

## The Invisible Woman Problem

For about the 10<sup>th</sup> time, I've heard yet another woman describe The Invisible Woman Problem. This time it was Christine Todd Whitman on a FORA.TV broadcast, talking about a past experience she had in the company of men (before The Hudson Union Society, September 9, 2009).

[http://fora.tv/2009/09/09/Christine\\_Todd\\_Whitman\\_in\\_Conversation.](http://fora.tv/2009/09/09/Christine_Todd_Whitman_in_Conversation.))

The tale of The Invisible Woman goes something like this: she made a statement or proposal to the group and then observed a total absence of support for her point from the men in the group. Minutes later, one of the men suggested the very same idea, and the other men in the room hopped on his wagon with the enthusiasm of Monday morning quarterbacks. Women around the globe nodded their understanding and agreement – they'd all been through the same encounter more than once.

Here's my question: If every woman on the planet has experienced this phenomenon, why haven't we figured out ways to prevent, deal with, or cope with this "problem?"

"Doing the same thing, again and again, expecting a different outcome is the definition of insanity." Are you crazy, girl? Fix the damn vulnerability!

How? Clearly, going back among your girlfriends, kvetching together in soulful sympathy has gotten you nowhere. Think differently! I mean, if all of us have seen this happen before, what would persuade us that it will not happen again? So, get ready to deal with it.

A crucial first tactic would be to never go into a mixed meeting without knowing the agenda. And always go into a mixed meeting with allies whom you respect and who respect you. If you don't have these three essential meeting pre-requisites (knowledge of the upcoming topics, collaborators and respect), then don't expect your verbal grenades to explode in wondrous Technicolor. Expect your bombs will be duds.

Next lesson: do copious homework, background checks and due diligence to comprehend what is most likely to happen. Prepare yourself to NOT have a weak side in any mixed meeting. Why you were weak before? Do you ramble? Are you too wimpy? Do you speak in gross generalizations that bore men to death? Do you know how to speak in simple, factual statements? Get feedback about why you might not be getting your message across. There are reasons. What are they?

Third, if you have an idea worthy of presenting, search out feedback on the idea with others whom you respect, beforehand. Discussions trim off the flab. Conversations build up alliances and identify possible points of contention. Test drive your idea to enhance clarity with different people. Involve worthy collaborators in the development of the idea. When you raise the topic in the meeting, familiar voices can join in the chorus. And opposing voices have been vetted – both as to the owner and the argument. This is not conspiring – this is preparing yourself to deal with the substantive issues.

The fourth point: if somebody “captures” your idea and attempts to run with it, be prepared to grab the flag back. Do not sit on your tushy and mope – that is the predictable little girl behavior which the pirate expected when he stole your idea. He thought you would not do anything to reclaim your ownership, your position, or your power. And guess what, girl: was he ever right?

Develop alternative strategies to reclaim you concept. Options include the use of humor, replay, or deflection.

Humor could be, “I didn’t expect your enthusiastic support of my idea, Tom, but it’s certainly refreshing to hear it coming from you.” Then repeat your own idea incorporating the statement, “as I said earlier.” Practice on your own and play act different genuinely humorous statements to get a feel for what sounds good. Beware of sarcasm which will only alienate the pirate and the others in the room. Nobody likes a bitch.

Replay requires you to re-iterate your original concept while showing the group the highlights that the pirate brought forth. This complements his statements while bringing the focus back on your origins and your ownership. Sometimes you can get brownie points for supporting an obvious pirate, rather than confronting him. You need to know the room.

Deflection involves tapping others whom you know will support your original idea as well as the fact that you own it. You need colleagues to be ready to answer the questions you pose. “Bob, when you and I talked about this proposal earlier, you made some great points about [budgets or something specific]. Why don’t you elaborate on that again, now, for this group?”

A final, but risky, strategy is the challenge. This should be wielded with care only when you are confident that the pirate really is a parrot chirping out, “Polly wants a cracker.” Try it only if you’re sure he has no real understanding of the idea he just echoed. Try it only when you know the room is with you, wholeheartedly.

The challenge involves a strong push-back: take back ownership and control. “When I first developed this proposal, my primary concerns were with budget impacts or inter-departmental coordination [or something specific]. Let’s take some time to focus on these issues, shall we, Tom?”

You want to get the group focused on specifics with you and your collaborators. Tom will not expect you to reclaim your idea. You will need to carefully assess the momentum of support in the room -- did you win them back? Did you show better focus on the issues? Did you engage the interest and support of the spectators? Does Tom look like the sad puppy dog that he really is?

Judgment. Strategy. Sensitivity. Preparation. And a willingness to take back rightful ownership. Do you have it in you?

Some women say, “It doesn’t matter whose idea it is as long as a good idea gets the light of day.” If that were true, then we would not hear the complaints from the chorus of frustrated women. Most women know that spectators are evaluating your performance in meetings, every day. If you are seen as someone easily walked over, it will continue to occur until the day you push back and show them you are capable of claiming your own rightful wisdom. Or until the day you bail – it’s your choice.

Some women will ask, “Why do we have to do all the heavy work, here?” We seek change because we are the ones who will benefit from the change. Toms of the world are benefiting from the status quo, and therefore seek to preserve it. If we want our ideas to be heard and valued in group gatherings, then we have to be willing to exert the effort required to be heard. That requires work on our part and collaboration with others.

Some women argue, “Why don’t THEY change?” There is a very long socio-cultural history of men not listening to women, as demonstrated by the Zits cartoon of 09/29/2009.



Source:

<http://www.chron.com/apps/comics/showComick.mpl?date=20090929&name=Zits>

Tom may actually believe the original idea WAS his. The Toms of the world also enjoy playing such games as long as they believe they can come out smelling pretty. If Tom suddenly gets caught with fingers sticky with chocolate, pulling his hand from the cookie jar of good meeting ideas, next time he may hesitate just long enough for you to win the respect of the group.

If every woman we know has seen this happen ten times in her life, what do we think are the odds that the Toms of the world WILL change unless we begin to test alternative challenge and response mechanisms? We have all met Toms (or Tabathas) in our lives, and we know that some people will NEVER change.

As a friend once said, “It is what it is. Deal with it!”