

# Speaking (Up) While Female

By Margeaux Kimbrough, Esq.

Sheryl Sandberg, the author of the revolutionary and very popular book, *Lean In*, and Professor Adam Grant, from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, recently published a New York Times op-ed entitled, “Speaking While Female.”<sup>1</sup> In this essay, Sandberg and Grant discuss the phenomenon of women remaining silent in professional settings:

When a woman speaks in a professional setting, she walks a tightrope. Either she’s barely heard or she’s judged as too aggressive. When a man says virtually the same thing, heads nod in appreciation for his fine idea. As a result, women often decide that saying less is more.

When I first read this article, I was taken aback. Was I part of some weird experiment where Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant were watching me on closed circuit television all these years??? It was almost as if they were citing a chapter from my autobiography. While I had long thought my experiences were my own, it was very disheartening to learn that many women had experiences similar to mine. I consider myself (and those who know me would agree) to be a very strong and opinionated woman. However, I know that I have been guilty of self-censorship. How did that happen? For me, keeping silent started much earlier in my life than beginning of my professional career.

My mother has always said I’m a talker. I have a loud voice, and sometimes I have a really hard time keeping my opinions to myself. I have been that way as long as I can remember. But at some point during college, I started holding my tongue.

I received a degree in Philosophy from The Ohio State University. All of my philosophy courses were predominately male attended. More often than not, I was only one of two women in a class of twenty. Initially, I was able to communicate my “profound” philosophical thoughts by speaking up in classes and presenting, what I thought, were well-reasoned opinions. But there were times after I was done speaking, I would notice my classmates staring at me as if I was a three-headed alien who just landed my flying saucer in the middle of the classroom. Oddly enough, if a male classmate subsequently said almost exactly the same thing I had just said, there would be a sea of nodding heads and approving looks.

I thought, “Maybe it’s just me. Maybe I’m just imagining it. Or, maybe my ‘profound’ ideas actually sound like gibberish. Maybe no one has the foggiest idea what I’m talking about.” In order to compensate for my perceived inability to communicate, I trained myself to take even more time to formulate my thoughts. Too often, my new approach resulted in: (a) a male classmate beating me to the punch and saying exactly what I was going to say, thus, rendering my comment moot; or (b) me timidly raising my hand and quietly beginning to speak when another male classmate suddenly, and confidently, interrupts me and proceeds to provide his analysis. I could not, for the life of me, figure out why this continued to happen. I especially could not figure out why it only seemed to happen in my classes where the students were predominately male.

By no means did this happen every time I attempted to speak, but it did occur frequently enough that I began to change my behavior. By the time I started practicing law, I had developed a bad habit of keeping my thoughts to myself.



One day, everything changed.

I will never forget the moment a few years ago when I was sitting in my office with my mentor, an experienced (and frank) male partner, discussing case strategy. While he was telling me his thoughts, I sat there passively nodding my head in agreement. I was in the middle of formulating my response when he looked me straight in the eye and very sternly said, “I see you nodding at me, Margeaux, but I don’t need someone to agree with me. I need you to give me your opinion.”

I was in shock. But, those stern words provided the wake-up call I desperately needed. Slowly and surely, my behavior changed, and I started speaking up again. Eventually, I found my voice. I am a different woman today than I was then—I’m a more confident version of my former self.

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the “speaking while female” phenomenon, something must be done to encourage women to speak up in professional settings. Sandberg and Grant suggest one solution may be holding meetings “Obama-style”—where women are offered the floor whenever possible. For me, all it took was a strong kick in the pants. As attorneys, we often assume that if someone has an opinion about an issue, that person will undoubtedly share it. We should all remember that sometimes even a woman we perceive as strong and opinionated may need a little help finding her voice again.

<sup>1</sup> January 15, 2015. “Speaking While Female: Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant on Why Women Stay Quiet at Work”. NY Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/opinion/sunday/speaking-while-female.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share&r=2>. The cited article is the second of four essays by Sandberg and Grant that discusses the experiences of women at work.



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