



## Don't Be So Darn Nice

We know that women are socialized to be attentive and inclusive of those around us. And we also know that being so often means being not seen as leaders, passed up for promotions and being denied credit for our work. In this episode, Gloria offers concrete examples of how being too nice works against us, and provides actionable tips for being “authentic, kind, and respectful in your communications” without descending into Niceness Hell.

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Gloria Feldt: Like I always say, you’ve gotta tackle the hard stuff to make progress. Nice is good, but straightforward is better.

Hello, and welcome to Power to You. I’m Gloria Feldt, here with secrets and tools to prepare and propel you with training and coaching to harness your incredible power to in your professional lives. I’ve spent my entire career advancing women’s rights and equality from the boardroom to the bedroom. I cofounded [Take the Lead](#) because I figured out how to crack the code that has been holding women back from equal leadership and pay, and my mission now is for women and men to hold equal power, pay, and leadership positions by 2025.

Riffing on Dante, my friend Jill and I used to speculate on what our [personal levels of hell](#) would be. Pervasive niceness was her deepest level of hellaciousness. She described it as a place where tough or controversial issues were never discussed, and she would have to be blandly agreeable at all times. It would be terminally boring, she said. To her, that would be a fate worse than death.

As it turns out, when too much niceness takes the form of avoiding difficult conversations, it’s not just boring. [It’s actually detrimental to relationships](#), and to productivity in the workplace. Embracing those conversations, even if they’re difficult, as a positive tool whose energy powers us forward to better solutions can make the difference between the organization that innovates successfully, and one that stagnates in a culture of enforced amiability.

Now, believe me, I am not advocating for people to be deliberately unkind to one another. What I am saying is that it is not kindness to withhold an honest opinion or to shy away from sharing facts that could lead to better outcomes because we’re trying to avoid conflict. [Language is power](#). Styles of language, the way we use it and our choices of what we talk about are rooted in power. And it’s a power that we all have. Nowhere is this more evident than [communications between men and women](#) from the bedroom to the boardroom.

20 years ago, [Deborah Tannen's work on linguistic gender differences in her book, You Just Don't Understand](#), and John Gray's Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus, got a lot of popular culture buzzing that men and women simply speak from different languages and that causes conflict. You know, they really played up, or at least the media played up the time honored battles of the sexes narrative. But I personally don't think any of this is hardwired. I think it's all about how we are raised, the messages that we get from our earliest days, and the role models that we see or don't see, and whether we experience any particular, "Aha," moments that cause us to question the roles that have been assigned to us.

If I'm right, what part of it is implicit bias ingrained in our culture that limits us? And what part is resistance to having the hard conversations across any divides that exist, whether of gender, culture, or life experience, simply because people tend to back away from controversy? How are we challenged today to explore those divides and to tackle questions that we've resisted about roles, relationships, race, privilege, power, and gasp, sex?

On the other side of the equation, how empowering it is to [have conversations about sexual harassment](#), or [Black Lives Matter](#). How empowering have those been for those who have experienced harassment, or abuse, or discrimination? How have the astringent rays of sunshine purified and healed a long-festered sore? Isn't it a huge relief to put ugly secrets out in the open and have real, authentic conversations about them? To lance that boil, so to speak?

An NBC study found that [51% of Americans believe that reports about sexual assault have helped to address the gender gap](#), and that is significant. And the same dynamics apply to solving any complex problem in a way that creates sustainable change. You have to crack open the egg first, to make any kind of an omelet. The business value of bringing everyone into the conversation is immense. [Scilla Elworthy](#) calls conflict "transformation." A positive process in which everyone grows.

Writing in Fast Company, Knowlarity CTO [Ajay Shrivastava suggests](#) that the management tactic of avoiding hitting the controversy on the head by papering over differences of opinions and seeking compromise instead of the best solutions really does a disservice to the company's strategic alignment. It ultimately slows down progress, although it may seem to take more time to work through differences at the outset. In a diverse workplace, it can be tempting to avoid confronting differences rather than address gendered communication styles that may deter women in particular from actively engaging in conversations where their voices are not heard. Heaven knows she might cry or something.

Women of color experience a double burden of being disregarded and undervalued, as Dr. Katherine Gismombe, Vice President and Women of Color Practitioner at Catalyst, shared from her groundbreaking study, [Women of Color in Corporate Management: Opportunities and Challenges](#). She told me about this

when I interviewed her recently, and I will link to this study in the show notes so you can see all of it.

A report from Murray Edwards College in Cambridge, England on gender differences and behaviors at work concluded: “Women continue to report that they commonly experience behaviors and assumptions from male peers and bosses in the workplace that frustrate them and impede promotion by merit. These behaviors include being interrupted and talked over in meetings and being side-lined from many informal conversations where decisions often are really made.”

So, engaging in difficult conversations turns out to be necessary to shifting a workplace culture to one where everyone can contribute their best. Everyone, male or female, can contribute their best.

[Fierce Conversations](#) is a training company that teaches organizations how to have effective conversations, including the tough ones. They’ve recently done a survey in which they found that while people are talking with their friends and families about movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, they’re far less likely to touch on those issues in the workplace. On the positive side, the survey found that younger workers and women are more likely to discuss these topics, and that employees in general do feel more empowered to do so.

I had a chance to interview [Stacey Engle, who’s the President of Fierce](#), and Stacey told me that a common barrier to addressing inequality in the workplace is being “too nice.” She gave the example of one of her clients, a Fierce client, CHRISTUS Health, where executives felt that the organization had developed a culture of being too “nice.” As a result of that culture, their associates were mistaking the company of value of compassion with avoiding difficult conversations and constructive feedback. When CHRISTUS implemented four specific skills: delegation, team conversations, confrontation, and coaching, employees were able to overcome fear and address issues directly, instead of avoiding difficult conversations.

They were then able to transition away from simply being “nice,” to feeling equipped to have meaningful and effective conversations. So, actually being “nice” is really about having those meaningful, effective conversations.

If I could give one simple remedy, it would be that men need to listen more, and women need to speak up more, in order to have those productive conversations in the workplace. Now, wouldn’t that be nice?

Here are three tips for you to be authentic, kind, and respectful in your communications, especially about difficult issues, but without getting buried in those deepest, most frustrating layers of niceness Hell:

1. Frame the question in terms of the values that are driving you to take a particular position. If your intention is to hold the organization to a standard of

honesty and integrity, rather than simply to argue for a particular strategic position, say so. It'll go down easier and you will remain authentic.

2. Second, use I messages to express your concerns, rather than shoving them under the rug until you're about to explode. Above all, refrain from being passive aggressive. Now, that is a trap that many women fall into when trying to be nice puts them over the edge. Oh yes, I've sure been there. Have you? Well, I'll say that communication starting with "**You Messages**" tend to make the receiver defensive. "**I Messages**" shift the focus to you and your reactions. It also suggests that you're willing to take ownership of your reactions, and it minimizes blame. A "**You Message**" would be, "You need to get on top of this." An "**I Message**" would be, "I need my project to run on schedule, can I get a confirmation that you'll get this to me tomorrow?"
3. The third tip that I'd like to give you is to practice giving and getting constructive feedback. Start with a partner you trust and an issue that is low risk, and then gradually work your way up to the most critical issues of your organization or your personal life. The reason I give people in my workshops the task of creating strategic leadership action plans is not so much that I want them to define goals for the entire rest of their lives, but because we work through a process of writing a goal that's accountable and a plan for achieving it. And then each person gets feedback from members of the group, and gives feedback to others. It's that feedback process that is most useful, and I guarantee you, it's really worth practicing.

So, I hope these tips have been helpful to you. Let me know how it goes for you by sharing with me on social media @gloriafeldt, or @taketheleadwomen. Until next week, Power to You!

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