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Working Women Facing Professional Crisis: New Research Can Help

By Kathy Caprino

What happens to a woman in mid-life when, after dedicating years to building and maintaining a successful, high-level career, she awakens suddenly to the belief that her work is no longer acceptable or positive for her, and that it no longer makes sense for her to continue?

"This phenomenon is not only devastating, but very disorienting and paralyzing for many women," says Kathy Caprino, M.A. a Westport, CT personal and professional coach, and therapist who herself underwent such a crisis before reinventing her professional life. In the course of 5 years, she transformed from a successful corporate Vice President to psychotherapist and coach focused on helping professional women face, and move successfully beyond this crisis. "From where I sit, this crisis of meaning is occurring with greater and greater frequency and impact, and has reached what appears to be epidemic proportions," Caprino says, citing her work as a coach as well as the early findings of her research study with professional women across the country.

Research on Professional Crisis in Women

Caprino's research study, called *Women Amidst and After Professional Crisis: Finding New Meaning in Life and Work*, involves in-depth interviews with over 100 women across the country ages 35-55, in a broad array of fields, who've developed a mid- to high-level career that by all standards would be considered successful, yet they've realized, sometimes with shock, sometimes with relief, that this professional track must end, and it must end soon. Caprino's study has revealed no fewer than 14 different crisis profiles, each with its own set of inner and outer characteristics and contributing factors. Once her research is completed, Caprino plans to develop and present effective and manageable approaches for each crisis that will help women face and overcome these very challenging experiences. In the course of her practice and research, Caprino cites many different aspects of professional crises and typical circumstances that can trigger them. Crises for professional women often involves experiences of deep loss, discrimination, sexual harassment, diminishment in the workplace, toxic environments and bosses, crushing competitive warfare, as well as unreasonable workloads that demand complete sacrifice of personal lives. According to this research, women continue to feel marginalized and pushed aside and away, despite stellar achievements and high ranks in the corporate hierarchy.

Contributing Factors to Crisis

Women today hold a completely different set of expectations, attitudes, priorities, and longings from previous generations. According to Caprino, many factors are colliding uniquely at this special time in women's social and professional development, bringing about a radical shift in what women are endeavoring to achieve. This shift brings with it new belief systems about what is truly important in life, and what women are fully capable of. "Our role models as we were growing up, in general, didn't prepare us for how to achieve, maintain, let alone conceive of what we most want now that we're mid-life," Caprino explains. "We're in a `new frontier' - we know we can `have it all', but we don't necessarily want it all as it is now. How many of our mothers faced that crisis?"

What Women Want

What do mid-life professional women seem to want most? In Caprino's study, women are sharing their deepest longings, wishes, and needs, including finding new ways to:

- Balance, integrate and express their whole selves
- Make a significant positive difference in the world and in the lives of others
- Be respected, treated and compensated fairly and equally
- Ensure their own freedom, protection, and independence
- Have the opportunity to make the largest impact possible
- To utilize fully their talents, abilities, and strengths
- And finally, to contribute both personally and professionally in as full a way as possible that fits their unique goals, needs, values, and priorities, without being judged.

Women Un-United?

One unexpected dimension that has emerged from Caprino's Women Amidst and After Professional Crisis study is the wide and ever-growing gap between the different segments of women, including working moms vs. stay-at-home moms, working women with children vs. without, and so on. Caprino has found a high incidence of indictments, negative judgments, and unforgiving evaluations that each camp hurls at the other. "It's clear that women are not helping other women as much as possible," Caprino states. "Instead, we're seeing that women can feel insecure about their own choices. As such, they can spend a good deal of time and energy putting down other women who've taken different paths rather than turning inward and working out their own needs, desires and wants satisfactorily, and then living positively with those choices."

Overcoming Professional Crisis

How can women overcome these professional crises? It's not an easy feat, Caprino states, and one that requires a good amount of inner and outer work, but it is doable, as her own life has borne out. As one interviewee in her research study -- an organizational design consultant turned life coach -- stated, "I realized that my purpose in life is to express who I am as fully and creatively as possible, and to do so required a powerful `shedding.'"

This shedding, according to Caprino, is a critical step in the process of effectively managing one's crisis of meaning. The goal of this work is to break down what isn't working, and create a more authentic, fulfilling, and joyful life through conscious choices from an empowered standpoint. These crises in our lives, Caprino says, can be viewed not only concretely, but metaphorically, as solid information about what must be addressed by professional women both individually and universally.

While Caprino continues her research, she's finding similar themes arising with her coaching clients. "Once we pull the lid off our denial that life is not working as well as we wish it to (or not at all), and pull ourselves together as women to marshal our efforts, abilities, talents, and resources, there's absolutely no telling how far we can go," she says. "The key is to see the crisis as an opportunity to empower ourselves, and as a result, balance and integrate our full selves into our work, our communities, and

our world. This, in turn, stimulates the same movement outward, creating a more balanced, humane, integrated, and empowered world."

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Crisis Management Tips

By Colin Ong TS

The term crisis management has different connotations. In this article, I will try to provide pointers that can be used in most situations:

Is It A Crisis In The First Place?:

This question is important to ask, as there are many situations that go wrong because the right person

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to handle it is not around. You may be in charge of a project until your supervisor comes back and are unable to contact him during a crisis. You have to make your own decisions in his absence and your action is dependent on the level of authority given.

The Big Picture:

It is not easy to handle a crisis if you are not aware of all the facts. If your role is a leader, you have to be detached from the emotional side of the crisis and rationally take stock of how to move on. Again, this is not as easy as it sounds as you may have long-time colleagues who are involved in this crisis.

The Relevant Team:

It is important to be able to meet up with the relevant team to discuss about the situation. This is to ensure that the team is able to analyse and make a united stand about handling this crisis. This team should also comprise of the authorities, if the crisis is serious.

The Timeline:

You must construct a timeline and ensure that each process scenario is highlighted. This practice will be a check to prevent your team from spending too much time in one aspect of handling the crisis.

Procedural Manual:

Is there an organizational situational manual that you can use for this situation? Are you able to recollect the tips that were given to you when you participated in a mock drill?

External Experts:

You should get external experts to assess the situation if the crisis is totally unanticipated. However, you must have had a close-door meeting with your inner circle. This is essential, as you do not want to unnecessarily reveal confidential information to external parties.

Speaking To The Media:

It is important to prepare a press kit—which provides a full detailed report about the crisis. If you are comfortable to conduct a press interview, you have to ensure that you have the full details first.

Your Communication Style:

You have to ensure that your communication style is in sync with the crisis. Remember to be forthcoming with reliable information and try not to speculate. This will also ensure that the victims' immediate families do not overly worry. It will also not help if you come across as very emotional in the media as you want to communicate that your organization has everything under control.

Beyond Your Control:

If the crisis involves the loss of lives, it is not unthinkable that your credibility and organisation's reputation is put into question. Assuming that the crisis was beyond your organisation's control, you have to stick to your best judgement and not be led into a debate that may open your organisation to possible legal action.

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Crisis Management Tips

Media Star Power Book Review

Is It A Crisis Or Does It Just Feel Like One

After a Crisis or Trauma

Weight to Height Charts for Men and Women

How Nice Guys, Shy Guys and Good Guys Finish First!

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