Better A Cracked Voice

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On October 25, 2018, the *New York Times* published an exposé on the terms of Andy Rubin’s 2014 departure from Google: a $90-million exit package following credible claims of sexual misconduct made by a female employee.¹ The same article referenced two other executives that Google had protected along similar code of conduct violations within the last decade. Sundar Pichai, CEO, and Eileen Naughton, then-head of HR, sent an email to the company attesting to how seriously Google takes sexual harassment and noted that 48 individuals had been fired without an exit package in the prior two years.² What the news coverage did not indicate, however, was that this email backfired completely: in an organization of linear thinkers such as Google, the immediate follow up to “48 people were fired for this with no golden parachute” could only be “so how many did walk away with lucrative deals?” With every damage-control missive sent by Pichai and Naughton came a flurry of other questions, each more problematic than the last. I know this because I was employed at Google when the story broke, and witnessed its aftermath first-hand.

Across the company email groups, internal sites and documents were set up: first statements of disgust, then petitions, then demands for resignations and transparency and a full accounting of how the inventor of Android could walk away with seed funding for his next adventure when the reason for his departure was sexual assault. Though nobody ever called it out explicitly (that I saw), the subtext was fairly obvious: one of the most basic truths of the tech world, in which the masters of the universe construct the future and the social systems on which the future will be built, is that genius trumps morality and ethics. This is the cost of doing business—a crime here and an ethical conflict there form the price paid for genius. That the crimes seem to be predominantly committed by men against women was seldom worth a mention—until October 2018, at least.

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² Ibid.
With continued pressure on Google’s executive to admit to its complicity, to apologize for upholding a system of gender violence, and for failing to answer direct questions at the now-defunct TGIT\(^3\) sessions, the workforce began to mobilize. Social media accounts were set up. Press releases were distributed. Engineers used their math skills to calculate what kind of social good Google could have done with the $90 million paid to Rubin. Through it all, two organizers emerged from the 200,000-strong\(^4\) workforce: Claire Stapleton and Meredith Whittaker. A plan was put in place: Googlers would walk out on the job at 11 a.m. local time on November 1 to demonstrate disgust with executive decision-making and call for solidarity and protection of anybody who had experienced sexual impropriety within Google’s walls through a list of demands.\(^5\) The first walkout occurred in Tokyo, and thousands of Googlers across the globe followed.

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I arrived at Google through unexpected means. With the exception of the people who were later hired to deal with the aftermath of the walkout, I was probably among a select few who worked at Google having graduated from a women’s studies program in university, an irony that I cannot dispense with to this day. A Google recruiter had contacted me on LinkedIn after stumbling upon my profile. I thought the inquiry was a joke. Google gets millions of job applications a year; the odds of being hired by the company is somewhere around half a per cent. But it turned out to be real, and after a few months of day-long

\(^3\) TGIT, or Thank God It’s Thursday, was a longstanding and much-beloved weekly event in which Larry Page and Sergei Brin (Google founders) would stand before an audience of 300 Googlers to answer any and every kind of question imaginable asked in person or through the “Dory,” an online tool to solicit questions that Googlers can vote on to indicate importance of the question. After the walkout Page and Brin disappeared from the TGITs, with only Pichai hosting them. Following continued leaks of internal issues, the company removed the archive of meetings dating back years. When I left Google, TGITs had become pre-scripted broadcasts with censored questions that had been pre-selected by management to prevent outbursts or challenges similar to the ones that occurred at the TGIT following the breaking of the Rubin story, and they only happened occasionally.

\(^4\) At this point, Google’s workforce was closer to 100,000, with another ~100,000 individual contractors, vendors and temps, some of whom also participated in the walkout.

interviews and negotiations, I left my government job\(^6\) to hop on a plane and fly to Mountain View for my weeklong indoctrination.

The orientation session was, indeed, effective. As someone with a social studies background, I immediately picked out the tactics employed that were similar to how cults recruit and brainwash members. Despite that, I felt powerless before my own interpellation: by the end of the week I was drinking spinach smoothies and cycling around campus on a G-bike, intoxicated by the wealth of privilege into which I had stumbled.

Despite this good fortune, I remained underwhelmed, which did not go unnoticed by my assigned ‘Oracle.’\(^7\) On my first day back in our local office she stated that I seemed underwhelmed. I told her I was still taking it all in and that sometimes people interpret my processing new information as aloofness, but in reality she was not wrong. In my previous role I was managing a $20-million budget and a department of 125 FTEs as the Executive Assistant to a Vice-President. I interacted with the Board of Directors, the President/CEO and the Chair. I had been a founding member of organizational innovation programs, was sent on design thinking workshops and was told many times that I was the future of the organization. But when I arrived at Google I was told that the only budget I needed to concern myself with was the “fun budget” I would be responsible for spending. I was a glorified babysitter of engineers whose social skills and emotional labour I would be expected to pick up the slack for. It took me only a matter of days to realize that the role I had been sold on was a lie, as if the last ten years of progress I had made in my career never happened. And yet at the same time I relied on the company-given heuristics to gaslight myself: you are here; millions of people would literally kill for your spot in the machine; you should be grateful and make the best of it.

So, I tried.

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\(^6\) Throughout the recruitment process I had been led to believe that the move would be a lateral one, with similar levels of authority and responsibility, which was the only reason I took the job.

\(^7\) When a new Administrative Business Partner joins Google, they are assigned an ‘Oracle’—somebody who holds a long tenure and is meant to be a mentor who can answer just about any question that the new hire might present to them. They are also supposed to be a confidante as joining Google can be intense for some people.
On the day of the walkout, my office was in chaos. Two women organized an event for us in the then-undeveloped space on the first floor of the new building, which had ironically been slated to become a “community space” to host groups of girls or underrepresented youth in the hopes of dragging them into the STEM world.

The few women in the office spoke, sharing stories of sexual assault in the workplace, sexual discrimination, and microaggressions. There was a feeling of cautious catharsis; these are the things that we wish we could talk about but know that we are not supposed to talk about within the male-coded walls of technological utopia. A few male allies spoke, including one that sent me for a spin. He started with something along the lines of, “I am a middle-aged white guy. I’m mid-career. I’ve been here for years. And yet I’ve never seen any sexual discrimination at work…”

Oh, great, I thought. It’s time to check off this box on my derailment bingo card.

But then, he continued in an unexpected direction: “…Except that that is obviously bullshit. I have seen it. I probably see it all the time because it happens all the time. How am I missing this? How can I be better about spotting it so that I can start to be a better ally?”

I had promised myself I would not get involved. I did not feel supported enough to take such a personal risk. And yet nobody else seemed equipped or willing to fill this gap between “I was sexually assaulted at work and got fired for it” and “why can’t I see sexual assault at work?” Before I knew it, I raised my hand, I took hold of the extremely screechy microphone, and unknowingly triggered a year of hell for myself with the following incantation:

“Before coming to Google, I reported to a VP who was highly supportive of me. He would encourage me to speak up in meetings. He said I had great ideas and a unique and compelling perspective. But often enough I would say something in a meeting among executives, and people would keep going as if I never said anything at all. Minutes later, a man—and it was always a man—would repeat my idea, and suddenly it would be celebrated as some ingenious revelation. That VP would occasionally recognize it
and call it out, but this sort of thing happens to women so often that it’s easy to miss. Does this qualify as sexual harassment? No, absolutely not. However, gender-based discrimination is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon. It exists on a gradient. On one extreme end is sexual violence and homicide. On the other are microaggressions—for example, questioning or overly scrutinizing a comment or idea not because the contents of the comment or idea are questionable, but because it came from a woman. Instead of searching for rape—which you likely won’t see at work since most abusers are particularly skilled as acting inappropriately in environments that lack witnesses and optimize for deniability—look for ways that you see the equivalent merits and qualifications of women as seeming suspect. When you interview, review your notes and ask yourself, “Would I be writing this if the interviewee had been a male?” And where you see others upholding a status quo in which a woman invading a male space with her intellect and professional prowess is challenged, put pressure on your leaders to address the behaviour. Disincentivize it. Tell your superiors that you won’t stand by their inaction. Be better by demanding better.”

The entire time I was talking, my voice cracked. I held back tears. I was shaking. Internally, I kept asking myself why I was still talking, what was there to gain. You are not the progress you seek. I had been at Google for a whopping seven months when the walkout happened, and was speaking into a microphone to address about 400 predominantly male people, some of whom were rightfully angry about the situation, some who were curious, and others who were no doubt looking for new targets for their James Damore-like microaggressions. I knew that the crumbling I experienced internally during my speech was observed by the audience when the scary dragon-lady of Google’s Kitchener office came by and hugged me and told me it was ok, that I was very brave, that everybody would forget in due time.

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The day before the walkout—on October 31, 2018—I had experienced my first of the twice-annual performance reviews that happen at Google. The man who hired me told me that after the 360-reviews, after the month-long calibrations, after all was said and done, I had earned a rating of Exceeds Expectations. In sharing this news with other admins later, I learned that it is extraordinarily rare for anyone—let alone an ABP—to get an EE rating the first time.

Newer admins celebrated me and told me I deserved it, while those with longer tenures were visibly displeased, my Oracle included. They felt that because they had been made to wait so long for such a rating that everyone should have to be delayed. I was reminded of the ways that women are trained to see each other as competition needing to be squashed rather than question the forces that undermine us or pit us against each other in the first place. I was also reminded of the truism that the women who suffer in male-dominated industries and live to tell about it are often the most problematic people you will encounter in tech; because they struggled, they feel everyone else should have to, too. This makes the job of the oppressor really easy, because they have outsourced the effort or reproducing imbalanced power structures to the people who have been most hurt by them. There is incentive to playing along, to being the woman who demonstrates that she is a credit to her gender by not supporting her gender at all, and effectively getting in the way of any gender-based progress.

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‘Administrative Business Partner’ is the rebranded title given to ‘Administrative Assistants’ at Google (I later found out) in an effort to communicate the importance of the role and that ABPs should be taken seriously and treated with respect. I do not believe I have ever come across another job title or function that has required such marketing efforts to obtain a base level of humanity, and yet I am not surprised given that the absolute vast majority of the thousands of ABPs at Google are female-identifying.

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9 The Google rating scale is Needs Improvement – Consistently Meets Expectations – Exceeds Expectations – Strongly Exceeds Expectations – Superb. The vast majority of Googlers end up in CME, and only people who are going to be performance managed out of the organization receive NI. Superb is extremely rare to come by, yet more people receive Superb than NI. These ratings are used to determine bonuses and stock awards, which can account for 25-50% of an employee’s pay in any given year.

10 i.e. The scary dragon-lady.
ABPs keep the company running. They are assistants to multiple executives at a time. They organize projects, they coordinate facilities and business plans. They run massive events, and are at the heart of the business. In other words, they occupy the space of ‘mother’ within the company, so much so that the language used to describe them in the job ladder\textsuperscript{11} is reminiscent of childcare workers. ABPs also complete the majority of the emotional labour at Google. They are expected to be extroverted and social, always in a good mood to be able to manage the psychosocial and emotional limitations of the engineers who happen to be introverted or anti-social. I, myself, am quite introverted, and later found out that this is why I was hired: the site manager thought the engineers would be able to relate to me. Maybe so, but I found the extroversion demands of the job to be exhausting because it’s in my nature to work quietly and independently behind the scenes. I am not cut out for carrying the weight of everyone else’s emotional labour, and yet it was presumed that I would be adept at this, presumably based solely on my gender.

Of course, ABPs are not exclusively female-identifying; there are a scant few males who take up the mantle, although to very different expectations and with very different rewards. As part of my training I attended a session titled “The Art of Managing Up for Administrative & Executive Business Partners” in which the male ABP who led it said, “I think of myself more as a camp counsellor for my teams than a strict calendar-watcher. Every so often my executive’s meetings might miss rooms but…” and he trailed off, for us to infer that this is not the high-value, high-impact work of an ABP. I could not help but think back to this moment when I received my second performance review, in which I was told that a meeting that had been set up while I was away did not have a room assigned, and this was somehow evidence of my collective failures in the role.

Not only do the male-identifying ABPs get away with more (or perhaps, are seen as being valuable for their strategic mindsets rather than their capacity for minutiae), but they get promoted faster and successfully transfer job ladders into more valued, respected and high-paying jobs much faster than the female ABPs do. While female ABPs try to navigate a professional labyrinth capped by a glass

\textsuperscript{11}Google’s version of job descriptions, which outline skills, competencies and experience required for promotion.
ceiling, male ABPs float along the glass escalator to the male-encoded spaces in which they belong. The few female ABPs who do manage to beat the odds and transcend the role into the upper echelons of the corporate executive often work extremely hard to bury their past, because being a woman in an occupation that is heavily gendered female—especially within a male industry—is a professional liability.

And yet the quiet part gets said out loud every so often. Google loves summits—every product team, division, area, role, or Employee Resource Group has summits, which are annual multi-day offsite events similar to conferences. I attended an ABP summit in New York City in 2019, which featured a keynote in by a career EA and author\(^\text{12}\) that Google had hired to deliver a speech based on her book titled, “Not, ‘Just an Admin!’” The crux of her argument is that admins are the most valuable resources in an organization and if we position ourselves correctly, we can be seen as strategic partners and advisors who are granted respect by the people who are actually important. The irony that Google probably spent more money on hiring someone to tells us not to feel sorry for ourselves for being so disrespected, abused and underpaid than if they were to actually address one of those issues was not lost on me.

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As with any social justice movement, the walkout gradually fizzled out. Google got better at silencing dissenting voices through threats, demotions and terminations\(^\text{13}\), while the dominant group of Googlers (i.e. white men) grew fatigued of not being able to apply engineering solutions to social problems, and retreated into their privilege accordingly.

This turn of events is not surprising, of course. The Damore Manifesto (often referred to as “the Google Memo”), despite having gotten James Damore fired from Google, is alive and well within the company. In positioning itself as a progressive organization founded on an absence of hierarchical structure in which ideas can be debated free from consequence or judgment, Google cannot take down the manifesto. Doing so would be an act of (justifiable) censorship, which would leave a sour taste in the

\(^{12}\) Peggy Vasquez.

\(^{13}\) Both Claire Stapleton and Meredith Whittaker (the walkout organizers) were demoted repeatedly prior to being terminated.
mouths of babes who may not agree with what you say, but who would fight to the death for your right to say it. And yet that the manifesto, toxic and misogynistic as it is, remains a document that any Googler can access at their whim, searchable and easy to find within the internal servers, demonstrates that even in the halls of the builders of the future, a man’s right to say anything he wants—even when factually and demonstrably false—supersedes a woman’s right to feel respected and comfortable in her workplace. Even though Google got rid of Damore, his beliefs are legitimized by being granted space (virtual or otherwise) to live on. Though he is long gone, his legacy at Google remains, an epitaph and monument that silences the women who were fired from Google for having the nerve to speak out about being sexually assaulted by the men who held power over them.

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For me, the aftermath of my participation in the walkout was more immediate. Within two weeks I was sat down by the Oracle—the person who was supposed to be my mentor and primary source of support, but who was also the ABP to the site lead—and told that I was not meeting her expectations or the expectations of her boss, one of the most powerful people in the Canadian tech landscape. For context, it would be as if somebody from the IT department told someone from the actuarial department that their job performance was problematic. I did not report to the Oracle or the site lead; my chain of command was an entirely different product area within a completely separate organization of the company based out of California (where my manager and management chain lived as well). Other than both of us having our desks assigned in the Kitchener office and occasionally working together on initiatives for the Kitchener office, we had nothing to do with each other. Yet, this did not stop her from sitting me down and telling me to expect a Needs Improvement rating in the next performance cycle (which would not even start for another three months), and that I needed to change significantly as a person if I was at all interested in keeping my job.

By that time, my hiring manager had moved on to another area and I had a new manager who simultaneously thrived on drama and could not be bothered to properly manage his ABP. He was not
supportive of me and even began participating in secret meetings about me with the executives from the Kitchener office who had not taken kindly to my stepping out of line. I was never told what was discussed or what the outcomes of the meetings were, but the message became quite clear to me that I had outed myself as a Problem Woman who needed to be exorcised from the organization. Given that the literal day before my indiscretions I had been told that I exceeded expectations for my role, there was work to do to provide evidence and justification for my presumed Needs Improvement rating (i.e. a drop of two ratings within six months), which was a foregone conclusion despite half of the performance period that would be under review had not even happened yet. In other words, no matter what I might accomplish in those next three months, my fate was sealed.

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During this period of conflict and being targeted by extremely powerful people, the site lead also accused me of being a culture mooch (his word), stating, “You enjoy the benefits of this culture but will not do your part to maintain it.” In other words, I was taking up space without giving back the requisite performance of gratitude expected of women in the workplace. On the surface, this appeared to be a suggestion that I was faring poorly in my job (although given that women tend to, and are expected to, take on the lion’s share of work in the workplace that is benevolent, voluntary, and perceived to be of low value and least likely to lead to promotion is an interesting dimension to this as I had never heard the same executive complain of any male culture mooches).

Analyzing this remark at any level of depth reveals most clearly the problem on the whole: if I speak out against a culture that values male lives over non-male lives, white lives over non-white lives, heterosexual lives over non-heterosexual lives, and so on, then why would I labour to maintain it? How much did the all-male site leadership genuinely believe that I enjoyed a culture that not only enabled, but created an environment in which Andy Rubin can walk away with $90 million while his victim finds herself unnameable and unemployed? How exactly is a woman supposed to maintain a culture that oppresses her, demonizes her, vilifies her, and punishes her for having the audacity to speak out? While
these men would bristle to hear me say it, the reality is that I got punished for failing to maintain a
culture, or replicate a system of power relations, that does not favour me. And somehow still, I was
blamed for somebody else’s indiscretions. Commonly, the singular piece of advice given to women who
approach the v-word\(^{14}\) to describe their socio-political location, whether it be at work, at home, or out
there in the great wilderness: make the best of it (as I had convinced myself following my failed
indoctrination session), lest you be seen as a Problem Woman who complains too much—or at all.

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After everything I managed to make it through my second performance review with a Consistently Meets
Expectations rating, which was enough to stay under the radar and avoid being put on a Performance
Improvement Plan, which would have been the first step towards termination. I later found out that my
new manager, under the site lead’s influence and tutelage, tried to give me Needs Improvement, and the
chorus of California-based directors and VPs who knew me laughed it off as a joke before putting him in
his place. Despite that, the damage had been done, so when someone internally approached me about a
different role in a completely different Alphabet organization in a different Canadian office, I leapt at it. I
escaped the Oracle and the site lead and would be free to mooch off an entirely different culture in the
sales-based Toronto office. But before then, I had to make peace with certain truths: that no matter where
in Google I was, I would always have a greater capacity to be a Problem Woman than I would to be a
change instigator, innovator or be seen as the future of the company. The simple act of being female
means that no space is safe, and every space is deliberately coded so that I am unable to understand or
successfully navigate it.

I found reprieve in my new role, only to later discover the myriad ways that misogyny manifests
in the workplace. While I was no longer a target, I also could no longer tolerate witnessing other women,
along with non-binary and BIPOC people being made examples of in transparent attempts to maintain the
status quo and re-solidify the hegemony. By July 2020 I had exited the company on my own volition, and

\(^{14}\) Victim.
when asked if there was anything that could be done to make me stay, the only answer was, “No,” this time said with the conviction and steadiness in my voice of white men congratulating each other on how progressive they are for not agreeing with Damore, while still taking the time to read his manifesto in its entirety.

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In the afternoon on the day of the walkout in 2018, I had my regular weekly meeting with the other admins from my project team. We were distracted by the goings-on and traded stories of what we witnessed on our respective campuses and the rumours going around from other campuses.

I was embarrassed by my poor performance in speaking to a room full of strangers who had way more power than me, yet I thought I could get over the humiliation by leaning into it. So, I recounted my story, what I said, how my voice cracked, how I faltered in the face of power and privilege, and in doing so betrayed myself and my own value systems. How I showed myself as merely another scared little girl. Just when I was in the middle of laughing myself off, ha ha, how pathetic am I, how dare I call myself a feminist, one of my colleagues said something that hit me like a ton of bricks—

“Better a cracked voice than no voice at all.”

I broke down immediately.

She continued, “You were speaking for the ones who can’t speak for themselves.”

While in that moment I knew she was right, it took me months to truly parse her words and intent, only to come to realize: part of being fearless in the face of social injustice is the willingness to appear fearful on behalf of someone, anyone, you might never meet. That the personal costs of speaking up often do not even begin to compare with the social costs of remaining silent. And that if the social conditions existed to make it easy for me to speak with conviction, I would not need to speak at all. A cracked voice might be a symptom of a broken society, but it can also be a weapon to compel its healing.
References

