

Achieving & the **LOOK** **SOUND** of **LEADERSHIP**

By Tom Henschel



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Executive Gender Bias ▶ 06/11/15

She's great, but . . .

"Can we talk about Carmen?" asked Paul.

This was only our fourth coaching session. I was enjoying him immensely. Paul was creative director in a global marketing division. He and I had bonded quickly over a shared history of having performed in theatre during our younger days.

About Carmen, he continued, "A promotion is coming up in three or four months, and it should be hers. I want it to be hers. But I'm afraid she's taking herself out of the running."

"How?" I asked.

"First, you have to know that Carmen's fantastic. She's been my right hand for two years now. Her work's beyond excellent—even though sometimes she thinks it's not! If she says she's going to do something, she does it, even if it kills her. She's smart, and she always works in the best interest of the company."

"Sounds great," I said. "So why wouldn't she get the promotion?"

"Well, I'm not the only decider. Which puts Brad into play."

"And Brad is . . . ?"

"Carmen's peer. Been here about eight months. Made a big splash. He hits my doorway at least once a week. He's always got an idea to bounce off me or wants to know if I have new ideas to share with him. I've probably heard more ideas from Brad in his eight months than I have from Carmen in her two years. And, look, let's be honest—a lot of his ideas are crap. But I love that. The more ideas the better. And Brad let's 'em fly. Not just with me, either. He does it with every one on the floor."



"Oh, this story is going to be such a bummer," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"I can predict the end. And it's not a happy one."

"Why not?"

Boy versus girl

I leaned forward. "It's a variation on the old 'boy meets girl' story. Except in this case, boy and girl show up together, there's only one seat at the table, boy gets the seat."

He made a sour lemon face. "Ewww, you really think it'll play out that way?"

I nodded sadly. "It happens all the time. And I bet it's going to happen here."

"Well, then help me stop it," he said seriously.

I didn't know where to begin. I sorted my thoughts for a moment, then said, "I don't know if you can stop it, Paul. This is bias. It's not conscious stuff. Carmen is doing valuable, dedicated, typical girl behavior. And Brad is doing fearless, slightly entitled, typical boy behavior. And the bias leans towards the boy behavior, not the girl behavior. All the studies tell us that."¹

He was nodding before I finished, ready with his own idea. "Like blind auditions. I had a roommate who was an oboist. At all his big auditions, he always performed behind a screen because of bias. It was, I don't know, the 70s I think, when orchestras started doing blind auditions because women never got the jobs. Then, blind auditions come along and, lo and behold, women get hired all time!"

"That's like the 'Henry and Henrietta' resumes," I said, ready with a story of my own. "Studies like this have been done over and over. Two profiles are created for one job opening. They're virtually identical except one has a male name, the other female. And people overwhelmingly pick the male profile. Even *women* pick the male profile."² I shook my head. "The deck is stacked against women. It really is. Which is why Brad will probably get the promotion."

"Well, if I can stack the deck in Carmen's favor, I will. I don't dislike Brad, I just don't think it's his turn yet. I want Carmen to get it, so what can I do?" he asked.



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"Tell me a little more about her," I said, settling back.

Why 'good girl' is bad

"Aside from the fact that she's great? OK, how about this. When we're in a meeting together, if it's ours to run, she always, always, always, sits right next to me. Everyone knows she's my go-to person. But when she has something to say, she still raises her hand before she talks. I mean, come on! Really?"

"Is this a hand-raising sort of culture?" I asked, doubting that it was.

He laughed at the idea. "Hardly! I don't mean to make her sound dorky. She's not. She's just polite. Kind of under the radar. But fantastic. Like our one-on-ones. Nine times out of ten, she shows up with an agenda. If she doesn't have one, she apologizes. Then, boy, you should hear the way she drives through the list. She rocks it. And she's not all work, all the time. She's fun to be with. A little guarded. She always seems to remember that I'm the boss. I think she has some idea about what's polite or correct."

"She's a 'good girl'," I nodded, using air quotes.

"Is she ever!" he agreed. "But why should being a 'good girl' be a bad thing? Doesn't that suck?"

"Big time," I agreed. "So let's try to stack the deck! What have you told her so far?"

"Well, I've asked her to speak up more in meetings, whether I'm there or not. And stop raising her hand. And she's gotten better. A little. It's hard for her, but she's doing it. A little."

"Wow, Paul," I said admiringly, "that's perfect coaching!"

"Is it?" he asked, a little surprised.

"Most bosses don't do that sort of behavioral coaching. Forcing participation is a perfect challenge when someone is trying to change 'good girl' behavior."

He smiled and asked, "Been down this road once or twice?"



"I've coached a boatload of 'good girls,'" I answered. "Even when women reach the senior levels, they often have 'good girl' behavior lurking inside them. Even they sometimes need a nudge—or a kick—to speak up more often."

The double bind for women

I shook my head and continued. "But there's a weird double bind. On the one hand, there are lots of studies that say women consistently under-rate their performance compared to men."³

"Like negotiating salaries, right?" he said.

"Yes, that, too! When they negotiate for themselves, women leave more money on the table than men. But I was talking about when men and women are asked to rate their own performance on a task or a test. Something like 85% of men will say they think they did well, but only like 60% of the women say that. Of course their actual performance is virtually the same! Men don't perform better, they just *think* they do!"

"That's a confidence issue. Like the speaking up is a confidence issue. Wow, this is complex, isn't it? So what's the other side of the double-bind?"

"Okay. On the one hand, women under-rate themselves. So it's logical that they might worry about participating, right? Because they think they won't do well. And by the way, ask the women in your life. Ask them what messages they got when they were schoolgirls. Almost always I hear, 'Be a good girl.' 'Don't bother people.' 'Be nice.' So it's no surprise that they keep a lower profile than someone like Brad.

"But the bind comes when we look at the studies that show how women get evaluated, not by themselves, but by others. For example, a business school ran an experiment. They asked men and women to rank the performance of CEOs who were 'talkative.' A talkative executive who was male got ranked high. A talkative female executive—who talked the exact same amount!—was ranked low.⁴ By women, too. So the bind is that even when women push themselves to participate, they can get dinged for it."

"That's insane," said Paul. He looked away, thinking. After a moment, he wondered out loud, "Am I wrong to want Carmen to be more bold? Am I just asking her to act like Brad? Is that my bias showing?"



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Careful or bold?

I didn't reply.

Paul continued to reflect. "But I really think she needs to be more bold. You said yourself, male behavior gets rewarded. So if she wants that promotion, I think she's going to have to be more bold." When I remained silent, he asked, "Don't you think so?"

I paused before answering. When I finally spoke, I shared a bit of my personal story with him. "Yes, I think Carmen would benefit from being more bold. But I think, sometimes, we send mixed signals about being bold. I know I've struggled over this with one of my daughters who's a climber."

"A climber? Like mountains?"

"Like anything. Roofs. Walls. And I mean two-story walls! And forget trees. She goes so high you can't even see her anymore. She's always been a climber. Since she was tiny. So there I am, on the ground, wanting her to be bold, being proud of her, but every part of me wants to shout, 'be careful!' And I know she can see it in my face. Now she's old enough to tease me about it. The 'be careful' message is there."

"But anybody would be nervous with their kid that high up. I don't think that's about whether she's a boy or a girl."

"Maybe," I said. "But it's still a mixed signal. And, because she is a girl, I don't think she needs to hear me say, 'be careful.' I think she needs to hear me say, 'be bold.'"

I could tell he was excited. He said, "Well, that's what I want for Carmen. I want her to be bold. Is there something I could read that would help me be a better coach for her?"

I told him my top two reads in this area: one an [article](#) that I felt would provoke his thinking and be something to discuss with Carmen; the other a [book](#) that would engage him and give him tools.

Then I said, "Here's my advice, Paul. Flood her with feedback. Yes, of course, tell her when you want her to be more bold. That's good. But also be sure to tell her when she did just fine. I promise you, she worries. I've never met Carmen, but I'm willing to bet, after she speaks up or does something that feels bold to her, she worries about it.⁵ Guys don't. So it doesn't occur to us to give that kind of



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feedback. But if she knows that the sky didn't fall when she acted boldly, it will help her keep going. Give her more thumbs up than seem reasonable to you."

"Because my bias would tell me there's nothing to worry about, right?"

"Right. It's not even on your radar. But it's on hers."

"This is great," he said, actually rubbing his hands together with excitement.

I was hopeful that, with Paul's partnership, Carmen would achieve *The Look & Sound of Leadership*TM.

Read related Tips:

[*Assertion Versus Aggression*](#)

[*Dealing with Emotional Responses*](#)

[*Gravitas*](#)

[*The Look & Sound of Self-Esteem*](#)

[*Women as Powerful Communicators*](#)

¹ To cite just three of the voluminous number of articles about gender bias in the workplace:

<http://socialjudgments.com/docs/Brescoll%20and%20Uhlmann%202008.pdf>

<http://www.readcube.com/articles/10.1111%2Fj.1754-9434.2008.00072.x?r3>

<http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2014-01-30/gender-inequality-in-the-workplace-what-data-analytics-says>

² The most often cited study about gender bias on resumes is:

<http://www.pnas.org/content/109/41/16474.short>

³ To cite just two of the many articles about women, confidence and self-rating:

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/peggydrexler/2013/07/15/women-need-more-than-confidence-to-succeed-they-need-ambition/>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2014/04/the-confidence-gap/359815/>



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<http://aom.org/News/Press-Releases/Women-greatly-underrate-their-standing-with-bosses-and-other-workers,-study-finds.aspx>

⁴ Articles about Victoria Brescoll's work at Yale School of Management on the perception of talkative male versus female senior executives are at:

<http://www.businessinsider.com/why-powerful-women-dont-talk-as-much-as-men-yale-study-2012-5>

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2012/05/18/do-talkative-women-leaders-have-less-power-than-talkative-men/>

Brescoll's article "Who Takes the Floor and Why: Gender, Power, and Volubility in Organizations" is at: <http://gap.hks.harvard.edu/who-takes-floor-and-why-gender-power-and-volubility-organizations>

⁵ Articles about women worrying more than men are at:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-human-beast/201212/why-women-worry-more>

<http://www.livescience.com/27926-women-worry-nervous-anxiety.html>

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