4 top tips for professional women in uncertain times from #movethedial's Jodi Kovitz

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The pandemic has many of us pressing pause instead of play, with consequences for our careers, home lives and mental health. Three inspirational women leaders — Jodi Kovitz, Vandana Juneja and Angela Nikolakakos —were invited to share their advice at a BLG Driven By Women™ event on April 27, 2021. If you weren't one of the more than 1200 people who attended (or if you'd like to relive the moment) here are their four tips for managing competing priorities, using your power to help all women advance and taking care of yourself.

When the pandemic hit, Jodi Kovitz made a choice she says was both the most difficult and easiest of her life.

"I had to consider whether I was going to prioritize being a mother or an entrepreneur who was leading a global movement," said the author, inclusion strategist and founder of #movethedial. "Those caregiving responsibilities had to trump my career and the company that I worked so hard to build."

A self-declared "glass half-full kind of girl," Jodi is grateful for the beautiful moments she's shared with her daughter. At the same time, she is keenly aware of the broader societal costs. The United Nations predicts COVID-19 could reverse the limited progress that has been made worldwide on gender equity and women's rights. Professional women and Black women are particularly affected. One in four women may now step out of the workforce entirely.

So how do we turn the hard-won lessons of the pandemic into a healthier, more equitable future, at a time when so many of us are struggling ourselves?

To answer this question, Jodi was joined by Angela Nikolakakos, Vice President of Legal and Corporate Affairs at Fiera Capital Corporation, and Vandana Juneja, Executive Director of Catalyst. Each of the women shared personal anecdotes, professional insights and wise advice that we've assembled into four powerful tips for professionals who want to navigate uncertain times with resiliency and intention.

Tip #1: Look out for the “only lonely”

Catalyst’s research has shown that people who feel different from the cultural norm are often at lower levels of the organization, have less powerful mentors and are overlooked for “hot jobs.” As a result, they downsize their aspirations. “When people give a fraction of themselves at work it’s not only an equity issue,” Vandana said. “It’s a talent issue.”

Intersecting identities mean one person may have multiple “only lonely” experiences. BLG partner Louise Lee, who moderated the panel, has experienced being both the only woman and only visible minority. “I've always wondered, which part of me am I championing today?” she admitted. “It seems like I'm asking too much if I ask everybody to address both of them, so I put one on the back burner. But maybe we’ll never get a chance to address them all if we don’t acknowledge that they intersect.”

As leaders, we must act with intention in small ways to build inclusion. “Allyship is a verb,” Jodi said. “It’s a journey and a practice, not a thing you are.” She recommends thinking about who you listen to and who you invite to speak; asking if people require accommodation; and uplifting those who experience marginalization by highlighting their work, providing them with stretch opportunities and sponsoring them. “And when you make mistakes, apologize.”

But efforts can’t just be made by women. “There are more CEOs named Michael than women CEOs,” Vandana said. “We can’t send the message that women have to fix themselves. We need to ensure that organizations are also doing the hard work.”

Tip #2: Make like water and flow

Water always finds a way, which makes it a compelling metaphor for how to handle adversity.

Jodi shared an anecdote from her days as the only senior woman in a tech firm and her challenges being heard and making change. “You can throw your hands up and walk away from your conviction or roll up your sleeves and figure out how to speak their language to bring them around,” she said. “It just might mean, like the water analogy, you have to find a different way.” Sometimes, she noted, that means changing your path entirely. “When I noticed it wasn’t working, I left,” she acknowledged. “I felt that I could add more value to the world in other ways.”

“Don’t be discouraged by the number of no’s that lie ahead,” Vandana said. “Be motivated that the next opportunity is going to be a yes.”

Tip #3: Give yourself some grace

All three speakers emphasized that hard times require being easy on ourselves.

“Stop ‘should-ing’ all over yourself,” joked Angela. “All of us have a lot of competing priorities and there's not a lot of time for rest and self care.”

She prefers the phrase ‘work-life equilibrium’ to ‘work-life balance.’ “Balance makes me feel like if I just followed this perfect formula there’d be enough time for everything,” she said. “Equilibrium gives me permission to neglect my children one week and neglect my work the next week because there's a different priority that needs my attention.”

As leaders, we need to model healthy behaviour: take vacation, forgive our mistakes and admit when we’re struggling. “Give yourself some grace along the way,” Vandana said. “Missteps are opportunities to course correct. And give your team some grace, too.”

Tip #4: Get educated

Inclusive leaders practice reflection, demonstrate humility and show curiosity about those who are different from them. “Learn deeply, privately and from others,” Jodi advised. “Read books, take courses, have conversations, make new friends.”

Here are some resources recommended by the panel:

- How to Be an Antiracist by Ibram X. Kendi
- Me and White Supremacy by Layla F. Saad
- Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race by Reni Eddo-Lodge
- The Urgency of Intersectionality a TEDWomen talk by Kimberlé Crenshaw
- Feeling Blah During the Pandemic? It’s Called Languishing by Adam Grant
- Go Out Of Your Way by Jodi Kovitz
- The Confidence Code by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman
- How Will You Measure Your Life by Clayton Christensen

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