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FEATURE

Top 10 Leadership Lessons of Effective Women Leaders

As I prepared recently to present “Leadership Secrets of Effective Women Leaders” to a group of elected women leaders from throughout the United States, I pondered these fundamental questions: What do followers need leaders to be? Is leadership different for men and women? Has the current economy and its repercussions affected what women leaders are called upon to do and to be in their organizations? What is the role of ethics in leadership? Is leadership different for us in the public sector?

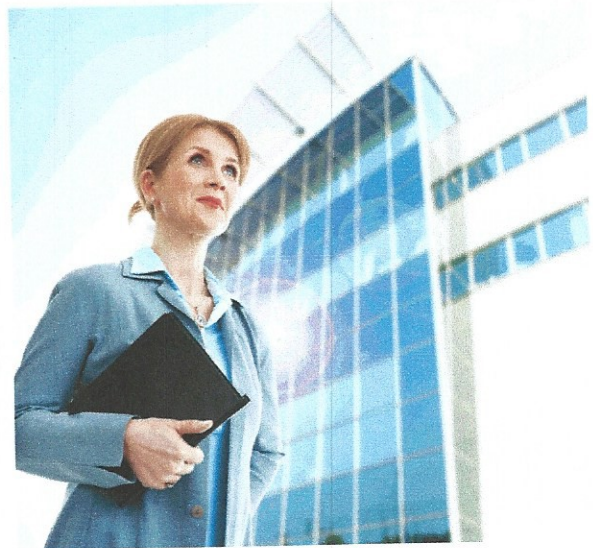
To answer these questions, I want to give credit to a group of women I admire greatly, whom I e-mailed in preparation for the presentation—women leaders ranging from the former president of Gannett Publishing Worldwide, to a highly successful chief executive officer of a public relations firm, to a city councilwoman, to a state legislator, to a college president, to the chief executive officer of an international airport.

I asked them to tell me the first thing that came to mind in answer to the question, What do aspiring women leaders need to know? What follows is a culmination of what they told me, and their responses were, coincidentally, especially consistent with what research tells us matters most in leadership.

WHAT ARE THE SECRETS?

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once said, “If you want to change the world, who do you begin with, yourself or others?” My answer? Yourself. The first secret, then, is to **be self-aware**. The admonition to “know thyself” goes back to the oracles at Delphi and has been attributed to no fewer than six Greek philosophers, including Socrates.

We need to understand what we know and what we don’t know. We need to know our strengths and be honest about our weaknesses and not be unnecessarily critical of ourselves, but we should get busy fixing the weaknesses. Remember that you can really only change yourself. It’s easier to overcome other people’s judgments of you than to overcome your own self-judgment.



So learn how to use your strengths to build on them and to address what you need to change in yourself. Knowing yourself and your values gives you confidence, and that confidence is contagious.

The second secret flows from the first: **be competent**. Always try to be the best-prepared person in the room. Don't take things on if you don't have the capacity to do them well. My mother used to say that you can do anything and everything—you just can't do it all at the same time.

And remember that communication skills—especially listening—are the most important competencies you need to master. Seek out and accept feedback that will help you to become ever more competent at the things that matter.

The third secret is: **be curious**. You cannot grow if you don't make room for what isn't already part of you. Curiosity about people, about issues, about things you don't know leads to better understanding, which makes you more powerful. And your genuine interest in and curiosity about other people make them feel special and make you more likable, more memorable to them.

The fourth secret, then, is **be kind**. Plato once said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." How you treat everyone matters to everyone else. They learn a lot about who you are by how you treat people at all levels. They decide how much they can trust you based on how they see you treating others.

Do you know your employees and constituents? Their stories? Their heartbreaks? Their dreams? They will follow you to the extent that they feel they matter to you. And remember that nobody ever gets too much encouragement. Be unselfish in your praise, in your listening, in your thoughtfulness.

Send handwritten notes. (Some of Washoe County's 3,000 employees have tacked up on their walls notes that I sent them five, eight, 10 years ago. It matters.) Seek first to understand, then to be understood, as author Stephen Covey says. Empower others, and they will follow you. And be kind to yourself, too. Remember to put the oxygen mask on yourself first, then help others!

The fifth secret is to **be purposeful**. Be intentional. Demonstrate your integrity, honesty, ethics, and consistency every day. The ends never justify the means. You are only as strong as your commitment to your personal mission and purpose in life, and that's the same for your organization.

Don't be afraid to speak your mind, but do so with respect, honoring the differing views of others. They will respect you more if you are committed to their right to disagree with you. Being purposeful also means being decisive. Indecision is worse than making a bad decision, which you can usually go back and fix.

Be accountable for all that you do, and be transparent. As we all know, that old warning, "Would you want to see this reported on the front page of the newspaper?" is really *true* for leaders like us!

FIVE MORE SECRETS

The sixth secret, then, is **be resilient**. Grow a thick skin. We all have to keep relearning not to take things personally. People are going to misunderstand us, reject our ideas, and attack us, and we have to hold up our heads and keep going.

10 Leadership Lessons of Effective Women Leaders

- Be self-aware
- Be competent
- Be curious
- Be kind
- Be purposeful
- Be resilient

We always have to ask ourselves whether the criticism we're getting is justified—if it is, acknowledge it and do something about it. If it isn't, shake it off and recognize that you aren't going to make

Be optimistic
Be connected
Be present
Be passionate.

everyone happy. A year or two or 10 from now, whatever this thing is will have paled in importance.

Whether you like her or not, Hillary Clinton has often been named one of the most resilient leaders of our time. She has been knocked down personally and publicly but has managed to get back up, get on her feet, and keep going time and again. Because of this, she has been able to contribute in ways that could never be possible otherwise.

The seventh secret is to **be optimistic**. It is said that optimistic people live considerably longer, make more money in their lifetimes, have a better health status, reportedly have more successful marriages and family lives, and have higher educational attainment—all other things being equal.

In other words, no matter where you come from, an optimistic nature pays off for you. This doesn't mean to be foolishly and naively cheerful in the face of crisis. It means that, whether things are going well or poorly, understand the negatives but try to refocus on the positives.

As the saying goes, "What I think about, I bring about." Our thoughts and expectations—of ourselves and others—are extremely powerful and are contagious. Enthusiasm gives people energy to face the difficult tasks we all share.

The eighth secret is **be connected**. Surround yourself with smart, talented people who will be honest with you—good or bad. Nurture and pay attention to relationships. They are the machinery of how everything good gets done.

Find a mentor whom you respect, and learn from your mentor. Get to know people in diverse networks—being open, inclusive, and tolerant of differing views gives you insight, knowledge, new perspectives, and solutions.

Know and practice the value of teamwork—the demands on us to know more and more make it virtually impossible to come up, by ourselves, individually, with solutions that are even half as good as the ones we can come up with by involving a team, not to mention that the sheer number of ideas a team can come up with increases exponentially over ideas of a single individual.

Reach out and meet people you think you should know. Don't wait for them to call you because they may not, but nine times out of 10, they'd love to hear from you and are extremely flattered and willing to give you some of their time.

And, speaking of time, the ninth secret is **be present** wherever you are. As my daughter's preschool teacher used to say, "Today is the day we have." I loved that phrase so much that when my daughter turned 16 I wrote a book of all the lessons I wanted her to know that maybe I hadn't fully shared with her, and that was the title I gave it. Today is the day we have. Let go of worrying about the future. If you can do something about it, do it; but stop the worrying. It robs you of productive energy.

And, likewise, let go of regrets about the past. There is nothing you can redo now. If there is a correction you can make, *make it* and free yourself of regrets. Focus on what you can do today, right now, in this minute, to carry out the change that you want to see in the world, as Gandhi said.

And being fully present wherever you are means putting down the PDA when you are in meetings and being fully engaged in what is in front of you. When you aren't, people lose respect for you.

Finally, the tenth secret is to **be passionate**. Have an inspired vision of what can be, and share it with others. One of the most highly correlated attributes that successful people share is that they are passionate. Whether they are corporate CEOs, or teachers, or world-class kayakers, or software developers, or the first person citizens meet when they come to your offices, it is people with enthusiasm, energy, passion, and a sense of joy who do more for the world and are more successful than their peers who lack those qualities.

In our organization, a fellow who works on the facilities management team stopped what he was doing to help an elderly lady who was obviously struggling to walk to her car. When I sent him a note to thank him and praise him for it, he said simply that he appreciated the chance to help and that it was actually our contract female security guard who noticed that the woman needed help and asked him to do it.

Both those people are passionate about what they do, and they remind us all and set an example of what a passion for service is all about. Public service is difficult, noble work, and despite all the attacks and criticism we sometimes take, we have to be passionate to keep going. Public service demands all that we have to give it.

PERTAINS TO EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING

In truth, these leadership secrets are no different for men than for women, for public sector or private sector leaders, for leaders in 2010 or leaders in 1950. To the extent that we all honor one another, we honor the work that we do and the people we serve. Make today another opportunity for greatness.

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