

## Executive Women's Leadership: Growing into your leadership



“The most dangerous leadership myth is that leaders are born — that there is a genetic factor to leadership. This myth asserts that people simply either have certain charismatic qualities or not. That’s nonsense; in fact, the opposite is true. Leaders are made rather than born.”

~ Warren Bennis, organizational consultant and author, widely regarded as the pioneer of the contemporary field of leadership

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At the end of the day, smart organizations want the best executive leaders at the table. It is the work of all individuals who want a seat at that table to be committed to honest self-knowledge and the continuous development of effective leadership capacity. Good leaders are developed over time and they continuously work to develop themselves based on what is needed of them in their roles in order to lead their organization effectively. This is true for men as well as women and can be difficult work.

**In this article series I will focus on executive women's leadership.**

Each year I conduct hundreds of interviews with executive leaders and the people who work for them. The purpose of these interviews is to obtain feedback for the leader about their leadership effectiveness from the perspectives of colleagues and people who work for the leader. These interviews reveal in what ways the leader is effective and what is needed from them by the people they work with and lead.

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*Interviewees bring forward incredibly valuable information and insights. Leaders learn what more is being asked of them and what they are doing that is not helpful or effective.*

## **Receptivity to feedback**

This article series begins with a focus on receptivity to feedback because this is where I see leaders struggle the most.

There are rules of the game in the executive suite and these are business rules. In order to be an effective member and player at this level, there are expectations of each participant based on their role in the organization and expectations about how they will participate as part of the team. A player may not like the rules and expectations, yet that is how business is conducted.

Feedback to women leaders from both men and other women will reflect how these women are engaging with the expectations of the executive suite. Feedback provides insights into how women are expressing their points of view, participating in discussions, effectively listening to others to understand their ideas and needs, surfacing differences and conflicts, carrying their authority and accountabilities constructively, problem-solving, bringing insights forward, taking risks, thinking strategically, providing the necessary clarity, and effectively leading employees to implement work and changes. These types of feedback are also given to male leaders.

*In the November 16, 2014 New York Times article “Finding, and Owning, Their Voice,” Dana Richardson-Heron, the CEO of YWCA USA, shares her take on unsolicited feedback: “People try to guide and direct you in ways that I just don’t think they would do with a man.” Her attitude does not serve the organization and is arrogant in the sense that it does not give credibility to the importance of how others experience the impact of a leader’s actions, behaviors, or perspectives.*

Both men and women receive unsolicited feedback, and while it may not be easy to hear, it is often intended to address what is needed from the leader in order to accomplish goals and/or work. Good leaders realize that others’ perspectives are key to their growth and success.

The capacity to be receptive to feedback that does not feel flattering or positive requires a certain kind of maturity. Leaders have to be honest with themselves about what they are doing that results in these perceptions on the part of other leaders and employees. The feedback may not be a deficit on the part of others, but rather a reflection back to the leader of what impact the leader’s actions, behaviors, and perspectives have on others. And that reflection might be painful

to hear and accept.

When we receive feedback we don't like or even agree with, we naturally have an emotional reaction. We can deny and deflect it and not take it seriously. We can take it too personally. Or, we can accept it and feel determined to change.

I see women and men react in all these ways. In general, I observe that men are prone to not taking feedback personally; they either accept it as a business need and commit to focusing on it, or they deny and deflect and ignore the feedback.

Many women executives begin by either denying the feedback or taking it personally and feeling stung by the perceived criticism. Some are able, after much agonizing, to accept the feedback and commit to focusing on changing. Agonizing before being ready to focus on changing is a natural reaction when feedback is difficult to hear and accept, because the feedback received does not match how we see ourselves.

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### **How to become more aware**

How do you become more aware of what is needed from you in your leadership role?

- Don't deny feedback. You may not agree with it, but there is something important to learn from it. It reveals how others perceive and experience you in your role of executive leader – how well you are engaging and leading and the resulting impact.
- Spend time reflecting on this feedback to deeply understand it and why you are receiving it. What is it you're doing that has this impact on people? What is the result of this impact on them, on the work, and on the organization? What is your intent – is it to justify yourself, or is it to become as effective as possible for the benefit of the organization?

Effective leadership requires a commitment to continuous learning and development of your leadership capacity. Good leaders develop over time. Receiving feedback may not be easy for women or for men, but it is how leaders find out what is needed of them in their roles if they are going to be increasingly effective executive leaders.

In Part 2 of this article series ('Facing our vulnerabilities strengthens our leadership), I discuss building leadership capabilities that take us out of our comfort zones.

**Reflections:**

1. What feedback is easy to hear and accept and what is difficult for you? Why?
2. How have you approached the feedback?
3. How might it be reflected in your leadership today?

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Evi Kahle, Executive Organizational and Leadership Expert, supports executive leaders to effectively direct organizational change, manage across boundaries, think and plan more strategically and engage people in change more effectively. Her clients include healthcare organizations, middle market and Fortune 500 companies. You are welcome to reprint this post as long as you include the above copyright and bio in full. Please contact Evi Kahle if you have any questions.

Website: [www.Evikahle.com](http://www.Evikahle.com)

Email: [evikahle@evikahle.com](mailto:evikahle@evikahle.com)