

"I welcome any criticism you have
that doesn't affect me."



Perspective: Why women quit

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By Joanne Cleaver

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"I've been looking forward to talking with you. Wait . . . let me shut my door."

In that moment, I know exactly what I'm about to hear: the six words that are nearly guaranteed to incite a midlevel woman to quit.

In my firm's ongoing research about what it takes for women to rise to leadership, we have heard the same career-derailing

sentence across several industries and at workplaces with all sorts of cultures. It's more than a classic case of gender miscommunication: It's an epic disconnect between what executives claim they want from women and how leadership responds when it counts the most.

There is no shortage of statistics that document where women aren't. Women aren't chief executive officers (4.2 percent, per Catalyst) or chief financial officers (12 percent, per Korn Ferry). They are scarce on boards and in technology leadership. Male leaders everywhere are all about advancing working women.

Women, women, women. They are about 50 percent of managers and professionals and make 80 percent of consumer purchasing decisions and are saluted by investor Warren Buffett and management guru Tom Peters and Lord help us business visionary Larry Ellison (a new convert to leaning in, thanks to Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook). Programs abound. We are awash in initiatives. And yet, the numbers don't budge.

The business case for advancing women is partly about finding new markets thanks to women's insights and partly about filling the pipeline with enough top quality talent so that aging baby boomers can retire. Today's executives can maintain the status quo with the men in the pipeline. But, to sustain growth, companies need additional talent.

Women leave to start their own companies. Women leave to take jobs where they believe they have a better chance of getting ahead. For some women, the fatal six words neutralize their ambition and they decide to coast until it's time to quit for the always socially acceptable family reasons. (This is one dynamic famously cited by Sandberg in her best-seller "Lean In.")

The door closes and my interview subject settles in for a heart-to-

heart about her career expectations. When, exactly, did she decide that she would stay the course at her current workplace? How has she signaled her intention to survive the odds and rise to senior leadership?

"Well, I have tried to have that conversation," she says. "I did what you're supposed to do: I raised my hand. I put myself out there. I took a risk. I asked my boss, 'What do I need to do to qualify for partner? And do you know what he said?'"

In fact, I do.

"He said, 'Just keep doing what you're doing.' What is that supposed to mean? If I keep doing what I'm doing, I'll keep getting the same results I'm getting now.

"That's why I asked! I want to do something different, and I don't know what that is. And they won't tell me. I've had it. I'm starting to answer headhunters when they call. I'm talking next week with a client that has a really great opportunity. Or maybe I'll go out on my own. But I'm not going to keep doing what I'm doing."

Enlightened bosses of America: Women will keep quitting if you keep saying what you've been saying.

"Just keep doing what you're doing" grates for several reasons. First, it reinforces the impression that quiet, passive Cinderellas should sit tight and wait for their corporate Prince Charming to 'tap them on the shoulder' with a golden scepter of recognition. Second, it contradicts the message that women are supposed to assert themselves and ask for opportunities. Finally, it means that advancement is based on alchemy: you know it when you see it — even if your track record indicates that all you see is those who already look like you.

The antidote to the damning six words are these five words: "Let's

figure it out together."

That's all it takes.

Women stay when they don't have to worry that their accomplishments are being overlooked. They stay when they are sure they have allies who will help them win their next developmental assignments, whether those are lateral or upward.

That's what midlevel women want. To be recognized, not invisible. To achieve more, not more of the same.

And, come on, bosses of America — you really don't want to keep doing what you're doing, either, do you? You're ordering way too many sheet cakes for way too many goodbye parties for women you'd thought you'd soon be promoting.

Unless you really like sheet cake. In which case, by all means: Just keep doing what you're doing.

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