



The Silenced Female Leader: A White Paper

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The concept of feeling silenced while in a leadership role is a paradox that many women do not discuss. Based on original research conducted in 2016 of the silenced female leader, this white paper highlights the study findings for practitioners conducting leadership development. A short review of the background and summary of the overall results is followed by two primary research findings.

The first finding is that a female leader's cognition, emotion, spirit, leadership, and body are impacted when experiencing silencing. This review is designed to give the reader a sense of how profound and traumatizing it can become. The narrative frames the phenomenon in a way that can be analyzed, assessed, and personally explored.

The second finding is how a female engages in the silencing recovery process. The white paper highlights certain characteristics and categories of how women respond to silencing by profiling a typology of moving from feeling silenced to voice recovery. The typology provides specific strategies based on her choice to stay or opt-out of her leadership role.

When a female leader feels silenced in her role, she only stands a 25% chance of recovering without making a job change. These findings indicate voice does not always emerge, or sustain, in executive leadership roles and women need to mitigate the viral effects of feeling silenced to stay effective. Failure to do so contributes to the gap in female executive positions and the growing opt-out phenomenon.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| <u>INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND</u> | 4 |
| <u>KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS</u> | 7 |
| <u>SOLUTION A: NAME THE ISSUE</u> | 9 |
| <u>SOLUTION B: COMMUNITY AND SELF-CARE</u> | 13 |
| <u>TYOLOGY</u> | 15 |
| <u>CONCLUSION</u> | 18 |
| <u>ADDITIONAL RESOURCES</u> | 19 |

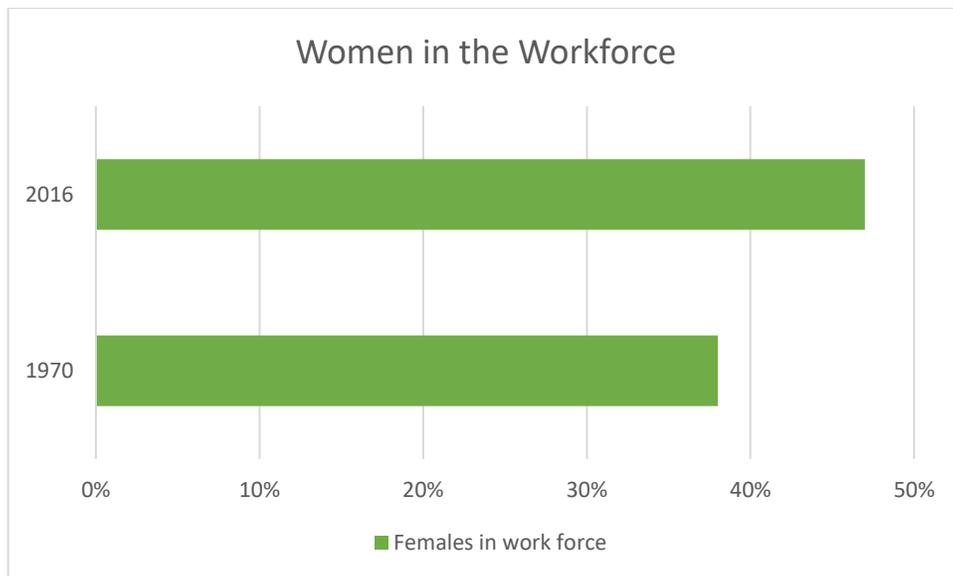


INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The first theory of silencing, along with the majority of women in leadership studies, emerged in the 1970s when females were a mere 38% of the workforce. According to recent statistics, the genders are more equally matched in the workplace with women now accounting for 47.2% (Bureau of Labor Statistics & U.S. Department of Labor, 2015; Chemers, 1997; Northouse, 2013).

FIGURE 1

SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics



The statistical swings indicate significant shifts in the workforce, domestic responsibilities, and organization norms. However, when it comes to leadership roles, women still lag behind their male counterparts. On June 26, 2016, the front page of the Business section of the Denver Post posted an article about executive pay. The top earners are men. On page 6 of that section was a smaller article titled, *Only 7 Percent of Women in State are Execs* (Cook, 2016).



Colorado is not unique; there is a nationwide shortage of women in executive roles, and this research introduces a new angle as to why that might be the case. As with any widespread shift in society, change takes time, and a 50/50 gender workforce does not necessarily result in equality with voice. Women are feeling silenced in their leadership roles, and it is time to bring this phenomenon into broader circles of discussion as greater exposure will allow for greater voice recovery. Women need to find their purposeful voice so they can lead with voice efficacy and join their male counterparts in fulfilling their executive leadership goals. It begins with intentional thought and reflection about the concepts of voice, silence, and silencing.

DEFINITIONS

Silencing is an action (verb), and *feeling silenced* can lead to an ontological shift. When someone feels silenced, they feel muted, suppressed, or muffled. The nature of their being can shift in that they show up as silenced in their leader interactions. Three scholars aid in the definition of silencing. Glenn (2004) presents silence as a rhetorical art and can be something one does, something that is done to someone, or something one experiences. Silencing includes any such act (or non-act) in which a person is unable to express themselves (Perlow & Repenning, 2009). Finally, Blackman and Sadler-Smith (2009) see the silenced as those who could speak, but do not, due to a locus of power that is either external or internal.

Purposeful voice is a concept that focuses on an individual's motivation to express ideas or information and opinions. Purposeful voice is different than merely speaking up or raising voice (Van Dyne, Soon, & Botero, 2003). *Purpose* suggests a form of decisiveness, intention, resolution, and agency. In the social sciences, agency refers to the capacity of an individual to act independently while at a place of free choice.

Voice efficacy assumes a repeated pattern of purposeful voice. It implies a person possesses necessary communication skills as well as the ability to use those skills and behaviors in multiple settings. They have a successful pattern of speaking up and using voice despite fears or potential consequences (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009).

SIGNIFICANCE

The concept of silencing is significant for two primary reasons. Addressing this topic may inform why there is a lack of women in top leadership positions, as there may be more to this phenomenon than just gender inequality. This white paper highlights the choices women make when faced with silencing



experiences, how those choices impact the efficacy of their leadership, and whether they stay on their leader trajectory. The second reason this issue is significant is that it describes the essence of women who feel silenced. This discovery provides an understanding of the lived experience that female leaders who read this may relate to, which creates awareness for personal change. Male readers will have a new understanding of how they can support their female colleagues and be cognizant of how they are contributing to systems that may not serve half the workforce population.

Regardless of how a woman uses her voice, non-verbal communication flows despite silencing, but it may not be the intended communication pattern female leaders seek (Urlic, 2010). As women name their patterns of feeling silenced and describe the sensations and impact, this understanding will inform their efficacy and leader development. Female leadership development may need to be distinct and customized to help women move to a place of voice that does not silence others but invites dialogue and growth. This white paper informs organization development practitioners and executive coaches about the significance of helping women develop their voice with confidence and influence to ensure their place in top leadership.



KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

The phenomenon of feeling silenced as a female leader is a unique and wide-spread leadership issue impacting millions of women in the workforce, government, and community. After conducting research with a sample of executive women in the Denver-metro area, multiple findings emerge (Arnold, 2017).

There is a shared narrative of the silenced female leader that organizations are not naming or describing. As a result, women feel isolated in experiences that could be normalized if brought into the open.

- Only 25% of women in the study who felt silenced, over an extended period, could recover without making a job change or opting out of a leadership role.
- When women self-silence (for multiple reasons), there is a high correlation of their opting out of leadership.
- When women opt-out of leadership or make a leadership change, their transition does not automatically bring voice recovery. Findings suggest that only half the women who opt-out or make a job change fully recover from their silencing experience.
- There is a typology of the silenced female leader and the ways women manage silencing. The types include:
 - Innovative Pioneers – female leaders who recover from silencing without opting out
 - Resolute Propellers – female leaders who have not opted out but are still dealing with silencing experiences
 - Voice Reinventors – female leaders who have made leadership changes or opted out and found recovery from silencing
 - Resilient Aspirants – female leaders who have made leadership changes or opted out and are still in recovery from their experience with silencing
- Silencing does not just occur between men and women. Research shows that women equally silence other women. This dynamic creates systems of silencing that are difficult to shift.



- Silencing is a virus that impacts women in all their domains. Studies show that women are infected cognitively, emotionally, spiritually, and their leadership shifts because of the phenomenon of feeling silenced (Arnold, 2017; Eaker & Kelly-Hayes, 2010; Geller, Srikameswaran, & Cassin, 2010; Jack, 1991; Jack & Ali, 2010; Ussher & Perz, 2010).
- As a result of this multi-domain experience, 85% of the female leaders studied also experienced physical manifestations. The body is primarily impacted in three distinct ways:
 - Digestive issues
 - Respiratory problems
 - Full-body stress
- There is a specific recovery process that female leaders need to engage in to mitigate the viral effects of silencing.

The next section of this white paper highlights two important solutions and a typology. The first solution is the ability to focus on the phenomenon and essence of feeling silenced and frame it as a virus. Second, there are strategies to heal from the virus that require a shift in focus. Last, the four-part typology of how women move from feeling silenced to voice recovery aids in determining specific ways to heal based on opt-out choices.



SOLUTION A: NAME THE ISSUE

The term *solution* is held loosely as not everything is a problem to be solved. When dealing with human dynamics, adult development, interpersonal interactions, and multiple perspectives, a mindset of *management* needs to supersede the desire to solve. To manage something effectively, one must know what they are dealing with and the power it holds over those it involves. Silencing can feel relentless and is at times difficult to name. The following description seeks to highlight the essence of the phenomenon in a way that helps the reader walk away with a better understanding and consciousness of what it means to feel silenced as a female leader. This summary is based on themes from the original study.

THE ESSENCE OF FEELING SILENCED

When a female leader feels silenced, she perceives a lack of agency. She feels she has lost options and is limited in her choices. This sensation is a paradox for a leader given the inherent authority in her leadership role. Her lack of agency is demonstrated in her language choices and metaphor. She refers to her role or her organization as a game she cannot win. She will fight to feel heard, get work accomplished, or have an equal voice at the table. Male-dominance is named as a barrier to her success with terms like “old-boys club.” She describes her organization, industry, or environment in life-and-death terms and may mention it feels that she is being eaten alive.

She equates her silencing to suffocation, strangulation, drowning, or being out on a limb all alone. Each silencing encounter is described as a form of arsenic that feels toxic in her soul and slowly erodes away at her. Her language choices will include her heart, body, and soul. She refers to heartbreak, and at times references the holes in her depth. She protects herself by putting on a metaphoric armor, and she develops a thick skin. The phenomenon of feeling silenced will bleed into all her domains.

She views her silencers as unknowingly incessant, and they can include people, systems, and even herself. She experiences silencing through the non-verbal opportunism of her boss or peers. They emphasize written communication over face-to-face conversations. They fail to give her eye contact and may mock her with eye rolls when she speaks. She experiences a sense of silent treatment that can come in the form of their non-responsiveness to her emails or requests. She also feels excluded from meetings by not getting invitations to attend certain ones or may even get uninvited. In more extreme circumstances, her silencers

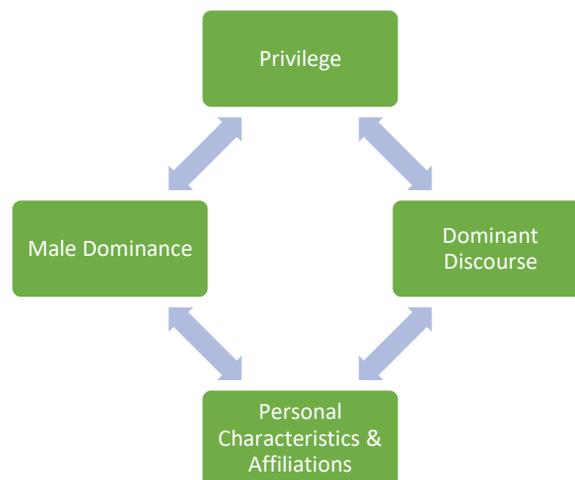


may fist-pump the table, raise their voices, or slam doors to show her their disapproval.

Individuals will also silence her with verbal criticism and control. She is the recipient of dismissive comments that question her expertise based on her gender or her role in the organization. She is criticized privately and publicly. She often feels she is on the receiving end of command-and-control leadership. She notices others colluding against her and may feel harassed. At times, she will need to ward off sexual advances or public shaming.

As she navigates silencing behavior from individuals, she is also silenced by systems of privilege. Here her silencers are faceless and represent male dominance. Systems of privilege may also favor personal characteristics, like a style of leadership (extraversion versus introversion) and may prefer affiliations that are based on favored groups, credentials, or roles. If she has those characteristics and affiliations, she may experience inclusion. Exclusion occurs when she perceives her speech as misaligned with the dominant discourse in her organization. Merely speaking up is rarely the solution as raising voice does not indicate voice efficacy. The lack of consciousness around this issue is the first barrier to overcome.

FIGURE 2: Systems of Privilege



Her silencers are young, old, and her same age. They are same-sex, heterosexual, male, and female. They are Black and White and inclusive of all nationalities, cultures, and religions. When there is no one around to silence her, she may silence herself and further decrease her care of self. When she self-silences, she has a perceived locus of power that is outside herself. This shows



up as an external threat and causes internal fear. She responds to that threat and fear with self-protection. She is unwilling to speak or act if it jeopardizes vital work relationships. She may actively suppress her thoughts.

When she feels silenced, it feels like she has contracted a virus. The silencing virus affects her cognition, emotion, spirit, and body. Cognitively it is like being in a mental spin, and she struggles with confusion on why she is being silenced. She replays conversations and situations in her head until she cannot think. She also suffers from deficit thinking and questions her leadership decisions. She wrestles with imposter syndrome and feels a lack of trust in self and others.

FIGURE 3: Silencing Virus





Emotionally she experiences a sense of isolation where she feels disconnected from her peers and those she is required to lead. She feels traumatized by her silencers, and she is miserable, fearful, and suffering. She experiences emotional vulnerability and feels anxious, depressed, drained, frustrated, hurt, and at times ashamed. She has a sense of inadequacy and insecurity that may result in tearful outbursts.

The virus affects her spiritually by shrouding her in the sense of loss of self. She will feel disconnected from her core and experience a void in her soul. She may feel trampled and misplaced.

The virus will manifest in different physical ways. She may have full-body stress that shows as exhaustion, body tightness followed by a physical dread, and heaviness. Her gut may tighten, and she may experience digestive issues, acid reflux, ulcers, nausea, appetite changes, and weight gain. She may experience a shortness of breath and have respiratory illnesses. The silencing virus may give her a sore throat and cause constriction.

Her leadership is also impacted by the silencing virus, and she feels a shift. She will become disengaged. Her direct reports and peers will notice changes in her leadership behavior, and her teams may start to develop silencing symptoms as a result. She may seek change within her organization, or she may leave her organization to recover voice. Based on findings in this study, she stands less than a 50% chance of recovering from feeling silenced by just opting out.



SOLUTION B: COMMUNITY AND SELF-CARE

A female leader's recovery from feeling silenced comes in the form of community and self-care. She will experience healing when she reaches out to her female friends and network of support. These are her peers, colleagues, groups of practices, spiritual communities, mentors, coaches, family members, and therapists. She finds relief when she steps out of her isolation and discovers safety in a community of other women or professionals who are wrestling with similar leadership dynamics. Her relationship and vulnerability with others help her see different perspectives.

This focus on community may be difficult for female leaders to find. Based on her role in an organization, she may need to seek her community outside of her company. When she holds a senior executive or CEO role, her peer group will need to be individuals who hold similar level roles in other organizations and can be men or women. This means finding community will not be simple and it requires an intention to create space and time for these relationships to form and be nurtured.

She will find her purposeful voice when she begins giving voice to others. As she becomes aware of those who are also silenced in her organization or community, she seeks to not further silence. She finds voice by becoming a role model and a sponsor for women. This comes with risk, and she will find it is easiest to advocate more for others and less for self.

Her self-care comes in the form of awareness of her choices along with differing viewpoints from the following:

- personal development
- broadening perspective
- educational opportunities
- spiritual practices
- other forms of community

As she moves out of isolation, she will begin to see small changes available to her and realize her willingness to risk may produce voice efficacy. As she seeks closure to the silencing experience, she wants to name what she has experienced. Her healing also comes in knowing she is not alone. This closure and growth may come because of her making a change, inside or outside her



organization; it may also come because her silencer has departed. Her perspective will shift, but it takes time. Based on the research, she can expect it to take several years to heal.

As she heals, her emotional and cognitive confidence increases. She will gain back her own trust and respect as she gains it from those around her. Her influence on others begins to manifest in positive feedback and increased followership. She feels her leadership expertise deepen, and she is better equipped to handle conflict. She may adopt a facilitative leadership style, which allows her to keep everyone's voice in the room.

In summary, the essence of feeling silenced as described above is not meant to generalize every female leader's experience. This white paper describes those leaders who participated in the research. As women read the narrative of a silenced female leader it may resonate with them in certain ways but not others. The description is meant to provide a frame of understanding that silencing is not merely talking over someone or interrupting them in a meeting. When someone feels silenced at the level this paper highlights, it is much deeper and insidious requiring a multi-faceted approach to manage and solve.

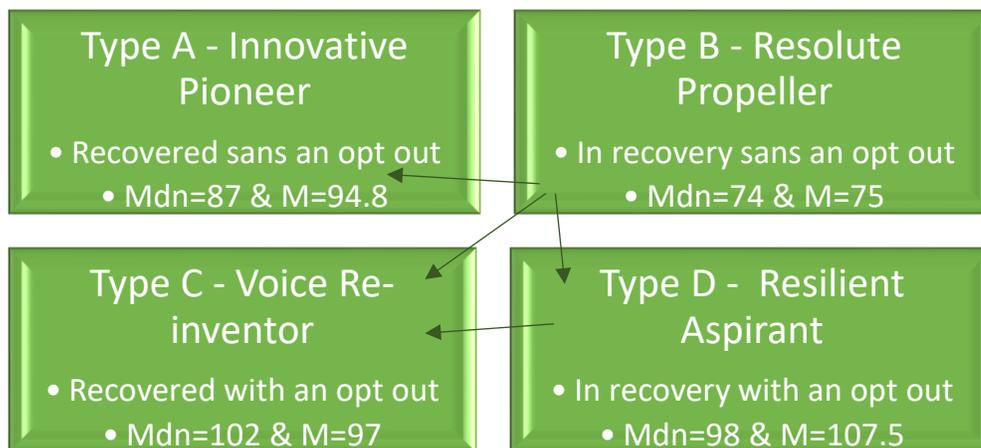


TYOLOGY

Theories often fail when focusing on particularities as they are designed to describe the general principles of something. In this study, the unique characteristics of each participant were re-assessed using a typology approach which allows for classifications according to general characteristics. Here the typology is based on opt-out history and recovery-from-silencing status. Four main types emerged that describe the status of women who have experienced this nature of silencing and how they have chosen to respond to their experience. This white paper argues that women can transition into new types as they exercise agency and heal. Further research may suggest additional categories.

The research also included a Silencing the Self Scale – Work (STSS-W). The scale was used in parallel to participant interviews. As female leaders self-identified their recovery from their silencing experience, it was correlated with their STSS-W results. The four types are described below, and higher scores indicate the stronger levels of self-silencing these female leaders applied to themselves as they were experiencing silencing in their leader roles.

FIGURE 4: Typology Moving from Feeling Silenced to Voice Recovery



Innovative Pioneers (Type A) are female leaders who recovered from their silencing experience without opting out of their leadership role. To emphasize, these are women who took a position, endured silencing in that role, and then recovered while leading in that same position. To stay after a silencing



experience is an act of courage. These women found sponsors within their organization (who were not their silencers) and found ways to innovate their leadership. They worked diligently on self-care and community to balance the feedback and not become subject to the perspective of their silencer(s). They were able to identify the systems that routinely silenced them and, when possible, shift or minimize those systems. **Innovation** is the key to recovery for women who fall into this type. They advocated for and created something that helped their purposeful voice emerge. This eventually led to healing and a sense of efficacy. Innovative Pioneers do not feel silenced anymore. They are past the experience and can recall it from a different and evolved perspective.

Resolute Propellers (Type B) are women who are still experiencing forms of silencing and have made the decision to not opt-out of their current leadership role. Often the sources of silencing in these situations are low-level or remnants of a silencing encounter from which they have not fully healed. Female leaders in this category do not speak of their silencing experience as something in the past; they use language to suggest they still struggle. **Propelling forward** is the key for these women as they work to manage and recover versus staying in isolation. Resolute Propellers need to use their agency to deepen their self-care and continue to connect with their community. These are women who feel an urge to stay and continue to lead, despite the obstacles and viral effects of silencing. Leaving is not yet the solution, and yet they consider it on a regular basis. Many female leaders who fall into this type use language to suggest they have not been released from their calling yet; they need to stay and lead to a particular outcome.

Voice Reinventors (Type C) are female leaders who have left an organization in part because of their silencing experience. These women have returned to a leadership role (either formal or informal) and as a result of their leadership change (and at times, break from employment) have found recovery from their silencing. They no longer speak of feeling silenced and see their departure as critical to their recovery. Women in this type have reinvented themselves in new settings. A thought-provoking discovery is that individuals who are voice reinventors are also equally passionate about speaking for and supporting social justice issues. Because of their lived experience with silencing, they see themselves as the voice for those who are often unable to speak up. These women also have a 'never again' attitude. They can recall the pain of their experience and at times, the shame for how long they tolerated silencing before making the necessary changes. The key for female leaders in this category is that they had the agency to **reinvent**. They now approach their lives and leadership with a new sense of identity and efficacy.



Resilient Aspirants (Type D) are female leaders who have opted out of leadership or made job changes and are still in the recovery process from feeling silenced. In some cases, they have chosen to step down from leadership entirely, and in other cases, they have made job changes and continue to lead despite still feeling silenced. These women are CEOs, executive vice presidents, senior directors, and other types of leaders with large scopes of responsibility. Women here are bringing their silenced essence into new positions, and the pain of not being their full and effective selves is a continuous challenge. These female leaders aspire for the purposeful voice they know they are capable of, but they also recognize their recovery takes time and they need space to shed the viral effects of their previous silencing. These women are on a journey to heal while simultaneously leading in new environments. The key for these female leaders is to **aspire** and deepen their **resiliency**. Studies show that silencing can weaken females' immunity, and the challenge for this type is to pay attention to their self-care, join new communities, and stop the cycle of silencing so their purposeful voice can emerge.

These four types are not static categories, and as women in Type B propel forward, they may move into other types. As female leaders in Type D aspire and find their resiliency, they will eventually transition into Voice Reinventors (Type C). The self-silencing scores vary by type and indicate those in the Type D category have more intense silencing experiences to move through to find recovery. As women identify their current type and determine which they want to move towards, it will create awareness of how they need to create customized strategies to reach those goals.

As with any social science experiment, it is problematic to name a direct and consistent correlation between two human factors. Women may opt-out of leadership for multiple issues. When feeling silenced is part of the opt-out decision, they may not experience the shifts or changes they hoped to see with just a job change. They need to approach their healing from silencing in ways similar to that of healing from any traumatic experience.



CONCLUSION

This white paper highlighted two significant findings regarding women in leadership who feel silenced. First, feeling silenced is a phenomenon that women and organizations are not referencing. The lack of discussion creates isolation for women that may keep them from voice recovery. Second, the findings indicate there are certain characteristics and types of women who experience feeling silenced or have recovered from feeling silenced. Some leaders find recovery by staying in their leadership roles (only 25%), while others need to find recovery through periods of opt-out or transition. Regardless, recovery takes time and may not automatically occur with job changes.

Leadership and organizational development consultants along with executive coaches have an opportunity to target the growth needs of current executive and emerging female leaders. The first step in this targeted approach is to name the issues associated with female leader silencing. The word “silencing” may need to join other terms such as workplace bullying, micro-aggressions, hostile work environment, harassment, or other disruptive behavior organizations attempt to eradicate. When a workforce of leaders is aware of how they feel silenced, it may also lead to discussions of how they silence others and inadvertently keep silencing systems alive. New conversations and healthy dialogue need to emerge regarding the collaborative ways all voices are heard. This type of discourse will not transpire without facilitation by those who are committed to the development and expansion of women in leadership.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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