

# Managing Yourself: Women, Find Your Voice

by Kathryn Heath, Jill Flynn, and Mary Davis Holt

A senior manager is asked to give up an executive committee seat because the CEO wants to shrink the group's size and plans to retain only "the most engaged" members.

The leader of a \$50 million division is passed over for promotion to the C-suite after failing to fully participate in strategic discussions in which "you have to shout to be heard."

A marketing executive is surprised when a colleague drops by after a meeting with this advice: "Stop acting like a facilitator. Start saying what you stand for."

The people described above have several things in common. They are all successful and ambitious. They are all admired by colleagues and superiors. Yet they have all failed to assert themselves in high-level meetings. And they are all women.

Our research reveals that such stories are typical. During decades of leadership coaching, we have consistently heard women say that they feel less effective in meetings than they do in other business situations. Some say that their voices are ignored or drowned out. Others tell us that they can't find a way into the conversation. Their male colleagues and managers have witnessed the phenomenon. In fact, several men reported seeing a female colleague get rattled or remain silent even when she was the expert at the table.

In 2012 we decided to take a systematic look at the issue. We began by examining 360-degree feedback we'd collected on 1,100 female executives at or above the vice president level—more than 7,000 surveys in all. We found widespread evidence in the executives' comments and in those of their colleagues and managers that meetings were a big stumbling block. To corroborate and update what we saw in the 360s, we surveyed 270 female managers in *Fortune* 500 organizations. More than half reported that meetings were a significant issue or a "work in progress." Finally, to get a picture of how the gender divide plays out in the highest-level meetings, we interviewed 65 top executives, including both male and female CEOs, from companies such as JPMorgan Chase, McDonald's, PepsiCo, Lowe's, Time Warner, and eBay. In all our investigations, we found that men and women generally agreed on the problems but often disagreed on their causes.

Although we have focused exclusively on women, we believe that many of our findings apply to others as well—members of racial and ethnic minorities and men with more-reserved personalities. We also realize that some women don't fit the mold we describe. However, we believe that our research and advice will be useful to the many female managers who do struggle in critical meetings. We think it can also help bosses keen to encourage all team members, male and female, to contribute to their full potential.

## **What Men See**

The male managers we interviewed were well aware that women often have a hard time making their otherwise strong voices heard in meetings, either because they're not speaking loudly enough or because they can't find a way to break into the conversation at all. More than a third indicated that when their female peers do speak up, they fail to articulate a strong point of view. Half said that women allow themselves to be interrupted, apologize repeatedly, and fail to back up opinions with evidence. One male executive offered this description of two "highly successful and powerful" female colleagues in a meeting he attended: "One went off on tangents, bringing in disparate points with few facts. It was like a snowball going down a hill and picking up stuff in its path. The other got wrapped up in the passion she feels for the topic, and she said the same thing three different ways."

Men frequently described women as being defensive when challenged and apt to panic or freeze if they lose the attention of the room. "These are high-octane meetings that are filled with domineering personalities," one CEO told us. "Women are often either quiet and tentative, or they pipe up at the wrong moment, and it sounds more like noise to some of us."

## **What Women Feel**

If men perceive that women lack confidence at meetings, it's because in many cases they do. Female executives, vastly outnumbered in boardrooms and C-suites and with few role models and sponsors, report feeling alone, unsupported, outside their comfort zones, and unable to advocate forcefully for their perspectives in many high-level meetings. As one said, "It is harder to read the room if there are no other women around the table."

Many women admitted that they do get rattled when they're challenged. In fact, they're uncomfortable with conflict in general. They find it unsettling when anyone receives a sharp public rebuke, and they often brood and second-guess themselves long after meetings are over. They don't see themselves as defensive on their own account, though they report feeling empathy for others, and perhaps an occasional touch of anger. "When men dismiss women," said a female vice president, "women may interpret it as being 'put in their place.'"

Most say that the trouble they have articulating their views has more to do with timing than with their ability to marshal facts, stick to a point, or control their feelings. In coaching sessions, women have told us that they sometimes get lukewarm responses when they raise an opposing view after the group has started to cohere around an idea. But they are strongly opposed to simply repeating others' ideas in different words, something they feel many of their male colleagues do.

"Men have a way to neatly repackage ideas," says Lynne Ford, executive vice president and head of distribution at Calvert Investments. "They restate and amplify what you just said." Even as she acknowledges that she has seen this tactic used very effectively, she adds, "It's gamesmanship."

## **What Women Can Do**

In the future, when more women are leading organizations, they can approach meetings in a way that feels perfectly natural to them. In the meantime, several practical steps can help them become more effective and more comfortable.

**Master the “pre-meeting.”** Our research shows that female executives are very efficient. They come to meetings on time. They leave as soon as the last agenda item has been completed, rushing off to the next meeting or heading back to their offices to put out fires. We’ve found that men are more likely to spend time connecting with one another to test their ideas and garner support. They arrive at meetings early in order to get a good seat and chat with colleagues, and they stay afterward to close off the discussion and talk about other issues on their minds.

Women could go a long way toward addressing the problem of timing and their feelings of isolation if they sounded out colleagues and built allies in this way. They need to get in on what several men described as the “meetings before the meetings,” where much of the real work happens. Participating in these informal advance conversations can help clarify the true purpose of a meeting, making it much easier to take an active part in the conversation. Will the group be asked to make a decision? Confirm a consensus? Establish power? It’s often not apparent in the official agenda.

“Men are really good at the pre-meeting,” said a male senior vice president. “This is their preparation.”

**Prepare to speak.** Many women we talked with prefer to pitch their ideas in formal presentations rather than in the more conversational way many men favor. Our advice to female executives, as counterintuitive as it sounds, is: *Prepare* to speak spontaneously. “You need to have written down some things you want to talk about,” Ford says. “Even some of the casual, off-the-cuff remarks you hear have been rehearsed. If it sounds good, it was probably prepared.”

Women who do their homework and come to a meeting with an accurate sense of what it’s really about and how it will probably unfold can build on others’ remarks. Being armed with some cogent comments or questions can allow them to move the conversation forward. Anne Taylor, vice chairman and regional managing partner at Deloitte LLP, says she has the most impact in a meeting when she finds an opportunity to “turn it in a different and more productive direction with questions like Have you thought of this...? or What if we looked at it this way...?”

When the conversation advances rapidly, holding the floor requires the use of “muscular words,” as one male executive put it—active, authoritative, precise language that shows you’re taking ownership of your opinions (see the sidebar “Make Your Language More Muscular”).

### **Make Your Language More Muscular**

**Keep an even keel.** “Passion is a key component of persuasion,” says eBay senior vice president Steve Boehm. “The question is, How passionate can women be?”—that is, how much feeling can they safely express?

Realistically, our research suggests, the answer is “not very much.” In our 360-degree feedback survey analysis, we learned that when women said they felt “passionate” about an idea or an opinion, their male managers and colleagues often perceived “too much emotion.”

Men acknowledge the existence of a double standard: “Women have to be mindful to stay within the guardrails; men don’t,” one male executive told us. Until that changes, women need to ensure that they are seen as composed and in command of their emotions. It is not so much *what* women say as *how* they say it. They need to keep an even tone, not shift to a higher pitch when under duress. They need to speak deliberately and avoid signaling frustration through sarcasm or curtness.

### He Said, She Said

Women must also learn to move past confrontation without taking it personally. Karen Dahut, executive vice president at Booz Allen Hamilton, offers this learning experience: “I put out some controversial points in an executive committee meeting a while back, which we debated for a good while. Eventually I realized we could go no further, so I closed the conversation. But I thought about the disagreement all weekend; I worried I’d harmed my work relationships. I wondered what it would take to get them back.... On Monday I saw some of my male colleagues—and there was no problem. To them, it was nothing!”

A little compartmentalization can be useful here. As one male senior executive put it, “Men can be intense and challenging, but then we go out and get a beer together.”

## What Organizations Can Do

Women can certainly do a better job of speaking up in meetings, but bosses can also help ensure that women’s voices are heard.

First, companies should fix broken feedback mechanisms. Fully 68% of the women in our study said they seldom receive any direct feedback about their meeting behavior. One male executive admitted, “We talk *about* them, but not *to* them.” Managers need to overcome their reluctance about giving direct feedback on this area of development issues.

Next, at the risk of stating the obvious, leaders need to invite more women to the table. When a woman walks into a meeting and finds that only two of the 15 people present are women, it takes a toll. Peer support and role models make a difference.

Finally, bosses need to proactively pull women into the conversation. During our interviews, we asked 30 high-ranking women to name the one thing they would change about how men treat them in meetings. Thirty-eight percent said, “Ask us direct questions” or “Bring us into the discussion.”

These changes can have profound results. “Eighteen years ago a male colleague [who] had been in a series of meetings with me recognized that I had something to say but was uncomfortable speaking out,” a female executive vice president told us. “One day he looked at all the guys around the table. He said he

knew I had a point, and he would like me to just say it and not to worry about how it might be received. He got the guys...to make it a safe environment for me to speak. I have been speaking up ever since.”