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The Strong Silent Type

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The Strong Silent Type

Abstract

Speak up. Be assertive. Lean in. Take up space. However it's said, there is a stream of discourse telling women that we should be louder and prouder in order to succeed.

As the argument goes, we, as women, are silenced by oppression. [Society tells us to be quiet, politely agree, and make ourselves as small as possible](#). So naturally, we should resist this social pressure by being more vocal, more extroverted, and more assertive. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, women leaders, women in the workforce

Disciplines

Gender and Sexuality | Sociology | Women's Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

THE STRONG SILENT TYPE

November 4, 2013

Speak up. Be assertive. Lean in. Take up space. However it's said, there is a stream of discourse telling women that we should be louder and prouder in order to succeed.



As the argument goes, we, as women, are silenced by oppression. [Society tells us to be quiet, politely agree, and make ourselves as small as possible](#). So naturally, we should resist this social pressure by being more vocal, more extroverted, and more assertive.

I get it. It makes sense. But I don't agree.

I am certainly not denying that women have been oppressed and silenced. And as a feminist, I believe that it is important for us to be confident, strong and willing to stand up for our beliefs. But for me, being a strong, confident woman is not synonymous with being more extroverted and assertive.

Instead of only telling women to be louder, a more nuanced approach is required.

I say this because, throughout my life, I have been singled out and criticized for being quiet. I cannot tell you how many times I have been called shy as if it were a four-letter word. "You're kind of shy aren't you?" people have asked me condescendingly, acting like I had some kind of serious personality flaw.

While I did get some positive feedback for being a silent leader (thanks Gettysburg), being quiet is more often viewed as my weakness. It is something that I need to "work on."

I remember one experience at Gettysburg in particular, when I was in a group of students who were introduced to an elected official. He made a point to tell us how he looked for promising young talent, and how we could succeed in his field. "I do not deal with people who are shy," he said, "I look for people who know what they want and are not too quiet to ask for it."

I spent months after that attempting to fix my "quiet problem". I started scheming about the ways that I could be louder, coming up with strategies to be more extroverted, and channeling my energy into changing my

personality. I did not want to be that weird, quiet girl any more. I wanted to be viewed as valuable, promising, and intelligent, and according to this “official important guy”, I couldn’t be any of those things without being louder.

However, whenever I made a conscious effort to talk more and be louder, I was also thinking about how this wasn’t really me. It seemed like it was only a disguise covering up my true, apparently socially awkward and quiet nature. Essentially, I ended up worrying about what was wrong with me rather than simply enjoying my interactions with people and feeling confident.

What I eventually realized was that, while I may be introverted, I am perfectly comfortable and confident being that way. I don’t need to be loud to be a strong woman. I am quiet, but that does not mean that I am insecure or unsure of my beliefs. In fact, the opposite is true. When I am not talking, I am listening carefully, learning and [connecting with others](#). I am hearing multiple viewpoints and seeing a problem from different angles. Being quiet allows me to reflect and to develop new ideas, leading to new perspectives, critical conversations, and thoughtful, effective compromise. And, because my points are infrequently made, my thoughts are heard when I do share them. Introversions can be a position of power not weakness.

Ultimately, I decided that telling all women they should be louder in order to succeed is like telling us that we should all wear pants suits in the workplace. It is telling us to conform to norms that are traditionally “masculine” and reject the “femininity” that society is “forcing” on us. Just as not all women want to wear pants with our blazers, not all of us want to be loud and assertive.

Men too are affected negatively by stereotypes of masculinity and femininity — introverted or reserved males are often questioned. I don’t mean to ignore their situations, but in this “Lean In” generation, I feel particularly scrutinized for my professional behavior. To me, glorifying extroversion is a feminist contradiction, reducing the characteristics of a “strong” woman to one dimension.

Rather than telling each other to be louder and promoting extroverted behavior as the ideal, we should remind ourselves of the basis of feminism – equity and respect for all.

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<http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2013/11/04/the-strong-silent-type/>