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Tough Questions: What If You're a "Token" Woman?

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By Tina Vasquez (Los Angeles)

A company taking a serious interest in appointing more women to its board doesn't seem as if it could ever be a bad thing, but in corporate America things aren't always black and white. Women account for half of the U.S. workforce, yet hold only 16 percent of the seats on Fortune 500 boards. So, how is intentionally seeking out women to appoint ever a bad thing? *If it leads to tokenism.* If a company is only looking to improve its gender diversity *appearance*, without tapping into the benefits of true diversity, being that sole woman in a sea of men can be lonely and frustrating.

Harriet Green, chief executive of Premier Farnell, [recently wrote](#) that corporations need to go beyond tokenism and move towards real acceptance of the value that a diverse mix can bring. "Women don't want tokenism. We want the opportunity to show what we can do and be measured on our performance," Green wrote. Something a CEO told Green also rings true: "One woman on the board is a token, two is a minority; three means you are really getting there."

The problem is that three women sitting on the board of the same Fortune 500 company is almost unheard of – even in 2012. Some companies really are trying by introducing women and other minorities to the boardroom, and of course, that means starting with one or two diverse individuals. But some boards are just trying to fend off criticism, while hoping to maintain the status quo. What should you do if you realize you were only hired to make a team or board look diverse and your contributions are not being taken seriously?

An Opportunity to Learn & Grow

Professional coach [Amber Rosenberg](#) contends that female tokenism is prevalent in the highest levels of corporate America, but out of the hundreds of women she has coached over the past decade, only a handful expressed concerns that they'd been hired or promoted because of their gender.

No matter the reasoning behind the hire, a woman's presence can prove to be an invaluable advantage to the highest ranks of corporate America, including a female executive or board member's ability to act as a much-needed role model to more junior female staff members. Rosenberg believes that women should embrace their newly-acquired position of power and view it as an opportunity to grow, learn, and succeed.

“Some token women may feel the need to downplay their visibility, recognition, or success for being seen or labeled as a ‘fraud’ or ‘bitch,’ but a more empowering option is to make the most of the opportunity and actively highlight their visibility and success,” Rosenberg said. “Some colleagues may choose to view them in a certain light, but at the end of the day, you can't control what other people say or how they act. You can only control your own action and words, so why spend your time and energy worrying about what other people may think of you?”

This biggest personal issue that can result from being a token woman isn't having to deal with the opinions of others, but rather a depleting sense of your self worth. If you focus too heavily on others viewing you in a negative light or not taking you seriously, you may begin to internalize this and doubt your abilities.

“You have to nip this in the bud. Get to the root of it and figure out what the cost of feeling insecure is. What's the benefit? Better awareness of insecurity leads to better management of insecurity,” Rosenberg said.

Making the Most of It

Ruth Nemzoff, author and resident scholar at the [Brandeis Women's Studies Research Center](#), says she has had plenty of experience as the token woman. She was the first woman on the board of a bank, the first woman on the board of a college, and the first woman on the industrial development board.

“Absolutely I knew I was a token,” Nemzoff said. “It was the late 1970s. I was a leader in the New Hampshire State Legislature and well known in my community because I had set up programs for persons with retardation, started the women's movement in southern New Hampshire, and, as much as I hate to admit it, I think my ‘fame’ was due in part to being ‘the doctor's wife.’”

“When I was asked to be on these boards the implication was that I was asked because I was a woman and they made a big deal about the fact that I was a woman. To be fair, I

was also well qualified. If you're chosen as a token, you can still have the credentials for the position – and I did.”

Sara Morgan, an attorney at [Heiting and Irwin](#), agreed. As Nemzoff said, if you're appointed to a board or promoted to a position because of your gender, it does not mean you're not qualified for it. Morgan recommends that women who believe they're occupying a token position should take advantage of the situation and see it as an opportunity for personal growth.

“Growing up as the girl that played Little League, I learned at a very young age that this is a man's world, but strife builds character and I've spent my life practicing and perfecting what my dad taught me: ‘To play with the boys, you have to be better than the boys,’” Morgan said. “I've navigated the waters of both the construction and legal fields, which are traditionally male-dominated and male-managed and speaking up and being persistent are key. Maybe they will never take you seriously, but they will have to hear you.”

Nemzoff would take a slightly different approach: silence ... until what she said was sure to carry weight. “My strategy was to listen and then when I finally had something not just good, but brilliant to say, I raised my hand and said it. I think the other board members were so stunned that they listened and after that I did not need to worry,” Nemzoff said.

Just as Morgan learned from her father, Rosenberg agrees that token women will probably have to work twice as hard to be heard. If you feel as if your contributions aren't being taken seriously, use your communication and interpersonal skills to slowly create allies, one-by-one. Start with the low-hanging fruit, colleagues who are approachable or who you've already developed a rapport with, and work your way up from there. It's not an ideal situation, but if you're in it, you've can strategize to make the most of it.