

WHAT SHE SAID



By Eleanor Beaton

It was 1993 and Madeleine Albright, then the newly-minted U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, was headed into her very first Security Council meeting intending to wait, listen closely to what was being said and figure out “who was who” among her 14 male counterparts. She wanted to be certain she knew the lay of the land and could identify her allies, before weighing in with her own opinions.

Then she noticed the placeholder that indicated where she was to sit. The card didn’t say “Madeleine Albright”. It said “United States.” Recognizing that she was (quite literally) the voice of the United States was an “out of body experience.” She realized “if I don’t speak today, then the voice of the United States is not heard.”

Albright would later say that in her work as a diplomat, she experienced many instances in which what a woman says is dismissed. “But sometimes, we do it to ourselves.”

What Albright realized that day at the United Nations, in the backroom where the real work happens, is that when it comes to influence and power, voice matters. And while women may work hard to get a seat at those tables, if they don’t speak up, then all the work it took to get there has been wasted. Albright was already a seasoned leader when she realized that her instincts to wait, listen and observe — all too common among women — could compromise her credibility and curb her job performance.

While Albright’s is a high profile example, her story represents a deeper malaise. In the past, my editor here at *Atlantic Business Magazine* (Dawn Chafe whom, as you may gather from her editorials, is NOT one to hold back from voicing her opinion), has faced criticism for not profiling enough women entrepreneurs in the magazine.

The challenge: fewer women entrepreneurs are willing to apply for awards, offer in-depth interviews or be profiled. Trust us: we try. This is a magazine published by a woman, edited by a woman, with a regular column devoted to women in business. Women are simply less likely to step into the spotlight. Several months ago I was speaking with a conference organizer who hosts several events each year that assemble tens of thousands of entrepreneurs. He confided in me that 60 per cent of the attendees of these conferences are women. The vast majority of the speakers are men. “It’s a real challenge to find women who are willing to speak from stage,” he said.

According to research from Stitcher (a podcast delivery service), of the top-ranked podcasts, 71 per cent are

hosted by men, while 11 per cent are hosted by women — this despite the fact that women make up half the podcast listening audience.

Why aren’t we willing to speak up? When women raise their opinions and concerns in a way that is “forceful” or “assertive”, their perceived competence and compensation can take a hit, according to a 2015 study from VitalSmarts, a workplace learning and development firm. (Men are also punished, but — predictably — less so.)

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The speak/don’t speak issue is a classic double bind: if we don’t speak up, we lose our influence and credibility, if we do speak up, our assertiveness can be held against us.

The key is in how you frame your opinions. When it comes to boldness (a vastly underrated tool), it is critical to master the art of the set up. When you deliver difficult to hear feedback to a client, you might frame it this way: “I’m going to be very blunt, and this may be difficult to hear, but it’s critical I offer some specific feedback.”

You might also link your directness to your underlying values. For instance, “Honesty and integrity are important to me, so it’s vital I express my opinion directly.”

The bottom line: if we want to lean in, we’ve got to speak up. If women don’t participate in the conversation, we can’t shape it.

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FEEDBACK

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