

Finding Your Voice

By identifying your core values and using the tools below, you can handle whatever comes your way.

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“You’re pretty smart for a woman engineer!” The statement leaves you flat-footed, stunned, and unsure of how to respond. You do, however, manage what you hope is an appropriate reply. Many times in your career as a woman engineer, you will need to find a suitable demeanor to address workplace issues and concerns in a professional, not career-derailing manner. Finding your voice — the reflection of your character and personality through the words you choose and how you express them — is a crucial first step in consistently handling unexpected situations and comments confidently.

UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF.

Knowing who you are — that is, defining your personal core values — and never compromising those values gives you a strong foundational “weapon.” It is the first step in finding your voice. If you hold to your values at your very core, your “default” behaviors should help you respond consistently. You will have a reservoir of inner strength to draw upon every time you need to find your voice.

This will also help you make decisions that are right for you and that you can express effectively and confidently.

THINK FIRST. Next, you need to learn to listen well, and, finally, you need to think before responding. Think about what, you ask? Think about what is being said to you, how it is being said, what type of reaction is wanted, what type of reaction is warranted, and how you can best respond. It is not necessary for you to offer an immediate reply when the other person is finished speaking. Waiting even a few seconds to answer — which often seems like an eternity — allows you to collect your thoughts, quickly strategize about what you should say, and then select an appropriate response. In fact, this technique of pausing and thinking is taught as part of the training for expert witnesses, and the pause doesn’t show up on the transcript.

KNOW WHEN TO KEEP QUIET.

Is it always necessary to respond or react in uncomfortable situations? Although it may seem counterintu-

itive, there are times when it’s best to pretend you didn’t hear — or understand — what was said. You may have heard the maxim that sometimes what is not said is more important than that which is said. In conjunction with thinking first, keeping quiet can actually be a powerful way of finding your voice.

MAINTAIN YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR.

Are they really out to get you — or do you just think they are? Having a sense of humor is critical to keeping your sanity and remaining professional. Can you laugh at yourself or with your co-workers over an incident or a perceived incident? Or is this one of those battles that must be fought? Taking yourself too seriously and overreacting can keep you from having an open mind or seeing viable alternatives. Using your sense of humor appropriately can be a good tool in diffusing a tense situation and can often result in a reasonable compromise.

STOP DIGGING. When you find yourself descending rapidly down that slippery slope where every point/counterpoint you make seems to dig you more deeply into a position away from where you want to go, it’s probably time to put down the shovel! Remember the listen-think-respond model discussed earlier? Take a short break, gather your thoughts, and reconvene with a clearer path to finding your voice.

SPEAKING UP FOR YOURSELF.

Learn how and when to speak up for yourself and take an active role in managing conflict in your work-

place. If someone's behavior is not appropriate, depend on your courage (yes, you have it) to enable you to speak to that person, explain calmly and rationally how the behavior affects you, and ask for a change. Similarly, when you believe you deserve a promotion or a raise, collect all of the necessary information to support your position, schedule a meeting with your boss, and demonstrate why you deserve it. Yes, hard work is always necessary - although not always sufficient - often you have to take it a step further and ask for what you deserve.

SHOWING EMOTION. If you do react, is it OK to show emotion? When can you get angry? Is it ever acceptable for you to cry at the workplace? Yes, you can get angry, but we would strongly counsel against any yelling. If you do raise your voice, you will be branded forever with the "b" word and categorized as not being a team

player. You can express your anger through the words you use and the boundaries you set. Tears are understandable when there has been a death in your family. But they are not appropriate when an insult is directed at you, when you do not get a project, receive a promotion you expected, or a performance evaluation does not go as well as you had hoped.

HOW TO RECOVER. What if you do make a faux pas — either you yelled or cried or got your nose out of joint over a seemingly harmless comment from one of your co-workers? Like a violation of trust, you will have to work hard to earn back the respect of your colleagues one occasion at a time, one day at a time. Continuously act and speak professionally, though, and it will be possible to recover.

Conclusion

Expressing yourself can come more easily if you condition your-

self to take a moment to think first, before responding...or perhaps purposefully choosing not to respond at all. Appropriate use of humor can help diffuse tension and lower the risk of an unbecoming emotional reaction. And, using your core values as a foundation to your behaviors will help you do this as readily as you say "please" or "thank you." Using these tools (with the exception of your shovel!) will certainly help you find your voice. ■

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