How to Close the 7 ‘Power Gaps’ That Impede Your Career

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I was introduced to Kathy Caprino as a fellow columnist in 2014, and have since valued every opportunity to connect at regular intervals.

Caprino advises leaders, and female executives in particular, on how to rise and claim their strongest successes. In the introduction in her newest book, “The Most Powerful You: 7 Bravery-Boosting Paths to Career Bliss,” (HarperCollins Leadership, July 28, 2020, and Murdoch Books, August 4, 2020), she describes her own major inflection moment.

“Back in October 2001, I heard these words from my therapist, and they were enough to change my life forever. He said: ‘I know this looks like the worst crisis you’ve ever faced, but from where I sit, it’s the first moment in your adult life you can choose who you want to be in the world. Now who do you want to be?’”

The discussion was weeks after the tragedies of 9/11, after which she’d been laid off from a role in a Connecticut-based marketing firm where she’d been desperately trying to succeed. To any outsider looking in, Caprino had built a successful 18-year corporate career, while also parenting her two children.

But in that moment, she was seeing her career — and especially the marketing position she’d been in the two years prior — through a different lens. In her late thirties, she’d been chronically ill with tracheal infections. As she worked

through the illness, she faced all of the professional hardships we often hear about women having, including sexual harassment, gender and age discrimination, no hope of a work-life balance, controlling bosses, punishment for being assertive and being marginalized for not “playing the game.”

But the therapist’s question painted an entirely different picture for her. While all she could see at the time was loss of career standing and the salary and benefits her family needed, she was actually gaining the ability to look into a new future of her own creation.

Three months later, she began a master’s program in marriage and family therapy. Four years into practice, she transitioned into the specialization of career, executive, and leadership coaching that has been her life’s work ever since. Today, interestingly in the wake of the pandemic, she is compiling that work and accompanying research into her newest book, dedicated to helping women executives and leaders achieve the two things she has found them chronically lacking: *bravery* and *power.*

Specifically, Caprino paints a road map for the seven most damaging gaps in power she sees, as follows:

1. Not recognizing your special talents, abilities, and accomplishments
2. Communicating from fear, not strength
3. Reluctance to ask for what you deserve
4. Isolating from influential support
5. Acquiescing instead of saying “stop!” to mistreatment
6. Losing sight of your thrilling dream
7. Allowing past trauma to shape and define you

They are prevalent, as 98 percent of the respondents she’s queried acknowledge they are experiencing at least one of these gaps and more than 75 percent acknowledge experiencing three or more of these gaps simultaneously. Her book defines

each of the seven in detail, but we spoke most specifically about the two I personally see occurring most: 2) communicating from fear, and 7) allowing past trauma to shape and define you. Here's what Caprino had to say about each.

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Communicating from fear, not strength

It is interesting (and even tragic) to observe how frequently women, in particular, are communicating from a vantage point of fear instead of strength. Some of the reasons include conditioning that goes back as far as childhood, where a raised male voice instilled fear. Very typically the fear will also extend to women who raise their voice or who have a reputation for meanness and vindictive behavior.

Other sources of fear include the voices in your head that say you are helpless, you may be ridiculed, or that the risks or costs of speaking up may be too heavy to bear.

To combat this, Caprino recommends exercises such as preparation of key facts and details in advance of a hard conversation. In advance, become very clear about what you need to say, and practice saying it. In a similar way to preparing for high stakes or crisis communication, which is my own specialty, you can practice firm and confident pacing and tone in your voice. You can put up a hand and say, "I'd like to be sure to cover this point," if a person is haranguing you with interruptions. Rehearse standing tall and looking directly into the eyes of the recipient. Rehearse your skills by choosing one tough conversation you need to have in every week and follow through with it.

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Allowing past trauma to shape and define you

In our current world, the majority of executives were traumatized in one or potentially multiple ways as adolescents and as professional adults. For many, it is difficult to move beyond traumatic situations without being triggered. Many individuals may even be subconsciously holding onto the trauma as a reason to avoid stepping up and leaning forward into fully accountable positions or senior leadership roles, i.e. "I was in an abusive marriage, and now it is impossible for me to step forward without re-opening my fear." In these cases, the trauma is being allowed to serve as a comforting alibi to protect you from the challenge of putting yourself forward at work.

It may be helpful to speak with an expert counselor about the ways to move beyond trauma. You can examine the ways you have actually grown stronger from some aspects of the challenge you have survived. Interestingly, research has shown that in the case of women who have been widowed, those who were required to step up and take over businesses or assume the role of breadwinner out of necessity have been found ultimately to have fared much better than those who had ample financial support that allowed them to sit and dwell on their loss. The same can hold true for career and work situations.

For some, Caprino suggests it may be helpful to openly vocalize the "dirty little secrets" you believe may be holding you back from your highest success, such as:

1. I didn't finish my degree.
2. I was fired for incompetence.
3. A prior business partner pushed me out of my role.
4. I lied on my resume and I don't have the experience and

training I said I did.
5. I don’t have the experience or training I need to do the new job I’ve been placed in.
6. I’m older than I ever let on.
7. I never feel good enough, in any job I hold.
8. Wherever I go, it seems others do better than I do.
9. I don’t have the skills I need to do this job well.
10. People think I know more than I do.

Voicing the issue may be a step toward making it a non-issue by putting it out in there. That discussion may also help to identify the ways it is typical and normal for every one of us to feel inadequate at times. It can also show us that while we may have made some bad choices and bad things may have occurred in the past, it does not mean we deserved for those things to happen.

We should also learn and exercise the practice of “the positive reframe.” While being passed over for a promotion may have been painful, what was the benefit in the situation for you? Perhaps more time to prepare for an even better role in the future or a wake-up call that this isn’t the right organization for you?

In my own case, the experience of being publicly pushed aside and diminished by a former co-founder was so shockingly painful it instilled in me a deep commitment to handling any difficult conversation or transition in private. Allowing the recipient of a message like this to hear it directly, in words instead of actions, and away from the audience of peers and clients is a grace that is perhaps beyond measure. I have purposely hung on to that pain as a reminder of how much impact my words and actions could have on somebody else.

As we move into a world of business marked by changes that are perhaps far greater than any prior moment in history, Caprino’s messages are especially timely.

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