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RELAX!**

## The Power of Pause

For women in the workplace, the key to continued growth is intentionally muting the noise.

BY BEVERLY CROWELL & BEVERLY KAYE

**WOMEN REPRESENT ABOUT** half of the nation's workforce yet still make about 83 percent of men's median wages, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. They're also underrepresented in the c-suites and boards across nearly every industry. In other words, women are working just as hard but aren't seeing the full benefit of their efforts.

As talent management professionals, we work with many of today's Fortune 1,000 companies. They invite us in to help their employees take ownership of their careers. Our formula is time-tested and successful but only when it's lived out beyond the classroom and put into practice.

Employees leave our sessions knowing what to do, but the actual doing is quite hard. And it's a little tougher for women. Why? A woman's focus is almost never solely on her career. She's juggling multiple priorities, so intentionally managing her career is an easy one to push down the to-do list.

What does it mean to manage one's career intentionally? We talk about

career management in the context of five critical questions:

1. *Who am I?*
2. *How do others see me?*
3. *What's changing in the world of work?*
4. *What are my options?*
5. *How can I achieve my goals?*

Answering these self-reflection questions requires muting the noise going on outside and focusing on the inside.

For women, that means not checking their text messages and see who forgot their school lunch, holding off listening to a voice mail from an ailing parent, and not stopping everything to add a calendar reminder to pick up eggs.

But muting is necessary for a process of discovery to unfold. So, if you are a leader of women, help them press mute and concentrate on what's going on inside the place they work: what's happening now, what's going to happen, and what will make them the best professional now and in the future. Then walk them down this five-step path.

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**STEP 1 » DECIDE WHO YOU ARE**

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What do you hold most dear, what do you do better than anyone else, and what do you really love doing? We talk about these three areas in the terms of having a good career fit.

Being able to be articulate one's skills is critical. In much of our work, the stereotypes prove true—women have a harder time articulating their specific skills (not just “I'm good with people”) and speaking about them as if they're owned. We have seen exceedingly skillful women unable to passionately and vehemently defend their almost innate abilities, and we often see women rating themselves lower in their skill sets.

And while women may have a harder time articulating these skills, they inherently possess many savvy behaviors that are key to navigating a successful career. They tend to score higher on their ability to listen well, collaborate, be comfortable with diversity, and build relationships through teams. In building these relationships, however, women can suffer from putting their own interests last. So, while they might know what they are passionate about doing, it's not uncommon to see female talent to hang tough and do work they don't enjoy for the sake of the team or peace at work.

Finally, what about values? What matters most to women? We've gotten a variety of answers over the past 35 years—everything from spending time with family and friends to challenging oneself intellectually. What is consistent is how women rate satisfaction with their values given their current work situation. It's common to see female talent more dissatisfied. Perhaps this is related to their willingness to tough it out for the sake of the team, the organization, or the family. In our own experiences, we've put major promotions on hold to care for young children where the value of family trumps the value of career.

One value we do see more often with women is the desire to feel appreciated and respected. It's important to them that their tough-it-out mentality be recognized: *Hey, can't you see the sacrifices I'm making here—appreciate me!*

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**STEP 2 » UNDERSTAND HOW OTHERS SEE YOU**

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The days of having your manager tap you on the shoulder and point you to your next job are over. Today, no one manages their career in a vacuum and no one truly works alone. Even if you work in a remote office, you're still connected and how all these connections view you is important.

To know the opinion of others requires feedback. And, while women are generally eager for feedback, it's not uncommon to see them ruminate on it. In fact, one of us is still talking about feedback we received from a boss in 2005. It was accurate feedback—about pouting in a meeting—but still stings.

Perspective from others is effective when women keep their emotions in check. We encourage them to stick to the facts and ask for specific examples when the feedback is fresh. Then step back and look for the truth within it. If you're not sure, ask a peer or mentor. Mentors are a powerful resource; women benefit from learning from someone who's walked a mile in their shoes.

We're talking more to women's groups about the power of personal

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branding in today's workplace. It begins by asking the hard questions like “what's my reputation at work” or “what do people say about me when I leave the room?” If you don't ask, you won't know if your brand is getting in the way of the career you want.

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**STEP 3 » RECOGNIZE AND ACCEPT CHANGE**

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Careers grow and evolve within ever-changing cultures and environments. A critical step in any career management is knowing exactly where you stand amid this changing environment and arming yourself to see opportunities where others may not.

To grow in today's complex organizations, it's essential to build a rich and diverse network. The key word here is diverse. We often see women looking more for networks at their own level and not higher-level networks that may help advance their careers and knowledge. Conversely, it's not uncommon to see their male counterparts being more strategic about who they want in their network. They take the “you never know unless you ask” approach.

Managing one's network is a conscious responsibility and the prescription for personal and business success. Know what you want, who can help and how, and what you can offer in return.

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**STEP 4 » STAY OPEN TO ALL OPTIONS**

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Here is where we see women in the workplace both thrive and struggle. Typically, we find that women aren't as upward-focused as men but they do see multiple career options: up, down, sideways, a little of each, or growing right where they are. The barrier is the either-or mentality they often take. Do they pull out all stops to get ahead or just keep their heads down and hope it all works out? The right answer is yes.

We recently spoke at a Women in Leadership Conference and career options was a highly charged topic. The women in the room openly voiced the concern about saying no to any opportunity that comes their way. By saying no,

# WIN THE WAR ON TALENT— WITH WOMEN

4 solutions for maximizing female talent in your organization. BY ODILE ROBOTTI

**A** lot of female talent goes wasted. The same top leaders who complain about the talent shortage fail to see women as an untapped source. The self-reported sleepless nights due to insufficient talent provoke wars in which high-potentials are trophies. Maybe a waste-reduction approach would also make sense.

Why are so few organizations systematically trying to make room for women? The reasons are deep-rooted in culture and gender roles. Also, there are a few conventional wisdoms that encourage acceptance of the status quo and, consequently, inaction. Here are four of them.

**PROBLEM: Meritocracy's invisible hand is pushing women down** Meritocracy is a construct crafted by the top leadership, often to reflect its own characteristics. As Albert Einstein once said, "If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."

In general, female leaders are more collaborative and their leadership style is more

inspiring and motivating. Unless you run an emergency room or an army, both these characteristics are positive and the best organizations are beginning to value them.

**SOLUTION:** Build a better meritocracy. Define leader-desired characteristics through rigorous methodology. The less gut that goes into assessments, the better.

**PROBLEM: Childrearing holds women back** Childrearing is too frequently used as a fig leaf. Studies show no statistically significant differences in the number of promotions between women with and without children.

**SOLUTION:** If you have a female talent problem, look beyond easy explanations. Check promotion and raise rates. Conduct serious exit interviews. Don't settle for the usual answers. Let meritocracy be questioned. You may not like what you find, but it's better than ignoring it.

**PROBLEM: Women don't aspire to senior leadership roles** Studies show that women become more ambitious as they climb the

corporate ladder and don't quit in higher proportion. However, they do get discouraged when their careers don't progress. Men receive twice as many vertical promotions and lateral broadening moves than women at the same level. This impacts women's morale and self-esteem.

**SOLUTION:** Ask, don't assume. Explain to your managers that talent does not always put itself forward.

**PROBLEM: Women lack the confidence required in top positions**

Women analyze their individual limits and the situation, and then carefully weigh probabilities and risks. Would it serve them to be more bold? Of course. But let's remember that the c-suite of most organizations is 80 to 90 percent male. Can we really be surprised that men are more confident?

**SOLUTION:** Cop to previous mistakes. Support women's confidence by showing through your actions (not just words) that they are important to the organization and that there is plenty of room for talent.

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many thought they were giving into the stereotype that women don't really want to do whatever it takes to get ahead. The fear prompts many women to say yes even when it may not be the right fit.

Leaders can support women more fully here by realizing that we employ a whole person and that whole person brings to work values, skills, interests, and perspectives that may not align with every opportunity. It's why self-awareness is so critical. Saying yes or no should begin with who you are, not what others want you to be.

## STEP 5 » DESIGN A PLAN

Careers happen, planned or not. You won't achieve even the clearest, most realistic goals without commitment and focus. It's this focus—or lack thereof—that can be a real roadblock for women. It requires putting themselves first. They can do so by reaching out to other women as mentors for guidance, forming career action teams where they support and hold one another accountable, or even asking for very specific development ideas from people in their career network, including their manager.

Once a plan is in place and women are excited by it, it's our experience that they will pursue their goals with a tenacity often unmatched by others. But it starts with having the courage to press pause. Do you have what it takes?



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