

## LOWERING THE WATERLINE

I've used this phrase throughout the book. It's more than just a different way to say "talking about the elephant in the room." Lowering the waterline can feel like an almost physical act; it's not just revealing previously unspoken things but releasing previously blocked energy. It's often dramatic and moving, acting as a catalyst for real change.

One such instance took place in a discussion about psychological safety at an investment firm. The term psychological safety evokes positives like trust and validation; but part of understanding what it means to feel safe is to tap into what it means to feel *unsafe*. To access that understanding, I might ask a variation of the following questions: What are the conditions that allow you to speak freely? What prevents you from freely sharing your ideas at work? Can you recall a time when you felt bad or ashamed for asking a question at work? It's good to get these questions out there, but more often than not, they don't prompt a lot of participation. People are reluctant to voice these feelings and experiences—*especially* if they involve the very organization or people they are currently working for. It takes a lot of courage to speak up. Yet when one person does, it unleashes other voices and a whole lot of bottled-up energy and emotion.

On this day, the discussion about feeling unsafe seemed to be heading

down the typical path where people hold back. But then Amber, a respected veteran and senior partner, spoke up. She spoke frankly about what it was like being a pioneer at a firm (and in an industry) that for decades had very much been an “old boys’ club.” When she started in the ’90s, there hadn’t even been a women’s bathroom. She had to go downstairs and to the nearby sandwich shop anytime she needed to use the bathroom. She paused to let that sink in. She went on to reveal she “wouldn’t dare ask” to leave work early to take care of her kids, which frequently forced her into difficult and impossible choices.

Amber was the only woman at meetings, and time and time again, she would make a point, and it would be ignored. Then a man would make essentially the same point, and suddenly it registered and was taken up enthusiastically. She felt it almost didn’t matter what she said. She talked about these and other instances almost matter-of-factly. “I was doing my time,” she said, “so you all wouldn’t have to go through the same thing.” She’d articulated a message I hear all the time, especially from women of color. They don’t focus on the difficulty of their own struggle; they look to see who’s coming behind them.

She even called out people in the firm—though she didn’t use names, it was still bold and powerful. “There are people in this very meeting who would prevent me from entering a room. Who would avoid inviting me to a happy-hour gathering. I fought my way to where I am today.”

Though the story of women’s marginalization in corporate boardrooms is familiar across America today, what Amber did that day was groundbreaking. There had never been a discussion like this at the firm. Much less a message like this coming from a senior partner. And on the first day of JEDI!©

The men on the call started to weigh in. “Amber, we had no idea—”

But Amber quickly clarified where she was coming from. “I’m not

looking for an apology. I want you to know how things were. And how things were is not at all in the rearview mirror, even if the firm is now 50 percent women. Fighting for a seat at the table is one thing. But I know I still have to fight to *keep* that seat. And I know there are others who are still fighting to get there. That’s who I’m speaking for.”

Now, this meeting had clear gender dynamics, but there were other power dynamics at play as well. This was a CEO-less firm run by its senior partners, Amber among them. But also in the meeting were associates and interns. Asha, one of the associates, spoke up.

“Since we’re being vulnerable and transparent,” she said, “I feel I need to address the huge gap between the people who have all the power and influence, and who seem to matter, and those who have virtually no power and influence and who don’t seem to matter as much.”

It was another mic-drop moment. Here the firm was, on the first day of learning how to build a more inclusive culture. Yet they had their own long history of exclusion, which they had never properly reckoned with. That exclusion was still present, in various forms, and still wasn’t being dealt with. It had been swept under the rug. But Amber and Asha had pulled that rug back.

To the firm’s credit, they were up to the challenge. After this first two-year pilot of JEDI,© Amber immediately said they wanted to renew for another two years. After that second two years, one of the male senior partners (who incidentally had been both apologetic and defensive in that first session) approached me and said he’d love to go through it a third time but wanted to give others the opportunity. He had found the program so valuable and still wanted ongoing maintenance and guidance on how to take these principles and apply them in daily practice. Out of that discussion came a whole new offering at RoundTable we call Inclusive Leadership Labs (ILL), where we turn the JEDI© learnings into real

applications for the particular company. This senior partner, four years later, continues to attend the ILLs and share his journey and, importantly, the lessons he has learned along the way and the new commitments he's making to be a kinder and more inclusive leader. People who attend the ILLs along with him are moved by his vulnerability, and he reminds them all the time that he was influenced by Amber's words years ago in that first JEDI© session.

All because one woman dared to lower the waterline.

## SCROLLING BUBBLES

Lowering the waterline played out very differently, in a more collective way, in another session, one for high-potential women leaders in a large media company. With about sixty-five women on the call, I had only an hour to introduce them to inclusive leadership, so I had to use my time wisely and cover only the most critical elements. As I've made clear, I believe a lot of progress can be made just by focusing on improving our listening skills. So I decided to do a primer on listening in the Me channel and in the You channel.

As we've covered previously, listening in the Me channel is much more than a focus on how something affects or resonates with you. It's also about learning to listen to your own inner voice. You can't be an effective leader and advocate until you are in tune with (and then can later hone and leverage) that voice.

We use a tool that allows participants to write down what they hear their inner voice saying, in an almost stream-of-consciousness way. Anonymously, those messages appear on a shared screen in "scrolling bubbles." It's a powerful way to bring the unsaid and unspoken out into the open while maintaining safety and allowing people to remain anonymous.

On this day, after a discussion on the different types of listening I asked the participants to share what kinds of messages they hear from their inner voice regularly and write them in the tool. After an anticipatory pause, messages like the following started appearing on the screen:

*I'm not smart enough to be in this group.*

*I'm too old to be a leader.*

*I don't understand what is going on most of the time.*

*I've never been thin enough and will never reach my ideal weight.*

*Nobody believes me when I talk.*

*They don't want me in the inner circle.*

*I'll never get a seat at the table.*

*I'm not allowed to make mistakes.*

*I don't belong here.*

*I have to change myself too much to fit in.*

*My accent is too thick and people don't understand me.*

I allowed the messages to scroll down uninterrupted and didn't say anything. One after another, these painful messages scrolled across the shared screen, collectively portraying the inner dialogue of these high-potential woman. There were so many messages, all ringing of this same quality: I'm not enough, and I don't belong.

Eventually, one courageous woman took herself off mute and turned her video on. "I see myself in those words," she shared gently, sadly. "I don't know if this is a good thing or a bad thing, but I just don't feel alone anymore."

Another woman joined in. "It's good to know I'm not the only one with these feelings."

And yet another. "I never felt safe saying how I felt, but if so many of us feel this way, it seems we should be able to express it."

We had lowered the waterline on what one had permission to say in

the group. Through their tears, the women saw that in their feelings of aloneness and vulnerability, they could be seen and understood. This was only possible when they were allowed to be anonymous—when they could hide, essentially. But the common ground of their emotion gave them the courage to stop hiding and share publicly. Emotion is often the bridge to inclusion because it is a universal language. What they saw was that one voice was all voices.



So yes, in this case, lowering the waterline also resulted in releasing the waterworks. That is not uncommon when people suddenly feel truly understood. My closest friends tease that I can make people cry with just a look or a smile, which isn't entirely true . . . it's more than just me and my coaching style. There's a larger dynamic at work here. Lowering the waterline exposes hidden and suppressed emotions, and those often get expressed through tears.

I am frankly quite fascinated by tears. They can express sadness or joy, or both at once. Often, they represent an emotion that doesn't have a word in English: a kind of freedom, an experience of being seen by others or even by oneself in a new way for the first time.

Known for my direct questions, I do often ask clients, "What do those tears mean for you?" To others, I may ask, "What's it like to see so-and-so crying?" And yes, that sometimes brings even more tears. But it also brings clarity to the experience of being seen and understood. These questions lower the waterline by giving people permission to feel, be themselves, and belong.



On this day, my clients seemed to understand that, even though their tears grew out of painful experiences of *not* belonging, of *not* feeling safe, their tears in this moment were about connection, belonging, and inclusion. I wanted to harness the power of the moment and the shared power the women were feeling. I continued the exercise of Me-channel listening and asked them to write down, on a new screen, what they would say to themselves the next time they heard their inner voice telling them they were not good enough or that they did not belong. This time, the bubbles started appearing more quickly.

*You go, girl!*

*You are enough.*

*You belong.*

*You are here for a reason.*

*You can make a difference.*

*All your hard work has led you to this moment. You deserve this.*

*Rest. You're worth it.*

*I love you.*

*You are a leader.*

The scrolling bubbles felt like a celebration. "I feel powerful just reading these!" one woman said through her tears.

Another said, "Imagine if we all felt like this all the time—there would be no stopping us!"

Powerfully, one person said, "Imagine our daughters and sons are feeling unsure of themselves all the time. We could be the voice for change for them, and by speaking these words to them, we get to hear them too."

The contrast was stark: the women viscerally experienced the shift from feeling despondent to powerful in mere moments, just by using their listening and their voice in a new way. Their new battle cry was grounded in a sense of togetherness. They emerged feeling less alone in the journey

to self-actualization. Though it is, in fact, a lonely journey, when we are reminded that we are all on the journey, albeit at different points, it helps us and moves us forward. These women were only reminded of that fact, though, because we safely lowered the waterline to uncover what was swimming beneath.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF DANCING

### FIRST, DISARM

There is an ancient Irish saying: “You don’t give a man a weapon until you’ve taught him how to dance.” The idea is that, before someone can responsibly wield power or an actual physical weapon, they have to undergo the kind of inner work that art (among other things) makes possible. Michael Meade, a writer who specializes in myth, explores this idea in his podcast episode “The March of Violence.” When we express ourselves artistically, Meade says, we are prompted to “know the wounds” of our souls.\* If someone wields power without going through this inner journey, they will likely be unmoved by the suffering of others and apt to project their unexamined wounds onto others.

The heart of the matter, Meade says, is that “in order to properly bear arms, a person must first become disarmed.” I love this idea that a person should lay down their defenses before thinking of wielding power or a weapon. That dance is chosen as the metaphor for self-expression and

\* Michael Meade, “The March of Violence,” episode 135, *Mosaic Voices*, podcast.