

November 8, 2019

### **LOL - Shortcomings: Own them don't Finesse them**

"Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face." Mike Tyson, boxer, once uttered. Such great wisdom.

I got punched in the face last week. ("You should see the other guy...") I was presenting to the WIN group (Women in Investing Network) on leadership. The audience of about fifty women was wonderfully lively and engaged all during the talk. When finished, I asked for questions. One of the women jumped right to the heart of the matter, "How can leaders address the challenges facing women in the investment world?"

Boom! Punched right in the face.

I didn't have a ready answer, let alone a good one. My mind fumbled with flashes of client engagements, articles, and FCG's work on diversity. The best I could do was, "It's a big question. (duh) A large part of the answer is raising the consciousness of leaders. More self-awareness."

That's it. Twenty years of consulting. Forty years of witnessing the challenges for women. And that was my answer. Punch in the face, no plan.

That was bad enough, but then another courageous woman jumped on my response and said, "That's unacceptable. Your supposed to be an expert on leadership and that is your answer!"

Now I'm getting pummeled!

So, here's where I got the opportunity to practice what FCG teaches—curiosity—versus the more typical response: defensiveness. Finesse the answer. Manage the situation. Control the damage.

My immediate reaction to this second question was a stunned silence. But then all my training and practice at the skills we teach kicked in. I didn't feel defensive. My mind seemed to open. I was curious: "Why do I not have a good answer to these questions?" I got still for a moment, then said out loud, "Clearly, I'm supposed to be learning something here tonight." The Universe was providing powerful feedback: "You should address these questions and have good answers."

I continued, "I'm sorry. I wish I had some wisdom to share but I don't. I will, however, write about this experience and follow up with something." (This LOL is the follow up, plus the link to a fine article.)

The program ended and the audience, again a wonderful group, applauded indicating--I imagine--that the material presented prior to the knockout punches was useful.

Then an interesting thing happened, several of the women, including the questioners, came up afterwards and appreciated me for the way I handled the Q&A. They were genuinely impressed that I hadn't tried to finesse, manage, or control the situation. I was honest.

I received these comments in follow up emails:

*"I think you did a great job of owning the situation and the event provided a good forum for real talk. I would love to see more of these kind of conversations in the future."*

And another:

*“I attended your presentation last night and was impressed with the way you handled the Q&A session. You were honest and humble. Those are qualities that our industry needs more of.”*

The next day the Universe provided a wonderful article in the Harvard Business Review daily alert called, “How to Show White Men That Diversity and Inclusion Efforts Need Them.” [Link to article](#) Kind of amazing, eh? I’m not kidding when I say the article arrived in my inbox the very next day. The article provides many of the answers that I believe the women were asking for.

As I reflected on this experience, I came up with an acronym for how these situations should be handled: HVAC (as in the service you call to take care of heating, ventilation, and air conditioning). The acronym stands for:

**H: humble.** The attitude that one doesn’t know all the answers. It is arrogant to believe that we do.

**V: vulnerable.** A willingness to be open and revealing of one’s shortcomings. We are all human with plenty of weaknesses.

**A: accepting.** Accepting the situation exactly as it is. Welcoming reality without trying to spin it or run from it.

**C: curious.** Adopting a curious attitude. What can I learn from this? What is the message I am supposed to get? In my case: reflect on the questions and come up with thoughtful responses.

It takes self-awareness, confidence, and courage to live this way in the investment world where the word “conviction” is a mantra. Investment leaders rarely model these qualities, but those who do create safe cultures in which people are free to take risks, ask questions, acknowledge their shortcomings, and challenge the status quo.

I am profoundly grateful for the experience at WIN. And for the courageous women who allowed me to practice HVAC. They created a safe space for me to be real. I am affirmed in my belief that being genuine is the way to navigate the investment landscape.

JW