

## THE DOUBLE BIND

THE DAMNED-IF-YOU-DO, DAMNED-IF-YOU-DON'T PARADOX FACING WOMEN LEADERS

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In researching a book about women and men at work, I spent several months taping conversations, observing interactions, and interviewing people at a corporation. When the book, *Talking from 9 to 5*, was published, I gave a lecture reporting my findings at the corporation, after which I asked audience members to write reactions and comments. One of the responses included a remark that surprised me and made me feel vaguely criticized. A man who worked in an office where I had spent a great deal of time commented that he noticed that I'd had a makeover. (I hadn't.) I thought of this when I read the title of one of the many demonographies that have been written about Hillary Clinton: *The Extreme Makeover of Hillary (Rodham) Clinton*, by Bay Buchanan. The concept of a "makeover" captures a lot about the way many people respond to women in positions of power, and to Hillary Clinton.

Women in authority are subject to a double bind, a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't paradox. Society's

expectations about how a woman should behave and how a person in authority should behave are at odds. If a woman speaks and acts in ways that are expected of a woman, she will be liked but may be underestimated. If she acts in ways that are expected of a person in authority, she may be respected but will probably be viewed as too aggressive. The characteristics that we associate with authority are also characteristics that we associate with men. This doesn't mean that every man possesses those traits, but if he aspires to, his path is clear: anything he does to fit society's image of a good leader will also bring him closer to society's image of a good man. For a woman the two goals conflict. To the extent that she fulfills the expectations associated with being a good leader, she violates those associated with being a good woman. If she meets expectations associated with being a good woman, she veers away from the characteristics we expect of a leader. That is the essence of a double bind: anything you do to serve one goal violates the other. And that is the vise that has Hillary Clinton—and potential voters—in its grip.

I observed this dilemma in my research on women and men at work, and I wrote about it in relation to Hillary during Bill Clinton's first presidential campaign. At the time I dubbed it "the Hillary factor." Here's how it worked then: Hillary started out paying little attention to her hair, holding it off her face with a headband and leaving its natural color unchanged. For this she was ridiculed. (She wasn't conforming to what society expects of a good woman: paying a lot of attention to her appearance.) So she did what her critics

seemed to demand: she got her hair styled and highlighted. Then she was ridiculed for trying several different hairstyles as she sought one that worked. (She wasn't conforming to what we expect of a public figure, which is steadiness and consistency.) Then her new hairstyles became fodder for interpretations of her character: she was too changeable, too concerned with appearances. In a word (though the word wasn't used at the time), she was pressed to have—then blamed for having had—a makeover.

The concept of a “makeover” is deeply associated with women. For one thing, it is nearly always women who undergo makeovers, which entail changing aspects of appearance that are more malleable—and more closely watched—in women than in men: hair, clothes, and makeup. In my case, all I did before I gave my lecture was put on makeup, as I always do when I'm speaking in public. But when I made my daily visits to the corporation's offices, I didn't wear makeup—a practice pretty standard for women in academia but unusual for women in the corporate world, so it probably was noticed. You can't say about a man, “He didn't wear makeup.” The statement has meaning only in contrast to expectations. So no man need make a decision about wearing makeup—a decision no woman can avoid, even as she knows that whatever choice she makes will incur the approval of some and the disapproval of others.

I also dressed more formally when I gave my lecture. A man could certainly improve his appearance by dressing more stylishly and getting a better haircut, but the change is likely

to be less dramatic because the range of styles available to men in these arenas is narrower than the range available to women. Most men have hair and clothing styles that are neutral, so their choices rarely lead to interpretations of their character. A man can choose a style that will, like a ponytail or a comb-over, but the point is, he doesn't have to. There is no such thing as a neutral style of hair or clothing for women. The range from which a woman must choose is so vast that any choice she makes will become the basis for judgment about the kind of person she is. And there will always be people who think her choices could be improved. (That's why mothers and daughters so often critique each other's hair and clothes—each wants to help the other look her best, though such suggestions are usually perceived as criticism.) How often have you looked at a woman and thought, “She'd look better if her hair were longer/shorter/curlier/straighter/with bangs/without bangs/with different bangs/a different color,” and so on?

The most striking thing about the concept of a makeover—and it is key to understanding how people react to Hillary Clinton—is the notion that there is something slightly manipulative about having one, as if a woman is unfairly wielding the weapon of appearance to achieve her goals. That's why it hurt my feelings a bit to learn that someone thought I had had one. That's the Hillary factor. Hillary is subject to these kinds of contradictory reactions to almost everything she does. When she first assumed the role of governor's wife in Arkansas, she was disliked for being too independent: she kept her maiden name as well as her career. When she began

behaving more as a political wife is expected to, taking her husband's name and attending more "wifely" functions, poll results indicated that people felt she didn't have an identity of her own.

Hillary has also been vilified for not acceding to demands that she apologize. For example, many people have angrily urged her to apologize for having voted to give President Bush authority to invade Iraq (although she emphasized, when casting that vote, that the authority was to be used only after all diplomatic options were exhausted). But, in other instances, she has been vilified *for* apologizing. After the failure of her health-care initiative, Hillary invited a group of women journalists to the White House to talk about how she had been portrayed in the press. Although she believed that the gathering was off the record, one journalist taped the proceedings and later reported that Hillary said, "I regret very much that the efforts on health care were badly misunderstood, taken out of context, and used politically against the administration. I take responsibility for that, and I'm very sorry for that." This triggered a barrage of attacks. One newspaper quoted a political scientist saying, "To apologize for substantive things you've done raises the white flag. There's a school of thought in politics that you never say you're sorry. The best defense is a good offense." A Republican woman in the Florida state cabinet was quoted as saying, "I've seen women who over-apologize, but I don't do that. I believe you negotiate through strength."

The assumption that apologizing is a sign of weakness

applies to public figures of both sexes. But apologies typically work differently for women and men. Research shows that women tend to say "I'm sorry" far more often than men do. But a woman's "I'm sorry" is often not an apology; it can be an expression of regret, shorthand for "I'm sorry that happened." Clearly that's the spirit in which Hillary made her remarks about health care. Ironically, the criticism she faced for "apologizing" reflected just the sort of misunderstanding and being "taken out of context" that her remark lamented. It's the double bind again: Anyone in the public eye is likely to resist apologizing so as not to appear weak. But a man who does so is fulfilling society's expectations for how men should behave. (Indeed, many men do fulfill these expectations, judging by how many couples' arguments revolve around the woman's frustration that the man won't apologize, and the man's frustration that the woman demands an explicit apology.) In contrast, when a woman in public life resists apologizing, although she is doing what is expected of a politician, she is flouting the expectations associated with women.

Moreover, a man who apologizes, as John Edwards did for his vote on the Iraq War, is starting from the position of strength that characterizes our images of authority and of men, so he can afford to sacrifice a coin from that stash of symbolic capital. But a woman who apologizes reinforces the assumption that women are weak. Any woman in public life must overcome this assumption, because weakness is at the core of our understanding of femininity. Many, if not all, of the ways that men have traditionally been expected to behave toward

women—such as being chivalrous and protective—are based on that notion. In fact, it's the source of a double bind confronted by men. Let's say a man tries to be polite by holding doors open for women. If he doesn't, a woman might protest: "Didn't your mother teach you any manners?" But if he does, a woman might also protest: "I am capable of opening a door, you know." It's a double bind because a man who doesn't observe traditional politeness rituals risks offending by appearing rude, but if he does observe them, he risks offending by implying that women are weak.

All human relations pivot on two intertwined dimensions: on one hand, closeness/distance, and on the other, hierarchy. We ask of every encounter: Does this bring us closer or push us apart? And also: Does this put me in a one-up or a one-down position? Researchers in my field refer to these dimensions as solidarity and power. You can see them at work in forms of address. If you call others by their first names, you're exercising solidarity, bringing them closer; using their titles and their last names creates distance. But forms of address also operate on the hierarchy dimension, especially if they're asymmetrical. Calling people by their first names can indicate their lack of power, as with children and workers in service roles. Addressing someone as Mr., Ms., or Dr. can indicate either formality or the fact that they are above you on the social ladder and, hence, more powerful. This constitutes another double bind, and it brings us back to Hillary.

Why, we might ask, do we refer to Hillary as Hillary? Women are far more often referred to by their first names than

are men in similar roles. This is partly because people tend to feel more comfortable with women and find them less intimidating. For a political candidate, that's a good thing. But being referred to by first name is also the result, and simultaneously the cause, of women commanding less respect. During the Democratic primary campaign debates, Hillary shared the stage with Kucinich, Edwards, Biden, Richardson, Dodd, and Obama—not Dennis, John, Joe, Bill, Christopher, and Barack. Of course, one obvious reason that Hillary is Hillary to us is that she shares her last name with the other famous Clinton (a choice, recall, that was pressed upon her). Another is that her name is unusual and therefore more recognizable than, say, Susan or Mary. But the name Barack is even more unusual. Without thinking it through, people are likely to view someone with whom they are on a first-name basis as less authoritative.

When we speak, we unthinkingly choose words that come to mind, but often the words we choose affect our thinking. The linguist Robin Lakoff pointed out years ago that the words commonly used in relation to women are often different from those used for men, and they typically create an impression of weakness. Lakoff noted, for example, that men may "pass out" but only women "faint." Many of the words used to describe Hillary are far more often used in connection with women. Take the list that Michael Tomasky quoted, in the *New York Review of Books*, from one of the many anti-Hillary screeds: "cold, bossy, stern, and controlling." Try out these words on male candidates, and ask how much sense they make. Pairing adjectives and candidates at random, let's

see: McCain is cold. Giuliani is bossy. Bloomberg is stern. Thompson is controlling. Like the phrase “didn’t wear make-up,” adjectives implicitly contrast what is described with what is expected. Men are less often called “cold” because women are expected to be warmer, so the level of aloofness required for that adjective to apply to a man is far greater than the level required to apply it to a woman. The word “stern” suggests particularly female stereotypes, such as the schoolmarm. And “controlling,” though it can be used to describe women *or* men, is, I think, more often used to describe women—and is more pejorative when applied to them.

The word “bossy” is particularly gender-specific. Think of children at play. Girls often reject other girls for being “bossy,” while boys rarely apply that term to other boys. Indeed, a boy who tells other boys what to do is the leader. But girls value the appearance of sameness and tend to reject a girl who puts herself above others by telling them what to do. I encountered this ethic in my workplace research.

When I asked supervisors what makes a good manager, the answer I heard most often from women was, “I treat the people who work for me like equals.” (The answer I heard most often from men was, “I hire good people, then get out of their way.”) The expectation that a woman should not tell others what to do, or act as if she knows more (even if she does) or is higher up the ladder (even if she is) puts women in any position of authority—or in politics—in a double bind. If she does her job, she’s bossy. If she doesn’t tell others what to do, she’s not doing her job.

There’s another trap that frequently ensnares Hillary: the post hoc attribution of intention. Although we all know how often things happen to us that we didn’t plan, we nonetheless tend to assume that what happens to others was plotted, sometimes nefariously, in advance. Hillary is widely perceived as ambitious: she must have plotted her ascent to the Senate and to the presidency. (Never mind that it’s on the public record that the idea of her running for the Senate was first suggested by New York congressman Charles Rangel.) Here again we face a double bind. Ambition is expected of men who hold high office, but it violates our expectations of a good woman.

Isn’t any individual who seeks public office ambitious—just like anyone who seeks a promotion or applies for a coveted job? But in a woman ambition is assumed to be a failing rather than a prerequisite. This explains another pattern I noticed during my research: women often believed that they should not make it obvious that they wanted a promotion—that is, appear ambitious—but instead should just do a great job and assume that it will be noticed and rewarded. (This conviction turned out to be a liability; promotions typically went to those who asked for them, or who already behaved as if they had the higher position.)

Yet another paradox makes life tough for women who stand out from the crowd. Studying junior high school girls, the sociologist Donna Eder made an unexpected observation: popular girls are widely disliked. At first this seems counter-intuitive, but when you think about it, it makes sense. A lot

of girls want to be friends with a popular girl in order to raise their own social status. But no one can have that many friends, so the popular girl has to rebuff the advances of most other girls. Hence, she's perceived by many as a stuck-up snob. I wonder if this isn't somehow at work with Hillary. Grown-up girls want her to be *their* best friend, to promote exactly the policies and beliefs that they espouse. And they can't forgive her when she doesn't. She must have another best friend.

This is one of many ways that Hillary seems to be held to a higher standard—a gender-based pattern that I noticed while writing a book about mothers and grown daughters. In talking to women, I quickly observed that many people expect more of their mothers than their fathers, and more of their daughters than their sons. Fathers, sons, and brothers may be busy at work, but mothers, daughters, and sisters should be there when you need them. For example, a woman commented that she barely notices when her sons don't call for weeks at a time, but if her daughters don't call for a week, she becomes concerned.

A related pattern that emerged in my research on families is that women are easier targets. The sociologist Samuel Vuchinich recorded sixty-four family-dinner conversations and tallied who started conflicts, and with whom. Children, he found, initiated more conflicts with mothers than with fathers. This finding reminded me of an observation made by a friend who sails competitively: early in the race, he said, he looks for ships skippered by women, because they'll usually give way more easily. This means that, whether or not

the women skippers indeed behave as he expects, they are the ones he is targeting.

A small incident that received a brief flurry of attention in the summer of 2007 epitomizes a fundamental double bind that underlies all the others. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Robin Givhan reported that as Senator Clinton spoke about education on the Senate floor, the neckline of her blazer revealed cleavage—a revelation that Givhan described as a “small acknowledgement of sexuality and femininity.” The very notion of cleavage encapsulates the questions that women face all the time: Is she sexy enough (to be a good woman)? Is she *too* sexy (to be a good woman—in a different sense of the word “good”)? Since few people agree where the line is drawn between too sexy and not sexy enough, women are always at risk of—and sure to be seen by some as—violating one standard or the other.

Givhan noted that as a senator, Hillary “had found a desexualized uniform: a black pantsuit.” Now, every male senator wears a “desexualized uniform.” But we wouldn't say that about them just as we wouldn't say they don't wear makeup, because men in professional contexts aren't expected to dress in ways that call attention to their sexuality. But sexuality is inherent in our concept of femininity, so failing to display the former violates the latter.

For a stunning illustration of this double bind, consider the story of Joan of Arc. To lead the armies of France against British invaders, Joan dressed in military garb—that is, as a man. Then, dressing as a man became one of the charges

that led to her being burned at the stake. In the trial scene of George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*, the charge is levied like this: "she wears men's clothes, which is indecent, unnatural, and abominable." In her own defense, Joan explains, "I was a soldier living among soldiers. I am a prisoner guarded by soldiers. If I were to dress as a woman they would think of me as a woman; and then what would become of me? If I dress as a soldier they think of me as a soldier, and I can live with them as I do at home with my brothers." In the same way, when Hillary dressed in "a desexualized pantsuit," she simply dressed as a senator.

When Joan says that the soldiers "would think of me as a woman," she means as a sexual object. She didn't have to say that because sexuality is entailed by the word "woman." That's why dressing as a woman invites thoughts of sex—thoughts that turned into an article in the *Washington Post*. Any reference to a woman's sexuality highlights her vulnerability and hence compromises her authority. But, like Joan, a woman today who dresses in a way that does not display sexuality (that is, like men in similar positions) will be burned (only figuratively, thank goodness) for failing to be feminine.

Not everything about Hillary and the way she is perceived reflects the fact that she is a woman. But an awful lot does. Though we rarely think we are reacting to others in particular ways because of their gender, it's pretty hard, maybe impossible, to see anyone except through that prism. It is important for businesses to take these double binds into account when evaluating women and men for hiring or promotion,

to ensure that they accurately assess employees' abilities. It's even more important when it comes to accurately assessing the abilities of candidates for public office. If we want to see Hillary for who she is and what she can do, we need to look more closely—not at her, but at how we look at her. Perhaps it's our own understanding of the double binds she faces that requires a makeover.