

## **Women and Leadership**

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### **Introduction**

Women learn leadership in many ways, through books, classes and by watching others but they learn the most through the challenging, interesting and sometimes difficult experiences of life.

What can you do now to make sure you are ready to answer the call to lead? How will you know if you are ready? Where is the classroom for your personal leadership? What kind of an imprint will you make?

### **The Leadership Classroom**

The leadership classroom for one young woman was in New Orleans after a devastating hurricane. She learned how to manage her feelings and sadness, to put her own needs aside and served others. Another young woman used an extracurricular business class to learn leadership. She is fifteen and she designed a product, learned how to market and sell the product and earned a profit for her shareholders. Leadership learning for another young woman unfolds in the mountains many miles from her inner city home. In the outdoors, she learns self-reliance, teamwork and caring for others.

All these young women learn practical and interpersonal skills through these experiences. They are preparing to answer the call to lead.

Of course, today women demonstrate leadership in every area of life. They are the backbone of community leadership; they lead in their families and they take leadership roles in every professional field.

### **Community Leadership**

Women have taken on many roles in politics, community advocacy, schools and health care. From the local town council to the national government, women drive the day-to-day operations of their organizations and they strategic vision for the future.

Women like Michaela Walsh are motivated to lead because they see a problem in their community and they decide they will solve it. Michaela thought poor women would help their families economically if they could own and operate a family business. Poor women needed access to small loans to buy the materials for their businesses but they did not have access to credit. Michaela thought she could find a way and she did. She established Women's World Banking and today, Women's World Banking "provides

support, advice, training and information ... and financial services to 23 million low-income people—primarily women—in 43 countries worldwide” [www.swwb.org](http://www.swwb.org).

### **Family Leadership**

Successful women often attribute their success to their mothers’ leadership within the family. Men and women, alike, recall how their own mothers set high goals for them, helped them build their skills and confidence, encouraged them through success and failure, and coached them to work hard.

The home and family serve as the very first leadership classroom. We learn what to do and what not to do within the structure of our family. Women, in our homes, mothers, neighbors, aunts, grandmothers they all teach us how to lead. The skills we learn “at our mother’s knee” are the important tools for a leader. Think of how much you learned about teamwork, managing conflict, managing time, managing feelings and emotions in your home and family.

### **Business Leadership**

Of course, women play a crucial role in business and increasingly, women provide economically for their families.

Today in the U.S., women compose 50% of the U.S. labor force, and 37% of these women work in management and professional occupations. On corporate boards, the number of women board members continues to grow, and in the Fortune 500, women currently hold 11% of corporate board positions.

In senior management roles, too, the numbers of women are steadily increasing. While, on average, 22% of the senior corporate ranks are women, there are some areas of the world where this percentage is close to 50%.

As women begin to have more access to education, they take advantage of this opportunity by doing well in school and attending college and graduate school. The numbers of women in professional programs; business, medicine, and law, continue to grow, and in a U.S. medical school or law school you may find over 50% of the class are women training to become doctors and lawyers.

### **Women and Leadership**

There are deeply held beliefs about who can lead and the stereotypes and biases still exist. Many people still think “male” when they think “leader”, but this is changing. Many successful women find these attitudes are only minor obstacles as they attempt to

lead, they plan for how to manage the obstacles but they do not let stereotypes and biases become major roadblocks to their achievement

A recent study by Catalyst, a women oriented research center, addressed this question “Are women as effective as men are when in a leadership role? Are they more effective?”. Catalyst reviewed more than 40 studies on gender differences in leadership and found more similarities than differences between women and men leaders. Moreover, despite the stereotype of women as social and strong in interpersonal skills, research in emotional intelligence, a measure of these interpersonal skills, women rate about the same as their male counterparts.

A leader does needs to feel confident and competent. Young women can lose this confidence when dreams, ambitions and goals are not encouraged. Studies indicate that girls in middle school and high school are very ambitious and have high achieving dreams, but these dreams and high ambitions are lost when others become critical of these dreams, when others question these ambitions because of long held beliefs about the role of women. Young women and all women need others to encourage and support them as the rise to the occasion of leadership.

Confidence and competence can help young women take the focus from the current media emphasis on appearance and popularity and place them on achievement and hard work. Active involvement in sports, student government, drama, music, and travel will build confidence, perspective, and personal strength.

Leadership characteristics tend to be seen as either masculine (dominant, competitive) or feminine (compassionate or understanding) depending on our own gender. For young women this tendency to categorize might have a negative impact on self-regard. It is the more effective leader who is willing to bring both the feminine and the masculine attributes to a leadership role.

### **Leadership Imprint**

We leave a leadership imprint when we answer the call to lead. When faced with problems, we will want to solve them. When we see a need, we will want to fill that need with our ideas and your imprint will grow as you learn.

As a young woman, you should capture the lessons of leadership embedded in all your learning experiences through a focused reflection and an analysis of these experiences. Use a learning journal as a vehicle for self-reflection. The journal entries will help you identify the skills you need and the values that are important to you.

These action guidelines may help you stay focused on your ambitions, dreams and leadership goals and plan strategically to answer the call to lead.

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## **Action Guidelines**

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### **Begin a Learning Journal**

- A learning journal will help you track the changes in your leadership imprint and in you as you grow and learn. Writing journal entries helps to identify themes, to make commitments, to understand our values, and to explore our goals.
- Each year, on your birthday perhaps, take time to reflect on you. Write about the type of imprint you have made the skills you have learned and the people who have helped you learn.

### **Build Leadership Skills**

- Your leadership imprint is the starting point for leadership development efforts, but you will also need to stay focused on growing leadership skills.
- To increase your capacity to lead: (1) know yourself, your goals, and your values; (2) understand your skill set; (3) create challenges for learning; and (4) find supportive friends, family, and coaches to help you stay on track and support you if you become discouraged.

### **Know What Matters**

- In your journal, reflect on these questions:
  - What matters to me the most this year?
  - What problems are important to me?
  - What imprint have I left on others this year?
  - What imprint do I want to make next year?

### **Understand Your Skills**

- Keep an ongoing assessment of your skills, strengths, and talents.
- Pay attention to how you add new skills through a new course, a book, a travel experience, or a team. Keep track of your new learning in your journal.
- Review any missteps and missed opportunities to help you identify skill gaps. We all have disappointments and make mistakes. When you take the time to

write about your positive and negative experiences you learn what you might have done differently.

- Learn to give and to receive feedback. Ask for feedback from others on how effective you are on your team. People do not like to give feedback so minimize any tendency toward defensiveness. Remember, you do not always have to agree with others but you do have to listen to the feedback. If you are able to engage others in your learning, you will keep an accurate picture of your strengths and weaknesses.

### **Create Challenges**

- Build personal strength through healthy competition and find any opportunity you can to compete. While you may win, you will learn just as much when you do not win. Join teams and clubs that promote positive competition, and remember to write in your journal when you win and when you lose.
- Build perspective through volunteer work, travel, and taking challenging courses and engaging in activities that will stretch you. Through these challenges, you will work with others who hold different views and perspectives from you. These experiences broaden your view of the world and can teach you to be inclusive in your leadership approach.
- Build self-awareness and self-management skills. Know yourself. Talk to yourself in positive ways when you are fearful and face an unfamiliar challenge. Learning to manage self-criticism and labels like “not good at math” or “too emotional” will place unnecessary restrictions on you. If you are too hard on yourself, you will stop learning.
- Study and work hard in school. You can have a rich and interesting social life, but try to keep this social life in balance and remember not to lose yourself in the social scene.

### **Support**

- Study role models. In your community, school, and home, watch and study women and men in leadership roles. Most role models have one or two strengths we admire, and we can watch their actions and behaviors and incorporate some of these into our own style of leadership. You can also learn from negative role models. So take note of women and men who are not effective in their leadership positions. You can learn from them, too, and they will teach you what you do not want to do when in the role of leader.
- Ask for a mentor. Join organizations that offer mentoring relationships with young women. Take a learning approach to these relationships and come

prepared to meetings with questions, concerns, and ideas. Remember to thank your mentors for their help.

- Choose your friends. The values that permeate media emphasize beauty, appearance, and popularity. The pressure to fit in socially can be strong. Try to find friends who share your interests and the positive values you want to have as a basis for your own leadership.
- Rely on family. Parents and siblings know you best. Your family can provide a safe harbor when you need time to talk, when you feel too much pressure, when you are uncertain about what path to take. Keep communication open with those in your closest circle, ask for help when you need it, and let your family know your dreams and goals.

### **Commitment**

Developing leadership requires a focus on you, your talents, your experiences, and a disciplined commitment to learning.

There will never be another you, and the unique combination of your education, family experiences, values, dreams, ambitions, and experiences. You, alone, will decide what problems to solve, what ideas have value, and what needs you will address. If you commit to lifelong learning, you will know which call to answer. You will be ready to step up and take your place as leader.

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