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www.influencingoptions.com

office 216 First Avenue South | Suite #331 | Seattle, WA 98104

p 206.906.9203 | toll free 877.454.2299 | f 866.451.5618

e libby@libbywagner.com

SPECIAL REPORT

Seriously, Girlfriend:

Communicate, Collaborate and Lead with Men

By Libby Wagner, Founder and President

Officially, I'm a Baby Boomer, but realistically, that doesn't seem to fit. My parents are true Boomers, but my birth date falls into the last year or so of the range. This is only important because when I was coming of age in the late 1970s and early 80s, I was working to reconcile my feminist self with, well, my self. I went to high school and undergraduate school in the Southern United States, and my young female years were filled with mixed messages: find a man, get engaged, get married, be yourself, be independent, don't let anyone control you, don't be submissive, be pleasant, don't be shrill . . .

In my early twenties, when I began reading feminist literature and non-fiction, I became even more confused about what I was supposed to be doing *about* men, and it seemed for a time, that whatever I chose in terms of career or life path, I might have to do it in *spite of men*. In my 30s, I adopted a full-on resistant posture with those men with whom I worked and lived. Now, on the greater side of my 40s, I'm happy to

report coming just about full circle, and I'm committed to helping my female clients, especially those in leadership roles, to communicate, collaborate and lead *with* men.

I know Robert Bly would argue with me, but men didn't get to have a "movement"—their whole world in terms of family, work and relationship never really had a revolution, and this article is too short an expose' to fully explore all the gifts and costs of the women's movement to young women like my niece Meghan (currently 15). Today's young feminists are different than their mothers and aunts, and some rights and ideas that felt hard-won in the 1970s and 80s are just matter-of-fact to these egalitarian girls. And many men, frankly, have been confused. I know this because I coach and work one-on-one with a lot of really wonderful men and I've watched them, curiously and at times enviously, to see how they're dealing with all this change in their worlds: women are not only their mothers and wives, they're bosses, colleagues, friends and strong daughters. Some resort to über Alpha Male behaviors, some feel emasculated, some select avoidance when it comes to dealing with women. And, it feels like often they are *dealing with us*. That, and an overuse of sports metaphors . . .

So here's my take: step up. Stop waiting for men to come along, make a change, be different from who they are. Stop whining about short comings and short changes and short anything, and be the change you want to see. And yes, I feel it *necessary* now to go ahead and offer a disclaimer: I know some very cool, very wonderful, very strong and kind men who get it and who are not only comfortable leading with women, they welcome it. They've been able to take the leap that we're just all people, albeit distinct and unique people, and we show up with our different strengths and our different lessons to learn. Those are not the men who might need our help the most. They are already our collaborators and compatriots. But they're not in the majority.

If the goal is increased happiness, less stress, higher performing teams and organizations, increased equity and fairness, impassioned and respectful discussion and debate, illumined creativity and innovation, then what's the alternative? Be mad about this history of women not having the same chances as men? Okay, be mad if you want to, but that really won't change a thing. Here's a sports metaphor I can get behind: *Step up to the plate and get in the game!*

Here are 10 Essentials for Leading With Men

1. Expect the Best

Let go of all your horror stories about working with men, real or imagined. Don't assume you won't get the job, will be treated as lesser-than, or won't be valued. What's the alternative? Expecting that this is a new day, a new era, a new opportunity to work together in a new way. People have a tendency to rise to the level of expectation that you set for them—make it a good one rather than a low one.

2. Prepare & Practice

Don't waste your time, or others, by appearing to be flighty, confused or uninformed. Preparation and practice also allows you to be calm and confident under pressure and appropriate in your emotional responses. And lest you think I mean "appropriate" suggests no emotion, it doesn't. Feelings and emotions are part of being human, but we want to create an atmosphere of camaraderie, support and safety because we can have the tough conversations and challenge the status quo from there. Be ready.

3. It's About Altitude: Bars and High Roads

Raise the bar and take the high road . . . always. Don't play dirty pool or manipulative games. A woman of integrity and consistency is a powerful force, and she gets things done and influences others to follow. People respect you, men and women, when you set the standards high and demonstrate congruence and humility in your quest.

4. Show Up Fresh

Every day is a new day, no matter how cliché that sounds. Be willing to start over, begin anew. Use negotiation tools such as “where do we go from here?” or “how can we create a win-win?” to set the tone and move forward. Honor history, but don’t repeat it by having to tell the story again and again. Help others move on, as well.

5. Ask Good Questions

Seriously, don’t talk too much. We’re already accused of it! As you prepare for your leadership and your courageous conversations, be willing to ask good questions, to be provocative in your thinking, and focused in your listening. Reflect and demonstrate empathy, which creates trust and strong relationships.

6. Ask for What You Want

This should probably be #1. The important distinction here is that if you don’t like something, are not getting something you want, or are unhappy in any way with the working relationship: stop, identify what you want *instead*, and ask for it. Give up expecting others to read your mind or feeling righteous about what they should and shouldn’t know. Ask!

7. Be Specific

This really is #6.a. When you ask for what you want, or when you prepare, or when you’re asking questions, all should be delivered with high specificity. This isn’t about being controlling or “type A,” because I want you to be *respectfully* specific. It’s not about ordering or dictating or adopting a tyrannical stance. Just set the person up for success. Give them everything they need to be fully informed, complete in their understanding and collected in their data. Be really specific.

8. Be Friendly, Not Flirty

I’m not a man. I don’t look like a man, nor do I want to. I also know the difference between friendly, approachable and attractive versus sexy and flirty. You don’t have to dress in monochromatic androgynous styles. You don’t have to dress like a man. And it seems so obvious to say this, because we should know better, but evidence suggests the opposite: style and fashion for work is not just a matter of taste. Look sharp. Be lovely. Be feminine. And, if you want people to take you and your ideas seriously, you can’t dress like you’re hot for a date or ready for the yoga class. It is what it is.

9. Use Min/Max for Meetings

If you face a challenging situation, scenario or relationship with one of the men in your work life, prepare for your meetings and interactions with a “min/max” strategy. What’s the minimum (Min) that needs to happen in order for you to feel the meeting has been successful? Even if it’s that you get to share your ideas and feel heard. Or, you get to have a calm, rational discussion, either can be a step in the right direction for a difficult relationship. Your Max is the best-case scenario you can

imagine for this time together. Imagine it, so that you'll know what to work between—your Min and your Max—and make incremental successes as you can.

10. Be Yourself

I realize this is a statement of obviosity, but really, it's more significant and complex than it might seem at first. Being yourself is frankly the most important, most difficult job of a life. In order to do it, you have to know yourself, your values, your principles and dare I say, what makes your heart sing? Without this self-knowledge, you won't be able to lead well because you won't be able to lead yourself first. And that's the very first step to leading *with* men. Develop resilient self-assessment skills. Set your inner compass toward your true North.

You might think, *well, those are just leadership principles in general*, and you'd be right. Leading with men isn't really that different from leading with women, except for that it *is* different because your context, audience or situation may be different. In the end, you have another human being beside you, or across the table from you, and your ability to be fully engaged, present and ready to learn about and know that person will allow you to lead well with him, and help him lead well with you.



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