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SHERI FELLA: Don't assume you can't do it. Give it a try.

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SHERI FELLA
IN THE WORKPLACE

I was asked a few weeks ago: When was the first time I can remember being treated differently solely because I was a girl, and how did I handle it? I knew instantly when it was. I was in the sixth grade. I wanted to play flag football and my boy classmates told me I couldn't because I was a girl.

I went home from school that day mad and confused and assumed I wouldn't play football. When my dad got home from work that evening and learned from my mom why I was upset, he quickly took me to where the first practice was being held. I remember the

conversation between my dad and the coach vividly because it had such a profound impact on me.

My dad motioned the coach over to the football-field fence and said, "Hi, Coach. I've got a sixth-grader who wants to play football."

The coach replied, "Great. Just have him come to practice."

Dad replied, "She is at practice. She is right here."

My dad went on to say that all he expected was that I get a fair tryout. If I wasn't good enough for the team, then I wouldn't play. But he was not going to stand for me to be denied an opportunity without a fair chance to try out for something that was important to me. The coach agreed.

So I got my chance to try out. I not only made the team, I was the quarterback, kicker and punter—thanks to training from my two older brothers. My dad taught me my biggest hurdle was not that I was a girl. My biggest hurdle was my own assumption. I assumed I couldn't do something I wanted to do simply because someone said I couldn't.

He also taught me that knowing what I wanted mattered. Sure, he talked to the coach because he thought it was the fair thing to do and because I couldn't do that for myself yet, but he wouldn't have taken any action if I had not been clear about how important it was to me.

Often, my clients accept a “no” from someone else as the only answer to their desire to go after something important to them. They accept a “no” before they even explore the possibilities of how they might pivot to a “yes,” before they voice how important it is to them, or before they build a business case for why it matters.

Developing myself by trying new things is my most important work. It is how I learn and grow, and I don't let a “no” from someone else get in the way of my growth. I have a line item in my budget for my development, and I intentionally block time on my calendar for it.

What is your most important work? Is there a line item in your budget for your growth? Do you have time blocked on your calendar to explore new things? If not, how can we expect others to have it on their budgets and calendars? I push myself and my clients to move past assumptions and explore ways to pivot to a “yes.”

Exploring questions like these can offer powerful insights to overcome our assumptions and create growth opportunities that are important to us. Standing at the fence that day with my dad was scary and awkward and yet felt right. I knew I wanted to try football on a real team to see if I could do it. It wasn't a girl thing for me; it was a “try” thing. And for my dad, it was about fairness. By knowing and voicing what I wanted to try, I pivoted a “no” to a “yes” and learned a lesson that shaped the rest of my life.

Are you going after your chances to try? I sure hope so. As leaders, trying is learning and learning is a constant, unending journey. •

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