



## THE SITUATION

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“ In a workshop on gender diversity in the workplace, my client (the only female on the executive team) shared that sometimes women’s voices are not heard in decision-making. She said other women often report to her that stating their idea gets no response, then moments later, when a man says the same thing everyone thinks it’s a great idea. The CEO responded, ‘That would never happen in our company.’ What coaching would best support her? ”

# How do I support my female client?

## THE EXPERTS WEIGH IN

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Your client, as the sole female leader on an executive team addressing an inequality (in this case, gender), invokes past injustice. In an article titled “*History Backfires: Reminders of past injustices against women undermine support for workplace policies promoting women*,” the authors Ivona Hideg and Anne E. Wilson address this issue. (Source: *Journal of Organization Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol 157, January 2020, pages 176-189.) In the article, they posit that reminding people about past injustice against a disadvantaged group (e.g., women) can invoke social identity threat among advantaged group members (e.g., men) and undermine support for employment equity policies by fostering the belief that inequality no longer exists. The CEO’s comments reflect this idea and the research in the article con-

firm his response is typical given the situation as described by your client. (I recommend reading the entire article for more details).

First, work with your client to help her understand that she and the CEO are facing an issue that is prevalent in workplaces worldwide. Second, a possible solution mentioned in the research reframes an approach that your client might find helpful. While acknowledging the past inequity is essential, also presenting to the CEO the value women bring to the company will help to mitigate any defensive behavior the CEO may exhibit.

Your client should base her comments on facts. She should get data showing how women add to an overall organization’s strength. And without women in leadership, this company may not be competitive in attracting great female leaders to grow the bottom-line, profits. In recognizing the progress to be made, the CEO may shift his

focus from self-protection to open acknowledgment of the problem. Together, they can work to create a collaborative process that isn’t accusatory but focused on the growth of the individuals and the company.

And finally, please remind her that this process will take time, and to be patient. Climbing is slow; falling is fast. Do not move so quickly to resolve the issue that further negative unintended consequences are created. Please work with your client to thoroughly acknowledge any unproductive personal emotions she has grappled with and address them to her satisfaction. Then design an approach using data as to the value women bring to leadership to the organization.

Coach her to develop alternative strategies while remaining committed to creating equity in the workplace. This plan can support her growth and all the women who will follow behind her.