

Women's Leadership in the Age of Misogyny

Discussion with TIAA Women

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Let's not mince words: it's been a tough week for women's leadership. Not only did Hillary Clinton lose the election, but we also lost the great Gwen Ifill on PBS, one of the truly extraordinary journalists and courageous media voices of our times. Here's a great quote from Gwen in an address she gave at American University's 2014 Commencement:

"I have a flat spot right in the front of my head, from trying to break down walls my entire career - forcing diversity of thought & opinion into newsrooms & onto the air. Whatever else you do with your lives, I hope you remember to fight those battles, too. "

— Journalist Gwen Ifill, from her 2014 American University Commencement Address

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED



Sad times.

Today I draw my reflections on women's leadership from the election results. There will be plenty of time to analyze the political results, why the polls failed, the impact of so many strands of American disharmony on the final results. But this morning I'd like to talk about some themes that emerged during the campaign season that are truths about women's leadership and women's place in our world, and we need to be clinical in analyzing these and smart about strategizing to overcome them in the future.

I call this the top 5 lessons from the election for women leaders in business:

1. Competence is not enough, but it is essential... for women.
2. Sexism and its more evil twin misogyny never really went away
3. Demonizing men, no matter how tempting, is a losing strategy
4. Don't assume your sisters got your back
5. Listen and lift as we climb

#1: Competence is not enough, but it is essential... for women

Many people observed during the election that, whatever you might think of her politics, Hillary Clinton was quite possibly the most remarkably well-prepared and experienced candidate in the history of presidential elections, or at least since George Washington (Teddy Roosevelt might disagree...!).

A political cartoon several days after the election showed Trump moving into the White House with this caption: “Once again, a qualified woman waiting a long time gets passed over for promotion by an inexperienced man.”



Here again, we’re talking about gender issues, or perceptions of them. Agree or disagree with the results, it’s fair to say that Hillary’s defeat reminds us that competence alone may not be enough... at least for women, and yet, it’s also essential... for women to be in the game.

How do we understand that lesson in our lives as women business leaders?

We certainly have to be competent, indeed, excellent at what we do. But let’s not be naïve. We also have to be smart and strategic about politics and human behavior, whether in the workplace or the public arena. Sure, there are laws that supposedly protect us from overt sex discrimination, but to move up in the executive ranks, you have to have your best game on every single day --- and part

of playing is understanding the forces at work that drive decisions about executive personnel and corporate leaders.

[Smith College President Kathleen McCartney](#) wrote about this very topic in the New York Times, commenting on the problem of implicit bias and not only glass ceilings but “glass walls” that keep women boxed into certain roles. She wrote¹

“For our daughters, today’s students, sexism is often implicit. Both men and women internalize stubborn cultural biases about gender that affect our understandings, actions and decisions.

“For this reason, female leaders are restricted by far more than ceilings. Glass walls erected by these unconscious biases box women into traditional roles and limit our opportunities.

“The psychologist Raymond Cattell coined a phrase — “coercion to the biosocial mean” — that addresses this issue: Society punishes people who deviate from culturally expected patterns or push boundaries. Every professional woman I know could share incident after incident that illustrates this phenomenon.

“Once, for example, a colleague told me that he thought I was “scary” when I voiced a strong opinion about a job candidate during a faculty meeting. I went home feeling chastised. The next day I checked with a few female colleagues; they had found me convincing, not scary.

“This kind of feedback leads to an irresolvable conflict for female leaders. If women stay boxed in by the norms of our gender — passive, gentle and congenial — we may not be viewed as leadership material. If women adopt the norms of a leader — commanding, decisive and assertive — we may be punished for being too bossy, too pushy, too strident, too ambitious, too scary.”

President McCartney went on to note:

“There is ample social science that shows how society expects more from female leaders than from male leaders. In one Yale School of Management study, participants who evaluated fictional stories of leaders making

¹ Excerpts from Kathleen McCartney, “For Women, Glass Ceilings and Glass Walls, Too,” The New York Times, November 16, 2016 at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/16/opinion/for-women-glass-ceilings-and-glass-walls-too.html>

mistakes, rated women three times more negatively than men for those mistakes — a huge effect. In the real world, female chief executives are more likely to become targets of campaigns by activist investors, and women at the top of all professions are regularly subjected to intensive scrutiny — and now, in the age of the internet, abusive online comments — especially when they venture into traditionally male realms like sports and technology.”

There’s been a lot written about Hillary Clinton taking too much for granted, assuming that everyone would get on board with her remarkable competence, that the eagerness of the country to shatter the glass ceiling would win the day.

Among other alleged failings, she completely misread the fact that such assumptions actually worked against her, that the “inside track” candidate would be the most vulnerable, that the “because I’m a smart woman able to do this job” would never be enough --- especially when paired with a candidate whose entire campaign was bread and circus, give the people whatever they want with a distinctive macho hubris. Trump may not know much about monetary policy or international diplomacy, but he got away with not releasing his tax returns and insulting more people and groups than I can list, and he excelled at playing to his audience who seemed to love him for precisely the behaviors that competent people disdain, especially if a woman were to behave that way.

Does that mean that competent women should become more venal? Of course not, but don’t be misled in assuming that being great at what you do is the sole requirement for success. Be shrewd as well.

#2: Sexism and misogyny never really went away

I won’t rehearse all of the bad stuff we heard during the campaign that revealed a level of virulent sexism and misogyny that we thought were over. I want to focus on the idea that we only fooled ourselves in thinking that it was safe to cross the street.

Margaret Thatcher once famously said that, “The battle for women’s rights has been largely won.” Easy for Britain’s Iron Lady to say!

The last 40 years or so has seemed like a great time for women’s rights and equal opportunity, at least on the surface. We celebrated a lot of women “firsts” from the first woman astronaut in Sally Ride to the first woman on the Supreme Court in

Sandra Day O'Connor to the first woman Speaker of the House in Nancy Pelosi to the first woman president of Harvard University in Drew Faust.

But we allowed the rising generation of young women to see these success stories as normative, and first Gen X and now the millennials ran from any suggestion that they might be associated with a symptom called “feminism” ---- ick, a disease their Boomer mothers might have, but not them! Nope, the rising generations just didn't want to believe all those old war stories. We're all equal now and taken on our own terms regardless of gender. Right.

Yet, something seemed amiss with this willfull cluelessness even long before the presidential election. Women at large did not make nearly as many gains as quickly as the headlines suggested. Given our population share of about 55%, our share of leadership positions across industries is meagre, from CEOs (4.6% S&P 500, 20% board seats) to college presidents (26%) to law firm partners (20%) to fewer than 30% of technology jobs in Silicon Valley to 6% of venture capital partners to 16% of medical school deans and so on in many other professions.

Even worse, the epidemic of sexual abuse on college campuses should have made us realize that women's rights and equality remain thwarted even in some of the most liberal and protective places anywhere.

My big worry is that this campaign somehow “normalized” the demonization of a powerful woman while indulging the objectification of the “perfect 10” woman. I worry that younger women will retreat from ambition, sensing that it's just easier to have lower horizons, play it safe, go along with the guys and don't invite the kind of truly wretched, hateful commentary that seems to go with the territory of being an ambitious woman. We cannot let this happen!

We must redouble our efforts to educate young women that they must stand up for themselves, that they can never just go along with being degraded in any way, and that they should never retreat from high ambitions because they are afraid of the cost of success. We have to be role models of courage for them. And we have to teach them that sometimes the goal is worth it even if it's very hard and sometimes painful to achieve. Don't run away from conflict, embrace it.

#3: Demonizing men, no matter how tempting, is a losing strategy

Despite all of the rational evidence proving her points, in fact, Hillary Clinton's strategy of attacking Donald Trump as being unfit proved to be unappealing,

unconvincing, and evidence of her own weakness for many voters ---- I almost said “a majority” there but I have to say at this point that, in fact, she won the popular vote by more than one million votes at last report, which just makes the situation even more bitter for some. We can talk about the Electoral College another time!

Of course, she was thoroughly demonized, herself, and post-election analysis will surely include many dissertations on the topic of the ways in which a powerful woman must suffer extreme character assassination. But returning the fire is often a losing strategy, tempting though it is.

Even though we abhor sex discrimination and want to fight back when it rears its ugly head, sometimes the worst thing we can do is to get into the gutter and fight with the same weapons. It’s a losing strategy. Bullies are best at bullying, and we should not try to bully back. Sometimes, rising above the temptation, refusing to take the bait, is the best strategy.

Now, that does not mean looking the other way on blatant sex discrimination or worse, sexual assault and abuse. Of course we must confront those behaviors. But on the other hand, we also have to figure out how to make men our allies in defeating discriminatory behaviors, whether sexist or racist or in any other way perpetrating bigotry. We need to work in solidarity with male colleagues who share the commitment to equal rights for all people, advancement without discrimination, and the desire to remake our places of work as truly communities where all can thrive. Some of the most compelling speeches about women’s rights I’ve heard have been given by men totally committed to the cause of justice. Let’s encourage that!

#4: Don’t assume your sisters got your back

A lot of women voted against Hillary Clinton, and the spitefulness in some of the comments among women interviewed on television was stunning. She did get support from a majority of women voters, mostly a coalition of college-educated women and women of color at all educational and social class levels.

I remember once overhearing a conversation between two powerful women in business in Washington, women who I admired, who were complaining about how some other woman was pressuring them to be more vocal advocates for getting more women on local corporate boards. “Gawd, doesn’t that just make you tired?” said one titan to another, “I mean, seriously, we worked hard to get to where we are, why should we promote just any other woman?”

The conversation crystallized a real problem I was only just beginning to understand back then, but now see very clearly: some women who have “made it” don’t want other women anywhere near them, for reasons that seem less than admirable. There’s the tendency for some women to believe their achievement is a singular act, that no one else could come close to their success. There’s some fear of competition. There’s real disdain for any suspicion that they might be playing the “woman card” --- they want to be taken seriously on their merits, and so they apply a harsher standard to all other women to do the same, as if we’re all on a level playing field.

I had another experience dealing with two women executives of a company I know, they were both extremely talented women in a tough business, but they seemed in my limited range of vision to be engaged in an ugly power struggle that was encouraged by more powerful men on their board --- some men --- ok, here I go, I don’t mean to demonize men, but I do observe this in some places --- some men love the cage match of ambitious women scratching each other’s eyes out, and it was clear that only the strongest woman would prevail. The other resigned and left the company. This does go on.

We need to develop corporate environments that reward cooperation rather than competition --- a talent often cited as a strength of women leaders ---- a talent that would surely help all colleagues, male and female, all races and job levels and skill sets. Creating a sense that we are truly responsible for each other’s success is good for business as well as for our human capital.

We also need to make sure that we cultivate an environment in which advancement is not seen as a zero sum game, that for some women to advance others have to be left in the dust, and this relates to expunging now and henceforth any remnants of ideas about quotas whether stated or implicit. It absolutely drives me crazy when I sit on a corporate or nonprofit board and hear the governance committee saying that well, ok, we now have two women so we’re done.... Stop that!

#5: Listen, and Lift as we climb...

Probably one of the greatest failures of Hillary’s campaign, in the end, was the failure to listen in a deeply insightful way to what the people were actually saying. Perhaps --- I can’t say this is truth, I only know what I read in the newspapers --- but perhaps the campaign was so enamored of the historic first and the candidate’s brilliance that they simply thought everyone would want the same things they wanted. When, in fact, a more insightful ability to listen deeply, to perceive

sharply, to be reflective and willing to be humble about what the people might want could have turned it around.

Don't assume that we all want the same things, and don't make a value judgment that some objects of desire are better than others. We surely can and must work for justice, work to ensure equal rights and the abolition of sexism and racism and sexual harassment and abuse and assault, these are bedrock moral values.

But let's be better listeners for each other, more astute about what women and all colleagues really want.

Now, having said that we should not predetermine what women want and should listen more, there is one thing that I have learned from long years of working in a woman-centered institution and teaching women of all ages --- and teaching a student body that is predominantly women of color who are very low income --- women do want sisterhood and support, and women do want opportunity regardless of whether they ultimately take the opportunity.

We want the freedom to choose, not the imperative mapped out by others.

We want to feel that women will, indeed, "lift as we climb" but not being dragged along, pushed up or otherwise made to feel lesser if we choose to stop out and make our peace on the ladder at some other rung along the way.

In helping each other to grow, we also help each other to find the peace and fulfillment that is our ultimate quest.

I leave you with this [thought](#) from First Lady Michelle Obama:

*"As women, we must stand up for ourselves.
As women, we must stand up for each other.
As women, we must stand up for justice for all."*²

² Michelle Obama, Remarks by the First Lady at the State Department Women of Courage Awards, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-first-lady-state-department-women-courage-awards>