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“Eating Our Own or Throwing a Lifeline”: Leadership of Consequence among Women in Uniform and Women Veterans

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Snarky Women

Misogyny among women is nothing new. Neither is the fact that girls behave with far more malice towards each other than boys do, and are a great deal less kind in their criticism of one another than most members of the male species (Meyers, 2013). The “mean girls” mindset is alive, well, and overflowing with all degrees of vitriol (Meyers, 2013). Few girls escaped junior high or high school without being the target of some degree of torment and social exclusion. The very threat of being left out is more akin to failure than most other forms of perceived persecution. According to Crick and Bigbee (Meyers, 2013), this is a form of relational aggression perpetrated by women against one another and a more covert form of interpersonal victimization.

If one takes a gander at social learning theory, it is clear that many mothers, under the guise of acting in the best interests of their children, conduct child rearing with a notable absence of kindness and lovability. The outcome is generations of women who feel anxious and inade-

quate. These women may readily come to believe that what one does in the world is necessarily flawed and that a cascade of criticism is just around every corner. Of equal concern is the idea that women are judgmental of one another, not because they have lost respect for them, but because they covet what they do not possess within themselves. They feel most threatened when they believe that another female is trying to take something away from them, which typically stems from personal feelings of insecurity. One’s female foes may strike out of fear and gladly leave stab wounds in their backs, despising parts of themselves more than they could ever detest any other woman (Stewart, 2015). It has become dangerous to step too close to those whose unmistakable disdain and disregard for themselves masquerades as envy and all things venomous.

Stated simply, the pressure for women to succeed, be liked, loved, and admired may come at the expense of other women trampled at the bottom rungs of that success ladder. There are women who will eat your soul for breakfast. Women can

be brutal, pitchfork-carrying members of that exclusive club of insecure high schoolers who never grew up or left that turf, carrying hate-mongering well past their youth into adulthood.

This takes passive-aggressiveness to entirely new levels of loathing. Casting one another in the most undesirable light to prevent other women from ascending above them is one of the most deleterious forms of sabotage, in the most mean-spirited manner (Hoogervorst, 2014). Throwing each other under the bus may have its early roots in how mothers parent their daughters. Children learn from what they observe and what they live.

In order to compete for acceptance as adults, some women see the need to scratch their way to the top in order to remain competitive in the approval market. In today's society and in many circles, men still have the upper edge. Women are far from resting on equal footing. Women who truly dislike or even despise themselves project their own self-hatred or self-disgust onto other women. Hence, the trap of despising one another (MacDonald, 2013) fosters something hardly resembling healthy competitiveness. The mission of female "have nots" is to launch search and destroy missions against their rivals. Women sabotage each other in the workplace, the classroom, the faith community, and the neighborhood. Nothing seems to be more offensive to some women than the success of other women, says renowned novelist, Barbara Taylor Bradford (Hopkins, 2013). The workplace is often abundant with a trail of destruction against those women with higher salaries, thinner frames, nicer clothes,

and more appealing faces. This remains one of the more blatant forms of sexism and oppression of women: by other women.

According to leading expert Dr. Paula Caplan (personal communication, 2015), clinical and research psychologist and an ardent women's activist, our entire society may be socialized to blame women for just about everything, set women up, and pit them against each other as enemies. Instead, we should focus our attention on the fact that women are trapped in an imbalance of power, with far fewer resources than men have at their disposal. In an ideal world, women should recognize and use this as a reason to pave the way to fight for and not against one another. What we need to be doing is to come together as allies to battle for a more equal and fair share of power and resources.

"But I think that instead of immediately rushing to blame women in power, we ought to consider: (1) what she had to struggle against to get her power, (2) the fact that quite likely, any support she got from women was not particularly effective, because most women had less power than she did or than the men who had the power to promote her, and (3) the fact that women with power are rarely in the top slots and thus, have to worry about losing what power they have. Some women may genuinely want to help other women, but if they are caught helping other women, they get slammed, accused of being biased, and can lose what power they

have" (Caplan, personal communication, 2015).

Toxic Leadership: Women in Uniform

The military is certainly fertile ground for the incubation and cultivation of toxic leadership among women. This may begin with the premise that the rules for women as military leaders are different from the start, probably from the playground decades earlier, remaining frozen in time among those brazen enough to accept leadership roles.

According to Litwin (2014), "women's friendship rules" and prospects for building connections and trust through relationships often fall short of matching the expectations of both the employer and women in military leadership positions. Masculine norms dictate that aloofness, toughness, and autonomy are the more desirable of leadership traits, but the greater truth may be that effective leadership requires more advanced interpersonal skills and actual likability, both within the military and the civilian sector.

Some women are thrilled to witness the progression of women up the corporate and military ladders, but they prefer not to work for them. **Professional jealousy, whether in military or civilian circles, persists as a problem of enormous proportions, especially when other women get promoted beyond those left behind, or when their accomplishments are more notice-**

able and recognized. This can evolve into a very public struggle for acceptance within the ranks for professional distinction and acknowledgment (Allen, 2015).

Women in positions of power may be at risk for assuming the intoxicating role of the Queen Bee (Caplan, 1981). With the high addictive potential of superior status, military women who become elevated in their workplace status frequently have little allegiance or loyalty to their

female counterparts and believe that they have absolutely everything to lose if they lend a hand to other women seeking the same opportunities in climbing to the next rung. Many women in positions of authority within military circles struggle to maintain their unique status and labor intensively to keep other women in lower positions, for fear that their positions, rank, and power will be overtaken or surpassed.

And then there are the age old societal and normative beliefs which perceive women as innately flawed. Women are continuously slapped with the implicit order to improve themselves... lose weight, stand up straight, have some "work" done on your face, get a makeover, throw out that old, ugly outfit... it is doubtful that anyone of the male persuasion has heard these directives. Women may very well struggle their entire lives to learn what not to wear. In essence, girls and women hear the same explicit,



misogynistic messages from the time their first pink bow is twisted into tow-head wisps of hair, internalizing sexism at the knees of their mothers and grandmothers. This same indoctrination seeks to protect male superiority, colluding with the male species to perpetrate stereotypes of women as weak, passive, manipulative, cunning, sneaky, untrustworthy, and without the requisite skills and abilities to assume any type of leadership role (Chemaly, 2012). These dynamics, sadly, are an excellent fit for many military women who scale their way to the top on the backs of other women and who will attempt to soar at any cost... no price too high.

Insidious and sinister, there is a subgroup of military women in positions of power who take pleasure in trampling on the souls of their female peers and eat their own for breakfast without so much as an eye blink. As with sexual harassment of male Service Members against female Service Members, consequences may be not only destructive, but deadly. Research has not yet taken into account how the mounting suicide rate among uniformed personnel may correlate with merciless treatment from toxic leaders and repeatedly being pushed over the brink, from which there is no escape. When troops are deployed overseas or in war zones, there is no going home to escape the crossfire. In the military, one cannot just walk away or quit the force without dire conse-

quences under the Uniformed Code of Military Justice; there is no exit strategy or safe haven from these forms of persecution. These tormentors are unrepentant and will stop at nothing to advance their careers.

In the corporate world, ruling by fear and ruthlessness is shameless enough, but in the military, this degree of toxicity is not just demeaning and poisonous; it "gets people killed" (Hatcher, 2014). This becomes particularly egregious when women target and engage in search and destroy missions against their very own, the consequences of which endure long past deployments, homecoming, and departure from military service. The landscape of toxic women in the military offers a rich battleground for women to propel themselves into an attack mode



against other women. It is well-known among Service women and women veterans that there is a subgroup of female peers and superiors who strike out and knock other women out of the way on their way to the top, all for the joy that comes from the power play to scale the summit with little regard for consequences or damaging repercussions on those in the direct line of fire. If the threat to their power exists, it must be eliminated, expelled, and exterminated at any cost (Heppner, 2013).

The other subgroup of toxic women leaders, experientially speaking, are those who are defined by their subservience to male domination, willingly subjected to the whims of toxic male leaders who call the shots for women to fall in line and stand behind them. These female leaders embrace oppression in order to gain male attention, acceptance, and approval. This may very well be a direct reflection of American culture, not just of the past, but very much of the present climate. Many women still remain stuck in the belief that they do not measure up to men. Mothers who teach their daughters to cook and clean would do well to teach them how to make command decisions at the same time. What a concept. Unfortunately when it comes to female military leaders, off the fainting couch we go, into the board room and the command center, often without the requisite (essential) skills to lead from the front. What often emerges is another type of cannibal who eats her own (Dallocchio, personal communication, October, 2015).

The worst kind of undermining and sabotage occurs when women in uniform en-

gage in crimes against the humanity of our own gender. It is incumbent upon us to refuse to become a part of this form of persecution. We cannot sell our souls to the devil to commit cruel, deriding, contemptuous, insolent, divisive, injurious and often despicable forms of inhumane treatment of human beings in our charge. This becomes the very downfall of the movement to become leaders in our own right.

“Mean girls” hamper other women and, not unlike “The Devil Wears Prada”, do not often enough frown on the unapologetic use of power in the workplace, in school, and in the trenches. Some women specialize in brilliant sneakiness, garnering closeness long enough to move in for the kill. Leave this to the scorpions. The percentage of women at the top of chain of commands is scarce, in part because women refuse to help other women move into leadership positions. They step on or shun them instead. This is perceived as a direct threat, a stunning example of professional jealousy, too often forgetting what it was like to be the rookie.

It is high time for military women leaders to get over sexism amnesia and to prevent passing on the legacy of crawling one’s way to the top at the expense of everyone on the rungs below. We can ill afford to make the women’s movement one of equality when we operate on principles of condemnation, name calling, sabotage, shunning, backlash, or pay-back. This will surely guarantee that we will live in fear of one another for all time and that a sexist society of women against women will create an entirely new atmosphere of inequality. Women

who inflict themselves as weapons upon other women is an abhorrent practice.

We must stop women who rise up the ranks through search and destroy missions, and who justify other women's inferiority in a culture that seeks to keep us there. We will fail to transform and rise above poor, abusive, and inhumane leadership on such a fertile battleground when there is such dissent and oppression within our own ranks. If bullying is the only way we know to get to the top, making women prime targets on behalf of our own deep-seated insecurities, we will surely fail to set the standard or raise the bar for women in military leadership positions. And bullying is the most cunning form of emotional manipulation; one that unleashes a degree of pathology from which victims may never recover. Ask most of us who have had the misfortune to serve with them and under them.

If we live in fear of other women getting ahead because we may be replaced, we will surely crash and burn and explode and will have earned that privilege. By the same token, those who seek to smash through the glass ceiling with a claw hammer will certainly face scrutiny and cast tremendous doubt on the ability of women to lead, not only in the workplace and within military culture, but in society at large. For too many, it boils down to temptation to stab every female perceived as a threat without hesitation. This is precisely what fosters such tremendous distrust of female commanders and leaders, by both women and men who serve with them.

What we must embrace, rather, is that hardships, challenges, sorrow, grief,

abuses and losses that are guaranteed occurrences throughout our military service absolutely must be the gorilla glue that forges the bands of sisters, as in the case of Lioness Missions in Iraq, and that leadeth us away from the temptation to conduct the hunt against our very selves. We cannot afford to allow ourselves to forget that we shared our very last sheet of the sandpaper we called toilet paper with the female soldier in the crapper next to us, in godforsaken 130 degree latrine heat, or the very last shred of privacy by stringing up moldy blankets on 550 cord in our hooches, posting guard over our weapons while we took 3 minute combat showers every 6 weeks or so, or that we never let our sisters down when they could no longer do the duffel bag drag with bag number 4 and with a full combat load of ammo or that we helped them schlep the last of their gear off the shithook (Chinook) before it took off under fire, or that we slammed each other into the ground when we came under indirect fire to protect one another from certain death with the latest symphony of mortar and rocket attacks, or that we endured the true horrors and deprivations of war in proportions that no civilian could relate to, let alone survive, and *that we endured this together.*

Together we prevailed through what few ever could or ever will and that we are members of a club so exclusive, that it sets us far apart from those who remain clueless about the devastating impact of military and wartime service. We rose to it anyway because that is what was asked of us as Servicewomen in all branches of the military. Move over world, because we carry the heaviest of loads and ruck sacks and all our battle

rattle, all 50+ pounds of it, without expecting anyone else to carry our loads for us... and we did it with finesse, true grit, and the determination to overcome any adversity and ascend any obstacle. We can ill afford to forget, overlook, or fail to honor the irrevocable bonds of this uniformed sisterhood that steeled us against the forces of evil in the Global War on Terrorism and in prior wars, and the unforgettable roles we played. We cannot cast aside or lose sight of these gifts and connections and what we, as women Service Members and veterans, carry to the banquet table of military service. It is ours to assure that these messages are passed on to the generations of women that will follow in our boots and that do us proud because we did what was right by our sisters in uniform.

A Call to Leadership of Consequence

Time is long past due for women Service Members and veterans to take the lead as team players, to encourage those women in their charge to reach deeply within themselves to give birth to team spirit and camaraderie, to be compassionate and yes, even empathic and likeable. This should never be at the expense of a single other soul, regardless of gender. Women should be able and willing to take the lead without fear and to be agents of positive cultural change, where tolerance of the abuses inherent in venomous military leadership should be prevented at all costs. Is this little more than a pipe dream?

Herein lies the challenge: be not afraid to live your personal values, to demonstrate and exist and abide by principles that only incorporate integrity and morals,

and values and ethics for the betterment of the masses and not just the self. Refuse to be a part of that conspiracy of silence that tolerates abuse of women against women. Doing nothing makes us accomplices to crimes against humanity. We must devise within each of us a means to develop a call to action to lift up our sisters as agents of change. The onus is upon us to undertake this without expecting anything in return, other than the pure and unadulterated satisfaction and reward of conducting business righteously and honorably. Make these the large and lofty goals with a force that drives and propels. Do not just aspire, but *inspire* (Namin-Hedayati, 2014). It is certainly not a stretch to expect that women Service Members and veterans can be good leaders, good mentors, good parents, and good people all in one. There are many military women that we can identify as role models whom should be fully acknowledged as such. We should seek to emulate them for their fine leadership and moral fortitude. And by the way, one does not need to be bossy to be a boss. Throw that notion out with the trash. The premise that women must step quietly into management or anywhere for that matter is pure horse hockey. Kill off the notion that women were not born to lead. The desire and the initiative to lead are actually not gender-specific. It is quite acceptable, even noble, to pursue dreams and to work tirelessly for them, as long as there are no broken backs along the route.

Mental toughness and guts need to include heart and soul. This is an absolute. Walk in the front door, but do not slam it shut on your sisters in arms... your sisters, period. There is never a time to

squash your female counterparts on the way up the ladder. Ever. Be seen and heard as an effectual and powerful leader by enabling and promoting the advancement of your sisters. This should be the only way to make one's mark on the organization, the military, the culture, and our society as a whole. Your epitaph will not be inscribed with what you did, but who you were. Character still counts. Be not afraid to risk failure, as this means only one thing; that you were courageous enough to step up and to take the risk. Lead lives that are meaningful by doing meaningful work that does not include vitriol and venom as part of your enterprise. The truth is that it is a great thing to level the playing field based upon merit and decency and kindness and plain old human consideration.

A destructive force among women looks like this: support non-qualified women for positions of leadership. This is highly unlikely to advance the cause of women breaching the glass ceiling and the brick wall. If there is a loose brick, maybe getting rid of it really is the right thing. It is high time that women in the ranks of leadership, military or otherwise, develop the sheer and unadulterated courage to battle against the rising tide of being demeaned, discounted, disrespected, dismissed, reviled and shunned, oppressed and suppressed, only to become depressed by a cultural wasteland that seeks to suck the lives out of us and send us back to our ovens and our irons.

It is long past time to throw our sisters a lifeline and not a noose. As women warriors, our country asked us to place our lives on the line and to be geared up to give it up by making the ultimate sacri-

fice, only to find that the real enemy is within the gates: a culture of cruelty, indifference, and devaluation within the military and more specifically, within our own ranks of women leaders. There is every reason not to become fearless of one another. In an ideal world, we should be bound to have the backs and "the six" of our sisters in uniform. This is pure sustenance in the wartime theater of operations and when we march home to a society from which we are completely divorced and detached. We will only become more invisible if we are ridden with conflict and contentiousness.

A Charge to Women Leaders of Consequence

Be Joan of Arc, but quit burning each other at the stake in order to reach past that intangible barrier in the ceiling and the roof. Do not bite the hand offered you, but take it. Mentor; don't annihilate and assassinate. Build, but do not erode trust by spewing mean-spiritedness and derailing your sisters in uniform. Get them back on track. Stop ruthlessness and miscarriages of justice in their tracks. Refuse to tolerate lapses in judgment and character. Do not allow the women's movement to come only from your bowels. And remember that whatever women do, we must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good. Fortunately, this is not hard.

Live a life of consequence, but not at the expense of your sisters in uniform. Memorize the Girl Scout promise. Mean it when you say it silently to yourself. The time is long past due for us to address the critical need for changing the culture that enables and rewards toxic leadership.



I invite women of audacity to come forward to create a blue ribbon commission to confront the military culture of toxic leadership, and to contact the staff of our e-magazine directly. We want researchers, military women in leadership positions including top brass, experts and authors about women's leadership issues, to join forces with us to challenge the problem and to change the culture for women in uniform. It is time for us to be, not women of victimization, but women of valor.

Contact us: info@stress.org

**Subject line: Women of Valor
Blue Ribbon Commission**

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