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"I Am Speaking!"

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“I Am Speaking!”

By Ashley Colquhoun
UCF Forum columnist
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Many women, especially women of color, have been discredited, interrupted, and looked over for quite some time. It is time that we break the cycle and normalize speaking up and speaking out.



There have been too many times when women get interrupted in meetings, ideas get shut down, and women get reprimanded for their “tough” leadership by men and women, writes Ashley Colquhoun ’12 ’15.

Have you ever attended a meeting where you have your notebook, pen and list of ideas that you know will grab everyone's attention? You have been waiting for the right time to raise your hand and say, "I have a suggestion."

But as you share your concept, you notice that eyes aren't on you. People are fidgeting and looking at their phones and laptops. You start to think that maybe your idea wasn't so great. Then when you're rudely interrupted by a male counterpart with an idea that seems almost identical to yours, your coworkers go wild and label him a genius. In that moment, you want to stand up and scream, "I am speaking!"

This seems to be a common occurrence these days.

"I am speaking" is a power-packed line that many women in the workplace can resonate with. In fact, those words are being printed on T-shirts, buttons and coffee mugs. Why? Simply because many women, especially women of color, have been discredited, interrupted, and looked over for quite some time. Even in the year 2020, women are still sharing these experiences all over social media.

Gender bias is a form of unconscious bias that occurs when one individual unconsciously attributes particular attitudes and stereotypes to another person or group. This is just one example of unconscious bias that disproportionately affects women's success in the workplace.

There have been articles, conversations and even memes with the many different adjectives we use to describe male and female leaders. While men are more often described as analytical, athletic and dependable; women are more likely to have characteristics described as compassionate, enthusiastic, energetic and organized. Most people hate to admit it, but women, especially those in power, are perceived differently from men.

When we dive a little deeper, gender bias becomes even more complicated when we add race into the picture. Many women of color, including myself, think twice before we speak at work or in other professional settings because we don't want to come off as the stereotypical "angry black woman."

I think now I finally have the voice to say that I am angry about how women are treated in the workplace. I am angry that women feel we have to shrink ourselves. If men are direct and frank, they are considered a leader and an expert. If a woman does the same, she is viewed as bossy and unreasonable. How can women "talk like a man" but be seen as a woman? How can we be respected in the workplace and taken seriously without being interrupted and feeling minimized?

We must be aware of these biases that can exist, and recognize and acknowledge them. Unfortunately, in most organizations, there is a lack of diversity in leadership positions. That is why we need the support of both men and women of all levels and speak up when we hear inappropriate comments or remarks that demean women in the workplace.

I want to be clear that I'm not placing the blame solely on men. I, too, have found myself in the past generalizing women to be emotional, gossipy and combative. I have thought that if a woman leader holds her emotions in, she is being cold. If she expresses her feelings, she is emotional. I realized that having those thoughts only enable others to have them as well.

Nobody should generalize women and their presumed behaviors, not even other women. Being strong or assertive should not necessarily be only male traits, and being organized and nurturing should not necessarily be only female traits. We are all guilty of stereotyping.

"I am speaking" is a phrase that many women connect with. There have been too many times when women get interrupted in meetings, ideas get shut down, and women get reprimanded for their "tough" leadership by men and women.

Learning to be calm when you are disrespected is a superpower. It is time that we break the cycle and normalize speaking up and speaking out. If you find yourself or a colleague in a similar position, do not hesitate to say:

"I am speaking."

"She is speaking."

Because you are speaking for all of us.

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