

Seven Deadly Traps

Women leaders are susceptible.



by Dede Henley

WOMEN HAVE SO much to offer, so much pure potential and talent. Yet many of our skills remain untapped. What is in the way? To a certain degree, we are. Even those of us who are described as powerhouses of strength, imagination, and creativity often limit ourselves unwittingly. We do this when we fall into any one of seven deadly traps.

Trap 1. Being one of the boys. While women have asserted themselves over the past 30 years, we have made these gains tentatively. We've sensed that we were entering a territory not of our own creation. As though we had been invited into the boys' clubhouse, we believed that if we wanted to stay, we had better lie low, fit in, and get along. When we adopt a masculine style of dress and of relating to and managing others, we disconnect from our true expression and natural way of being. When we become one of the boys, we disengage from our authentic selves and lose sight of our most important work: our purpose, our calling. Tragically, we're then unable to offer our unique gifts. Our feminine circum-spect view, our relational perspective, and our highly intuitive and creative input are silenced.

Trap 2. Playing the martyr. "I'll do it myself." Women excel at many things. We can juggle many tasks and multi-task. We can get just about any job done, no matter how tedious or onerous. The challenge that goes with our competence is the facility with which we become martyrs, feeling overworked and underappreciated. For centuries, we were taught that good girls made other people happy. If we didn't have something nice to say, we didn't say anything at all. We were encouraged to play along, play it safe, and avoid making waves. We learned that it was costly to speak up and speak out, to express our needs and desires directly. Yet to end our martyrdom and claim our sovereignty, we need to ask directly for what we want and need; give up the right to be

right; make room for people to say no; and trust that others can make powerful choices for themselves.

Trap 3. Having no voice and no choice. Women lose power when we see ourselves as victims without choice. In truth, only one kind of complaining makes a difference: complaining for action or speaking out—taking your complaint to someone who can do something about it. If someone at work isn't pulling her load, talk to her directly. If your team is ineffective in meetings, create a new format for meetings that works for all. If your boss is driving you crazy, have a chat. If you can't discover an action that will resolve the situation, be still, calm, and silent. Retain your power.



Trap 4. Waiting for rescue. Years ago, I realized that I'd been waiting to be rescued. "Happily ever after" sounded so promising—surely I could find a shortcut to it! I was waiting for the perfect job, client, partner, and office to appear. I now realize that there are no shortcuts. Life unfolds slowly and in its own time. Waiting for rescue is another way of abdicating your power and sovereignty. To preserve your sovereignty, stop waiting for your life to turn out. Take one positive action, and then another. Get a handle on your finances, your weight, your relationships, your leadership team—now. Do work you love. Create the life you've been waiting for.

Trap 5. Peace at any price. Preserving the peace at any price is another way in which we sacrifice sovereignty. We may go out of our way to please others, withhold honest feedback, or try to make things okay that really aren't.

Pleasing others, regardless of the cost, holds us back. We give up what is most important to us to keep the peace. This peace-at-any-price trap is an outgrowth of what most women learned as girls: "Be nice. Get along. Avoid conflict." You may need a new set of "boat-rocking" skills. Identify what you are afraid to do at work. What conversations do you avoid? What could you say that would change things? Share your thoughts truthfully. Speak more spontaneously. If you make a mistake, you can clarify or apologize later. Look for win-win solutions. What solution could you and someone else create together?

Trap 6. Hurry, hurry, hurry! We are addicted to speed. We want everything now. E-mail enables you to send messages to thousands of people with a single click. Cell phones enable you to talk in the car while waiting for your fast-food lunch. It's the era of online banking and fast profits. We can do just about anything in a hurry, and we're increasingly impatient. In our headlong race toward our goals, we often rush past inspiration and creativity. We don't innovate; we simply start running—so busy getting from point A to B that we forget why we're going there in the first place. The challenge is to create a life/work structure that supports your natural cycles. Doing so may mean letting go of the obsession with time, and the myth of control. It may mean that by shifting a dead line, you throw yourself a life line.

Trap 7. Self-protection. You relinquish the privilege of leadership when you take leave of your true source of power and influence, abandon your followers in the name of self-protection, and become more concerned about staying safe than about providing clear direction and grounding for others. When you are threatened, frightened, angry, anxious, or overwhelmed, you are thrown from your position of leadership. To become aware of your blind spots, those things that other people readily perceive about you, seek input and feedback from others. Identify your self-protective strategies and consider what results they produce in the lives of others. Then choose an empowering response, one that will better serve yourself and others. LE

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ACTION: Avoid the seven traps.