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Marilyn L. Grady

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, mgrady1@unl.edu

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Giving Voice to Women

Marilyn L. Grady

If you sit and listen long enough, you can identify recurrent patterns of communication in organizational settings. I am struck by two communication models I observe repeatedly that involve women's voices in meetings.

In one model, the super-educated, pellucid, articulate woman, in meeting after meeting, makes suggestions, "points," or recommendations for initiatives, problem-solving, future direction, program improvement, decision making, or conflict resolution. All of these comments drop into silence . . . the great abyss of being totally, and decisively ignored by her colleagues. This scenario is repeated, week-after-week, month-after-month, year-after-year. One could speculate endlessly about why the phenomenon of invisibility persists. But it does. Perhaps the invisibility phenomenon isn't the exclusive province of the woman's voice in the male enclave. However, the persistence of women's experiences in having their voices ignored is pernicious. Fortunately, even when women's words are not attributed to them or credited to them, their words may find life through the silver-throated males who repeat the same words . . . and they are heralded as brilliant and insightful. In many ways, this oft-repeated scenario is humorous. For those who watch and listen, this is both funny and lamentable. Perhaps it is merely an extension of how those who are in minority status or low status are treated in any organization or food chain. The pattern is repeated too often.

In a second model, the woman is the first to speak on each and every item on an agenda. Loud, forceful, confident, and pejorative, her voice is never silent in a discussion. Long-winded, authoritative, certain, she can filibuster the opposition to silence. She kills a conversation. Perhaps her years at the helm of an organization have given her the confidence and license to fire verbal volley after verbal volley. She is a formidable presence at the table or in the room. She states her position. Is she heard? Or is she, too, invisible? Her pattern of communication is repeated consistently. She is predictable.

These two models of communication are not the most effective. In the first model, the woman's voice is filtered through a man's voice. In the second model, the woman's voice is resisted because of the presentation style.

Women's voices need to be heard. Because women are often minorities in groups, we should focus on developing strategies that allow all voices to

be heard. Nominal group technique is an ideal strategy to accomplish that goal!

References

Moore, C. M. (1994). *Group techniques for idea building*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Proposals and Registrations for the *21th Annual Women in Educational Leadership Conference* are being accepted!
For information about the conference contact Marilyn Grady
at mgradyl@unl.edu