



Women in Leadership: "You Need To Create an Environment to Get Feedback."

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After interviewing more than 500 CEOs for the "Corner Office" series I started in The New York Times, I'm launching a number of interview series around leadership in my [role](#) at The ExCo Group, a senior leadership development and executive mentoring firm. In "Women in Leadership," I'll be focusing on key lessons that leaders have learned about navigating the inevitable headwinds that women often face in the workplace, and the "playbook" advice they offer other women who are trying to do the same. Here's my conversation (edited for space) with [Jillian Griffiths](#), chief operating officer of [Clayton, Dubilier & Rice](#), a private-equity firm. Follow me here on LinkedIn for future interviews.

Q. What were some early lessons for you around the theme of women and leadership?

A. The one that stands out is something I heard at a group lecture for an audience of women. The speaker was talking about diversity and why men often progress faster than women.

She said that when people have comfortable relationships, they tend to have a very easygoing relationship when it comes to feedback, too. So two men might make a presentation, and the more junior person might say to the more senior colleague after the proposal, "How did I do?" And he may get the feedback, "I can't believe you said X, Y and Z. What were you thinking? But this part was good." And it's very casual, the kind of instant

feedback you get when guys are just hanging out.

But often when a female and a male would go into that same situation, and there wasn't that same relationship, the more junior female colleague might ask the man, "How did that go?" And the female just gets a short answer of, "Oh, fine," because the man worries about the emotional fallout, and so he avoids giving feedback.

And so the question is, how do you change that? Because if you've got high-performing people who want to learn as fast as possible, you need that feedback loop. There's always chatter about how someone's doing, and you want to be part of that chatter. You don't want to be oblivious to it.

So you need to create an environment to get feedback. Instead of coming out of that meeting and asking right away for the feedback, it's a good idea for the woman to say to the man, "Hey, I'd love to get your feedback on this meeting. I'm going to book ten minutes in your diary tomorrow."

You're putting that person on record that you want that feedback, and it also gives you the time to prepare. And when you have that meeting, you specifically say, "Hey, I know giving feedback isn't something we all love to do, but I want to learn, and the faster I learn what you think, the faster I'm going to progress."

Even to this day I might say, "Look, I know you've said to me that you think I'm doing well. But I know that I'm not perfect and I want to get to my full potential."

It's about finding the right words to make sure the person on the other side of the table understands what you want. The point is, give me the feedback.

Q. What were some other memorable insights for you?

A. I worked in Europe for three years, and I will never forget walking into a meeting -- a huge boardroom of a very global company in Europe -- with about 50 people, and there were 49 men and myself.

In those moments, you have to make sure you get a seat at the table. That's another piece of advice that might seem very obvious, but it's very easy to be the one who wants to pull yourself back a little bit, because you're the one who's noticed.

Everyone remembers your name in the room, because you're the only female. You don't necessarily want to be at the front of the room, but don't hesitate to make sure that you have a seat at the table. Again, that might seem very obvious, but I find a lot of women tend to shrink from that.

Q. When you became partner at PwC, you were one of only a handful of women in that group. How did you navigate some of the inevitable gender headwinds?

A. It can be easy to start thinking that if you're only one of a hundred, that it's the men's responsibility to include you. But you have to have the confidence to say, well, why am I not asking them to lunch? Why is it their responsibility to ask me to lunch? It's about realizing that I need to do as much as men to drive change. I can't just rely on them to do it.

You also have to focus on building a team if you want to move up. You can't move on until you've got someone coming up behind you. So you've got to make sure you're spending time on people and developing them along the way, because people only put you in a new role if there's someone behind you to replace you.

Q. Other insights?

A. As people move up, they often focus on the people above them, and what they can learn from them, and the people below them, to build your team. But someone told me, "Don't forget your peer network."

I didn't realize until I made partner how important that was, because people will look for future leaders based on how you interact with your peers. Would they follow you or not? It was something I hadn't focused on before. Not that it changed my behavior necessarily, but it put in context another range of relationships I had and made me realize why a particular person was chosen for a leadership position. I saw things in a different light.

Another thing is that I felt that I always had to say yes, because I wanted people to think that I could do it all, and that if I said no, then it might be perceived as a negative. But there are only so many hours in the day.

So when someone brings you a new assignment, you have to think about what's coming off your plate to make it happen. You have to learn how to articulate saying no in a thoughtful way so that people recognize that you're balancing your time.

That's why it's so important to build your team. You won't get necessarily get those other opportunities if your plate is always full or you're spread too thin. So instead of saying no, you think about who on your team could do it instead of you.

You also can't say no to everything, either, because people may stop asking. Sometimes it's worth saying yes to something you don't love, because it gains you an opportunity in some way, shape or form, with a different skill set, that could be good for you in the long-term.

Let's continue the conversation. What do you think about Jillian Griffiths about the importance of creating the right environment to get feedback? Do you agree?