

If Women Only Knew What They Know

Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D.

Carol Kinsey Goman, Ph.D. is an international speaker, consultant, and author of nine books, including *This Isn't the Company I Joined*. Her latest book, *Ghost Story: A Modern Business Fable*, is a fable about the power of collaboration and knowledge sharing. Carol also authored: *The Human Side of High-Tech*, *Change-Busting: 50 Ways to Sabotage Organizational Change*, *Adapting to Change: Making it Work for You*, *Managing for Commitment*, *The Loyalty Factor*, and *Managing in a Global Organization*.

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Years ago, I met with the management team of a California company that was relocating to another state. Shortly after meeting with the President of the company, he telephoned to talk with me about his Administrative Assistant.

"She is probably the brightest, most creative person I've worked with," the President told me. "Problem is, she can't move her family out of state so she needs to find a new job. I was wondering if you would see her for a private counseling session so that when she applies for a new position, she'll come across just as terrific as she really is. I'll gladly pay for the session."

I looked forward to meeting this talented woman.

"This is a real pleasure. I've heard so many nice things about you." I told her when we met. "Tell me about yourself. What is it that you do exceptionally well? What would you most want a prospective employer to know about you?"

The woman was silent for several seconds. Finally she sighed and replied, "I really don't know. I do a lot of things well, but when I do them, I don't notice."

The problem was clear: *She didn't know what she knew!*

My latest book, [*Ghost Story: A Modern Business Fable*](#) (KCS Publishing, Sept. 2002), is about collaboration and knowledge-sharing. And, after surveying 200 mid-level managers regarding the state of knowledge-sharing in their organizations, I found women to be at a distinct disadvantage. Survey results revealed that women are less likely to speak up in meetings, less likely to believe that their contributions are valuable, and more likely to personalize failure while externalizing success.

The heroine of *Ghost Story* doesn't participate in team meetings because she believes she has nothing to contribute. Dorothy ("Dot") possesses what educators refer to as "unconscious competence." Like my earlier client example, Dot too doesn't know what she knows. And, because she is outranked and intimidated in all team discussions, she believes that her input has no value. (In the end, of course, it is her courage, strength, and innate wisdom that save the day. But that -- quite literally -- is another story.)

If, like many women, your challenge is to develop "conscious competence," there are a number of strategies to help do this:

1) Focus on your strengths.

Everyone has areas of lesser and greater talents, and although it can be helpful to acknowledge weaknesses and seek guidance or training to develop those areas, there is nothing more frustrating than striving vainly to excel in areas where one has little or no natural ability.

While you're doing that, talents you have overlooked may atrophy. And weaknesses -- regardless of how much effort you put into trying to improve them -- will never match your natural strengths. Management expert, Peter Drucker, advises, "Don't focus on building up your weaknesses. Understand your strengths and place yourself in positions where those strengths can best be employed. Your strengths will carry you through to success."

2) Own your successes.

I was coaching an executive in a utility company. After a particularly productive session, the

executive complimented me. "You really know a lot." he said. "In addition to great communication skills, you have good common sense."

Unprepared, I answered, "Oh... I've just worked with a lot of talented people."

And in that moment, I completely retreated from my success.

What I should have said then is the same thing I'm reminding you to say under similar circumstances: "Thank you."

3) Publicize your successes.

Notice (and record in a weekly "success log") when you do something exceptionally well. Then tell others about it.

One woman I know came up with a creative solution to the oft-heard lament that her boss seldom noticed accomplishments. She put a hand-painted sign on her desk and jokingly displayed it whenever she had a significant achievement.

What started out as an office gag is now her favorite ritual. The sign reads, "I just did something wonderful. Ask me about it!" She spends a lot of time these days answering questions.

4) Take advantage of all opportunities to discover (and develop) your abilities.

The Office Support Network (OSN) is an organization of office and clerical workers at S.C. Johnson Wax that reports to the head of Human Resources. OSN has a 10-member steering committee and nine subcommittees that address the growth and development of office staff.

When I spoke at the network's annual dinner meeting, the Chairwoman of the steering committee (also a library clerk) booked me and made all the financial and travel arrangements for my engagement. Her experience with OSN greatly enhanced her opinion of her abilities: "This program has given me a whole new view of myself. I now know that I can conduct meetings and give speeches. For the first time, I feel that I'm a true professional with a lot to offer."

5) Recognize the value of what you bring to your organization.

The more organizations need teamwork and collaboration, the more valuable are managers and team leaders who can create an environment that encourages knowledge-sharing. And it is here where women often excel.

My research indicates that women are more likely to take the time and effort necessary to make people feel safe and valued. It also shows that women are more inclined to emphasize people's strengths, encourage the sharing of mistakes and lessons learned, set clear expectations for outcomes and clarify individual roles, and help all members recognize what each of them brings to the team.

The best of these female leaders model openness, vulnerability, and honesty. They tell stories of group successes and personal challenges. They understand the necessity of building trust among team members. Most of all, they respect and acknowledge everyone's contribution. And, hopefully, they know how well they're doing it.

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Linkage
Burlington, MA
781.402.5555
info@linkageinc.com