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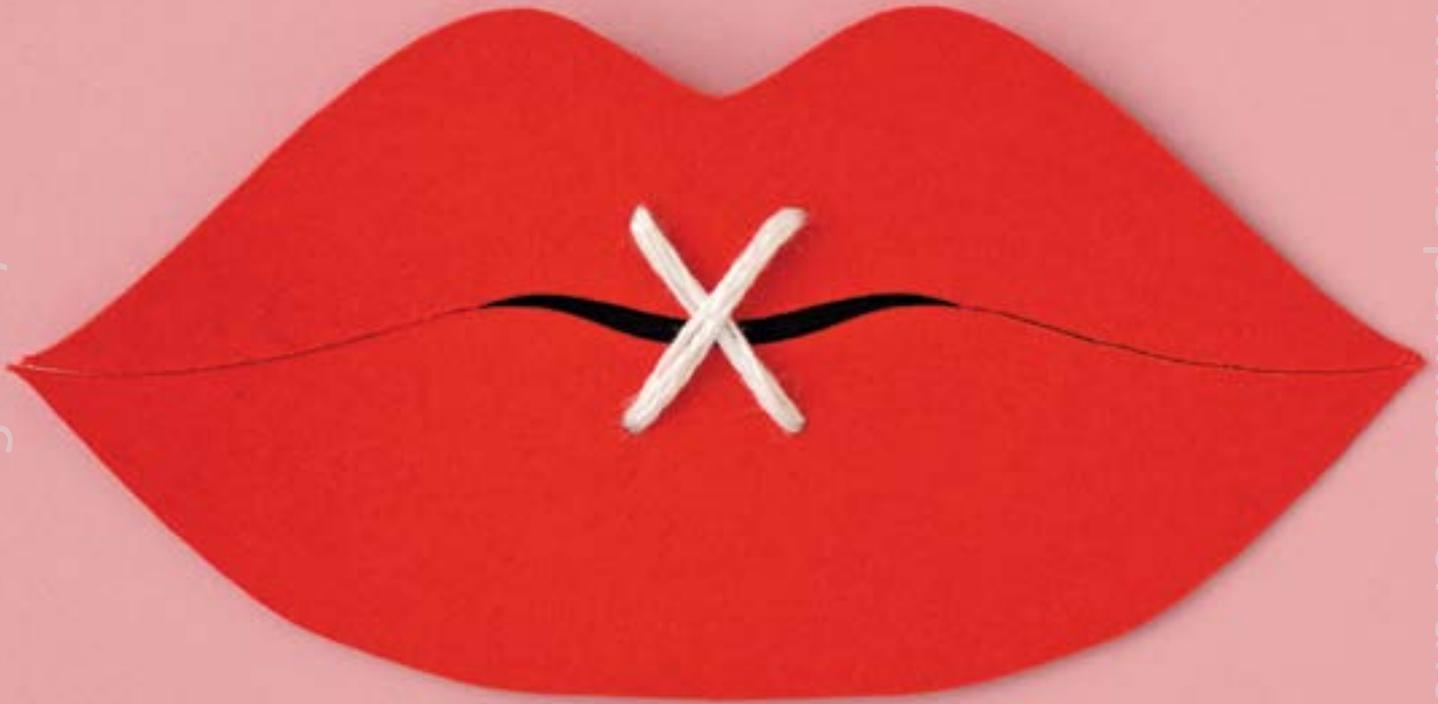
Coaching women  
in leadership



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# THE LOW CROUCH

## Leading while silenced

By Carrie A. L. Arnold, PhD, MCC

Last fall, my husband and I took a long weekend with two of our children in Estes Park. We live in south Denver, Colorado, and the drive takes less than two hours. My husband and his son went up earlier, and my daughter and I left for the mountains at 5:00 p.m. We were on the road for 30 minutes when the snow and rain began.

I spent that drive on high alert, and as it grew dark, I alternated between stan-

dard and bright headlights as I maneuvered tight turns, oncoming traffic, and windy roads. I did not want to alarm my daughter that I was nervous. I pretended I was completely comfortable and tried to act normal.

When we arrived at our rented cabin, my body was in a tight crouch. My hands were sore from gripping the steering wheel, and I felt like I had been swimming in a pool of adrenaline. The

drive took a toll on me, and once there, I could admit how scared I was and how easy it could have been to slide off the road, swerve, or cause an accident. My relief to be out of the car felt immediate.

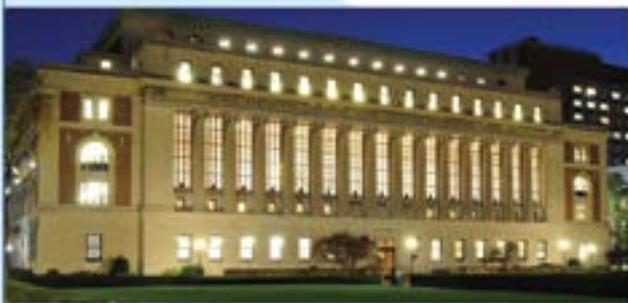
Most of us have had a driving experience like this; the tension we feel is visceral. Now imagine holding that type of stress in your body all day, every day. Women who feel silenced while trying to lead can experience this exact type of grip.

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### FEELING SILENCED

In 2011, I began to explore silencing. As an executive coach, I focused on the client group I work with most: female executives. The silenced female leader is a paradox, as leadership implies a sense of voice and efficacy. Leaders need to communicate their purpose and vision to enlist followers. This is hardly done without voice, yet my research suggests many women are sitting in executive and senior-leader roles feeling silenced.

The sensation is far more complicated than refusing to speak up or out; it is also not about tone, volume, preferences, or having a quiet personality. Voice is an intricate part of leading. We breathe in oxygen that allows our vocal cords to vibrate, and then sound is produced. There is the physical phenomenon of speaking but much more profound is the psychological aspect of having a voice.

Women are silenced by systems that favor a dominant male discourse, or they may experience systems that prefer a style or opinion they do not resemble or share. As a default, their authentic style may be silenced by ingroup normative behaviors. There are also relationships that silence. Peers and direct reports who hold power in an organization can be commanding silencers, not to mention those in leadership who yield authority over others.

It is a myth to assume that men always silence women. This is not true. My research suggests that women silence other women in equal – and at times, more painful – ways. Women often feel they have to adopt the male-dominant style of leadership and communication to be successful. When they do so, they can become silencers of their gender in unconscious ways.

When systems or relationships do not silence women, they can become self-silencing. Women can go to great lengths to preserve relationships, and their association with an organization can become the entity they will silence themselves to remain un-

beaten in their careers. The impact of feeling silenced requires a higher level of awareness. My original research indicates that silencing effects the brain, heart, soul, and body like a virus.

Here are some key findings a silencing virus creates:

- **A mental spin** that causes someone to think, rethink, play and replay certain things. The brain is seeking a different outcome from something in the past that will never happen.
- **Deficit thinking** makes a woman reconsider if she deserves a seat at the table. She may see herself as less than or begin to question if she belongs.
- **Emotional trauma** with post-traumatic stress terms used by women; they also use war-like metaphors to describe their efforts to lead.
- **A sense of vulnerability** can cause women to play small. They often mute their leadership voice if they believe speaking out could jeopardize their relationship with an organization.
- **Feelings of isolation** to finally arrive at the hard-earned corner office and still feel silenced is often a difficult thing to admit.
- **A loss of self or a loss** of who they are in their leadership role can be a spiritual crisis. Disconnection from purpose, values, or identity is a painful place to lead.
- **Immunity issues** that impact the body. The respiratory system, digestive system, and overall body health can be damaged. Women in my study spoke about ulcers, constant colds, stomach tears, significant weight gain or loss, grinding teeth, blurred vision, and various other conditions that emerged during periods of silencing.
- **A possible opt-out** of leadership is likely. When women self-silence, there is a higher correlation of this phenomenon.

When women opt-out of leadership or make a leadership change, their transition does not automatically bring voice recovery. Findings suggest that

only half the women who opt-out or create a job change fully recover from their silencing experience. The overall leadership of a woman facing these silencing symptoms is bound to compromise how she interacts, leads, or propels a team forward.

I surmise that silencing is perhaps an unspoken phenomenon that is creating a barrier to women promoting into or sustaining leadership positions. Based on a study conducted with more than 60 women in executive roles, less than 25% of women leaders can stay in their leadership positions after a long silencing experience. Most transfer, leave, or opt out of leadership entirely.

regard. When we highly regard someone, they get our respect, our undivided attention, and our kind words of appreciation. Self-regard is taking that same conscious consideration women are eager to give others and directing it back on themselves.

Third, women need to form relationships with others and move out of isolation when they feel silenced, as this is a critical aspect of recovery. Often men are crucial in helping women feel heard again; they need the invitation to partner and be part of the process.

Also, women need to find their tribe of other women who are in similar

*Women are silenced by systems that favor a dominant male discourse, or they may experience systems that prefer a style or opinion they do not resemble or share.*

## HAVING A VOICE

Not every woman in leadership will experience silencing. Those who do need to focus on voice recovery by relying on three essential strategies.

First, the ability to focus on the phenomenon and essence of feeling silenced and frame it as a virus is critical. This is not just about gaining more confidence, speaking up, breaking the silence, or being more assertive. When silencing is over-simplified, women can feel dismissed and further silenced.

By naming the phenomenon in new terms, it allows women to consider their leadership in new ways and it also helps normalize something that many are reluctant to name. Having a purposeful and effective voice does not happen by accident, and it requires intention.

Second, there are strategies to heal from the virus that requires a shift in focus. Many women talk about improving their self-care, and this is perhaps a mistake. Instead, women need to consider their level of self-

executive roles. Having a shared context is essential for women who are struggling with silencing, as not everyone can understand the complexity. Women need to make time for precious community and connection.

## IN SUMMARY

Women leaders face a host of barricades. Pay, effort, access, airtime, promotions, forgiveness for errors, and overall grace are a long way from being equal. Some barriers women face are outside their control, while others – like maintaining a purposeful and effective voice – are within their scope of agency and influence. Women first need to recognize if they are in a silencing situation; second, they need to assess their self-regard; and last, they need to find a community of other executives who share a similar context. The low crouch is an impossible place from which to lead – but with voice recovery, there comes a new and needed posture. •