

Part One

Choose to Take the Stage

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Chapter One

We Have Been Taught to Fit In, Not Stand Out

Growing up, I didn't fit in. I had four sisters who were always together—ice skating, sledding, playing with our animals, dating cute guys, and going to camp, where they met still more friends. But I did not feel part of this youthful euphoria. I remember lying awake at night, counting the days in an average life span, just to get some measure of how long I'd have to endure this isolation. We lived in a very small town where no buses, trains, or taxis stopped. I often wished I could run down to the end of our road and signal a bus to stop and take me anywhere else.

My way out was the violin, which transported me from this social and rural isolation to a glorious world where I could be alone yet connected to something larger than myself—a world of music, of the Masters, of teachers who believed in me, and universities that welcomed my musical talent. Though my parents made it clear they did not want me to become a musician—too Bohemian a lifestyle—I chose my own path and financially fended for myself. Through part-time work, loans, and a fellowship, I managed to support myself and get two master's degrees.

This sense of autonomy pushed me to go further. I bought a Triumph motorcycle in grad school and taught a community course on "Feminism."

My college boyfriends called me a “modern woman.” I became increasingly comfortable taking the stage as the years went by—and I enjoyed more success in doing so.

Most women are socialized to fit in—to seek self-definition through acceptance by others. And many women who acted in accordance with the expectations of others probably had an easier time growing up than I did. But if they want to get ahead in business they must confront a hard reality: their socialization has made them less comfortable than men are standing out and claiming their place in the spotlight. Only when women understand these formative influences can they move beyond their socialization and embody the mindset of a leader.

Girls Are Taught to Fit In

Let’s begin with our earliest social interactions on the playground. In her book *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work*, author Deborah Tannen explains, “Boys are expected to put themselves forward, emphasize the qualities that make them look good, and deemphasize those that would show them in a less favorable light. . . . Girls are expected to be ‘humble’—not try to take the spotlight, emphasize the ways they are just like everyone else, and deemphasize ways they are special. A woman who does this really well comes off as lacking in confidence.”¹

Starting in childhood, girls learn that sounding too sure of themselves will make them unpopular with their peers. A group of girls might ostracize a schoolmate who shows too much pride in her accomplishments by saying, “Look at her, she’s got attitude” or “Who does she think she is?” A girl who tells others what to do is called “bossy.” As girls we learned that it is bad to stand out or be too successful. I experienced this when I received a fellowship to pursue my graduate program in English literature. I called home with the good news, and my dad admonished me, “Don’t get too many degrees. The boys won’t like you.” It didn’t stop me from moving forward with my education, but I wondered at the time if he might be right.

My female clients often speak about their own socialization in these terms. One female executive told me, “I spend a lot of time trying to

build others up. I was often being tapped for leadership situations in high school, and always was embarrassed about it. I felt if I was doing achievement-oriented things in school or in my social life I'd try to soften them so people wouldn't turn against me. I kept saying, 'It's no big deal.' And I see myself doing that same kind of minimizing now."

Another woman, Terry, remembers her childhood with sadness: "I was a quiet, shy child. But I can recall one instance when I was organizing a game with my friends, and found myself getting excited in this youthful leadership role. I was almost shouting to one friend, 'Let's do this,' and to another, 'You stand there.' I felt really great. Then my mother heard this and reprimanded me for speaking too boldly. 'Terry, be quieter,' she said. After that, I kept my voice down."

Girls learn to express themselves in ways that sound neither too aggressive nor too certain. I was one of five girls, and I still remember my mother saying firmly more than a few times, "No arguing! No bickering! I didn't have five daughters so they could fight—I had them so they could be best friends." Girls raised with these norms adopt a collegial sharing of power that rewards uniformity and ensures that one person does not achieve a status higher than any others.

Doreen Lorenzo, president of product development company Quirky, echoes this perspective: "Girls are taught to be cooperative more than boys. I don't think girls get the tools they need in school to get that self-assuredness. In high school, girls want to be part of the tribe, so they're not stepping out of line. The boys are often the jocks, with much more bravado."² This inclusiveness hurts women when the time comes for them to stand out, whereas boys develop a social dynamic based on being one up or one down the ladder as they compete for the top position.

Even girls who were tomboys as youngsters seem eventually to fall into line. One female client told me, "There is a constant 'push' and 'pull' going on in my mind when I use 'me/mine' language. I'm afraid of being bold, arrogant, and aggressive. As a child, I didn't hold back. I was involved in lots of schoolyard fights. But I settled down when I got to high school. As I've grown older, the gender identity thing came into play. I don't like that I was aggressive as a child and have tried to compensate for that as an adult."

Women Are Reluctant to Stand Out

These childhood habits stay with us into adulthood. As women, we're uncomfortable in the boardroom or any other business situation when all eyes are on us. Expressing a dissenting idea can be nerve-wracking.

Women managers and executives often feel most comfortable in guiding or nurturing roles, where they can focus on *others* instead of themselves. They are at ease, for example, talking to their teams, because status is conferred in that situation. They provide valuable direction and receive positive feedback. Women also find comfort in being the organization's "worker bees," because they don't have to stand out; they can feel like behind-the-scenes contributors.

But when they have to sell their ideas and earn others' respect, women's socialization holds them back. Patsy Rodenburg, British voice coach and author of the essay "*Powerspeak: Women and Their Voices in the Workplace*," writes that whereas "male communication habits revolve around taking up space. Not giving in . . . Female habits revolve around reduction, denial, giving way, and not taking up space."³ As Rodenburg explains, these tendencies toward "reduction" extend to our choice of words, the way we frame our thoughts, the way we express our voices—even the way we stand or sit in a chair. Such self-effacing behavior can characterize not only junior women but often the most senior women as well.

Many of the female senior executives I coach are almost embarrassed to be "in the spotlight" and undercut themselves when "too much" attention is lavished on them. One CEO I observed before she began her coaching stood in front of her audience, at an angle to them, cocked her head as if asking permission to speak, swayed back and forth, and spoke in a soft and halting voice—even though she was speaking about her company's extraordinary growth. She confessed that she felt like an imposter when she was center stage.

This kind of discomfort in the spotlight is something women at all levels experience. It can take the form of nervousness in front of a large audience, reluctance to express one's voice in a meeting, hesitation to apply for a career opportunity, or preference for observing others rather than speaking. We in The Humphrey Group have seen countless

examples of women's reluctance to come forward into the spotlight. Here are just a few:

- A C-suite executive told me: "When I am asked to comment in a meeting on my work or speak about an issue at a management meeting, I don't know what to say. When I speak, I feel constantly rushed, my eyes fly everywhere, and I look as though I lack self-confidence. People must wonder how I ever made it to senior vice president."
- A manager in a global logistics firm said, "I often have stage fright and don't like to get up in front of a group of people—so I just do a *speed* presentation; I rush through it as fast as I can. I am more comfortable working with people who are within my area."
- A senior banker told me that "when there is a restructuring, the men go to the new head of the group and say 'I'd love to work for you.' The women wait until someone comes to them." And that rarely happens.
- When a bank president visited a team of eight HR women, they politely listened, but when he opened the floor to dialogue *not one* of the women spoke. As a result, they missed an opportunity to gain visibility.
- A female engineer said, "I love to observe and see what other people are doing. I'm not really interested in getting my opinion heard."
- A young newly hired woman was delighted to be attending a client meeting with her "mentor"; however, she stayed silent throughout because her mentor did not introduce her into the conversation.

Not all women are reluctant to stand out. But many we work with say they avoid being the center of attention. This is a systemic issue for women. They find clever and counterproductive ways either to avoid the spotlight or to minimize themselves and their power when they do become the focus of attention. Some may not be aware of what they're doing; but if they continue to retreat to the wings, they risk diminishing themselves—and paying a high price for it.

These behaviors reflect patterns of communicating in which women seek to AVOID sounding too strong, too successful, too sure of themselves. They adopt strategies for fitting in, not standing out. Scenarios like these

are played out on the corporate stage every day; they suggest why women as a group are not progressing. Women in general don't have a *center-stage* mentality. They prefer to stand aside and make *others* look good.

If We Don't Stand Out, We Can't Be Outstanding

We have been taught to “fit in” and now must learn to “stand out.” We must get rid of these minimizing behaviors and become comfortable being the ones others truly listen to. You can't get ahead in business—or anywhere else, for that matter—unless you can influence others; and you can't do that unless you are the one they're listening to.

To achieve this goal we must reverse the impact of our socialization by taking the stage, selling ourselves in every situation—delivering strong, clear, and compelling messages about ourselves and our ideas. This means showing a willingness to “go for it” and not backing down when the going gets tough.

Taking the stage is a metaphor for the transformation necessary for women if they want to succeed at higher levels. Those on stage get heard—and get promoted. Every chapter in this book will empower you to achieve the goal of successfully standing out.

And in *standing out*, you will have the opportunity to be seen as *outstanding*.

Advice for Leaders of Women

Women's preference for being “in the wings” is often the result of socially conditioned behavior. It does not reflect their true ability or desire to contribute. You can develop your female talent—and strengthen your team—by encouraging women to stand out more.

- Call on them when you chair meetings. They will welcome the “invitation” to speak.
- Give deserving women an opportunity to lead a project or sit on a committee.
- Give them visibility as conference speakers.

- Listen to them. Tom Marinelli, acting CEO of Ontario Lottery and Gaming, says he “grew up with three sisters” and understands that women communicate in a different way than men. But he learned to listen to his sisters, his wife, and daughter, and “that has made all the difference in my ability to listen to women. They can sometimes be overwhelmed by us [male leaders] . . . and so listening requires a more inclusive approach—one that will help us all, men *and* women.”
- Give them an opportunity to develop and mentor other women.