

How Women Can Show Passion at Work Without Seeming “Emotional”

by Kathryn Heath and Jill Flynn

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One of our coaching clients, a VP at a consumer products company, was abruptly silenced when she tried to make a point at a recent executive committee meeting. The problem? She was passionate – and it didn’t go over well.

Sales at the organization had plummeted, and the group was discussing the efficacy of its newest product. Our executive, Claudia, was convinced that the sales team needed to be examined instead. So she spoke up: “Our reps are apathetic and underperforming. They don’t have what they need to close deals. We should make some major changes *right now*, or we’ll lose the year....” She found herself speaking loudly and gesturing with her hands for effect. But when she stopped to take a

breath, she looked around the table and saw mostly blank stares. As she geared up to elaborate, a male colleague sitting across from her waved his hand across his throat, gesturing like a movie director cutting a scene. He shut her down and redirected the conversation back to the product.

Claudia was furious. After the meeting, she confronted her colleague. He apologized for cutting her off but told her she had “reacted with too much emotion.” He said, “You were off-point, and your tone seemed excited and inappropriate.” That’s not the way Claudia saw the situation. She walked away wondering, *Where is the line between appropriate passion and too much emotion?*

It’s a recurring theme in our coaching sessions with women. Although passion has a legitimate place in business, it can be misinterpreted – especially when women are doing the communicating and male colleagues are on the receiving end. That’s what we’ve found in our review of more than 1,000 360-degree feedback reports on female executives. When women fervently sell an idea or argue against the consensus, for example, we’ve seen that male colleagues or managers say things like, “She was too hyped up” and “She was emotional,” whereas the women themselves say they are simply advancing their cause or expressing an opinion, albeit passionately.

This lines up with what we’ve found in our qualitative research. In interviews on how women can find their voice in meetings, female executives told us they worry that their comments during heated discussions are misinterpreted as emotional. One of their pain points is that they are perceived as “overly direct,” and they often “have to reword or reposition” what they say. One executive reported that her passion was met “with great silence,” and she asked, “Is that my gender or my communication style?”

The answer is both, of course, because her style – passionate expression – is viewed differently by men and women. Overall, male executives shared “an ongoing perception that women are more emotional than men,” and they largely felt that women “need to be aware of

it and remain composed.” We also heard from men that unchecked emotion by women makes their ideas less convincing and compromises their credibility, because it focuses attention on style rather than content.

That’s not to say that women are in the wrong. It’s a “lost in translation” issue, with repercussions for men and women alike. If male managers don’t check their biases, and those of their colleagues – and adjust how they receive and filter information from women – they will miss crucial input, and their decision quality may suffer.

For women, matters of perception are tricky, but here are some things you can do to minimize miscommunication and put your passion to work for you.

Be intentional. If you use your passion to make a point, do so deliberately as opposed to in-the-moment. How? Plan your argument in advance, and generate support before meetings so your passion won’t take others by surprise. We also tell women to use *language* that is passionate but a tone that’s moderate. In other words, remain in control so that people focus on the content of your argument and take it seriously.

Know your audience. Claudia’s executive committee was stacked with number crunchers and business analysts. She acknowledges, in retrospect, that they are swayed more readily by figures than by pure debate. She might have held the floor longer if she had begun her remarks with quantitative facts. For instance: “The sales numbers are down 6% this quarter; so let’s start by examining the sales strategy. Here’s what I have in mind...”

Use other tools of influence. Combining passion with logic, specificity, creativity, and experience can be more effective than relying on passion alone. If some colleagues, male or female, don’t respond to passionate appeals, they may respond more favorably to a different tactic. In addition, the versatility signals that you are in control of your emotions and able to switch gears in order to effectively make a point.

Support what your gut is telling you. If you feel passionate about something, say it proudly and then proceed to back up your feelings with facts. The people around you are more likely to be swayed by your open declaration if it's clear that you have reason and logic on your side. They might even find your passion contagious.

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