

Rundown of Women and Leadership Conference 2014

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Background

In August of 2013, I would not have identified as a feminist. After attending the Women and Leadership conference in September 2013, I acknowledged myself as a feminist, one who advocates for women's rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality, but I still wasn't entirely comfortable with it due to the connotation of feminist being so contentious. The conference gave me so much information that it took a long time to adjust to a new way of thinking. I read a lot of articles and books during the following months and soon had no trouble calling myself a feminist. By the time I received my first notice of the 2014 Women and Leadership Conference, I was thrilled about being able to share my new passion in a friendly environment where women are all present to learn and support.

There were many incredible speakers, but three had messages that stood out to me. Admiral Michelle Howard spoke about **Pioneering Success** and gave five specific recommendations. Carla Harris, a managing partner of Morgan Stanley, gave a dynamic talk called **Expect to Win** where she shared four 'pearls' of wisdom. Dr. Caroline Heldman, from Occidental College's Department of Politics, shared information on **The Imposter Syndrome**, which struck home with most of the women present.

Pioneering Success

Admiral Howard shared her own stories as well of those who have come before to demonstrate her points. There are three steps of the journey: 1) Surviving 2) Building a home 3) Exchanging wisdom. Her five recommendations are as follows:

1. Commit to the Journey. The Admiral recommends that if you don't like something, change it, if you can't change it, then change your attitude. If you are passionate and can project it, you can bring others with you. Or more simply, fake it until you make it.
2. Travel light by letting the baggage go. Admiral Howard didn't speak much about modern baggage to let go. The way I can apply it to my life is that I won't carry around the heavy burdens on my shoulders. I can share the burden with others or drop them entirely.
3. Develop stamina. Admiral Howard emphasized a need for both physical and mental stamina in leadership. She added that teamwork is one of the best parts of leadership.
4. Keep a sense of humor. Don't forget your sense of humor and to keep a sense of yourself.
5. Stay connected to other women. The Admiral then compared the pioneer women who were isolated by location to the women who work in male dominated fields. The pioneer women would hold quilting bees, which weren't about quilts, but an opportunity to get together and exchange wisdom.

The connection to other women is what I've been working on this past year. Out of all of the Admiral's lessons, this one resonates with me the most. Being able to learn from a strong community of women who have walked in my shoes is valuable beyond all measure.

Expect to Win

Ms. Harris starts her speech by telling us that success is not a function of how smart you are and how hard you work. This is her main message and the 'pearls' she passes on are the ways to change the equation.

Pearl 1: Perception is the copilot to reality. Understand how you are perceived, know the adjectives for success in your role, and train people to think of you that way.

Pearl 2: You must be comfortable taking risks to be a leader. Fear has no place in your success equation. If your boss can't tell you what success is, you never have a chance of reaching it. At this point tell him what success is and you can play to that.

Pearl 3: You cannot do it alone. You need relationships with others in order to maximize your success.

Pearl 4: Authenticity. Do not submerge that which is uniquely you. Nobody can be you the way you can be you. Your authenticity is your distinct competitive advantage.

When Ms. Harris spoke about Pearl 3, she went into the differences between advisers, mentors, and sponsors. An adviser is anybody in your environment that has the intellect or experience to answer your questions. A mentor is someone that you know thoroughly and trust completely. They do not need to look like you or be in your organization, but they must understand the context of you and your work. A mentor should give you tailored advice when you share the good, the bad, and the ugly. A sponsor, on the other hand, is someone you only want to share the good with. This is the person who will argue on your behalf behind closed doors to further your career. The difference between these three roles was new to me and I am still working out who should be who in my career.

Ms. Harris closed out her discourse with the words, 'If you expect to win, you will.' I think that Carla Harris gave the most applicable advice I heard during the entire conference. She gave concrete examples of how to proceed in the workplace and I really cherish her words of guidance.

The Imposter Syndrome

Dr. Caroline Heldman defines the imposter syndrome as a psychological phenomenon in which people remain convinced that they are frauds and do not deserve the success they have achieved, despite external evidence of their competence. Dr. Heldman told us that women are disproportionately likely to suffer from the Imposter Syndrome and successful women in particular. Two out of five women in American culture think of themselves as frauds. None of this is to say that it does not affect men, it is just statistically more likely to affect women.

A few signs as to whether you suffer under the Imposter Syndrome are: a) you secretly worry that others will find out that you're not as bright and capable as they think you are, b) you sometimes shy

away from challenges because of nagging self-doubt, c) you tend to chalk your accomplishments up to being a "fluke," "no big deal," or the fact that people just "like" you, d) you hate making a mistake, being less than fully prepared or not doing things perfectly, e) you tend to feel crushed by even constructive criticism, seeing it as evidence of your "ineptness." The Impost Syndrome can be identified in many other ways as well.

Ways that I've recognized the Imposter Syndrome include only applying for jobs when I met 100% of the criteria, when later I found out that several of the engineers I was initially hired into only met about 60-80% of the 'requirements'. I also struggle to answer technical questions that I'm asked on the spot. Even when I know the correct answer, I prefer to go back to my notes and data before giving a definite answer.

Dr. Heldman speaks in depth about the systematic societal challenges that we face. This is incredibly fascinating and I'd love to transcribe it all here. Instead I'll highly recommend that you listen to the podcast from the conference. Please listen with an open mind, it may be hard for someone who hasn't suffered from the Imposter Syndrome to understand, but I am willing to talk about this at any time.

Dr. Heldman stated that recognizing the Imposter Syndrome is the best first step for overcoming it, but she warns that it will sneak back in when you're not watching. Here are five things you can do to help yourself:

1. Stop seeking outside validation; set your own standards and validate yourself.
2. Learn to internalize external validation; collect it as data for yourself.
3. Don't suffer in silence; Imposter Syndrome tends to isolate you from your peers.
4. Laugh at yourself, at the sexism, at the things that hurt you.
5. Look in an accurate mirror; recognize the credit you deserve for your work.

Conference

The conference in 2014 had definitely grown from the opening conference in 2013. They increased the length of the days and filled it with speakers. For me, focusing on the speakers was surprisingly draining and I was exhausted every evening. On the feedback forms I recommended that they add some workshops or even activity into the conference to break it up. They did attempt some networking and panels this year, but it was not very well organized. I think they will do a much better job next year with the feedback from 2014.

Conclusion

Both the 2013 and 2014 Women in Leadership Conferences intensified my awareness of the many aspects surrounding the political, social, and economic inequalities between the sexes. It's remarkable how succinctly you can see your own reflection in the obstacles women face when the speaker brings them to light. It's staggering to listen to a speaker and look around the room and realize that it is touching each and every woman there just as much as it touches your own life.

The annual conference is an incredible opportunity to rally with other women in a format tailored to educate and exchange ideas. Women have the perception of being competitive in the workplace, but

the mood at this conference is to boost up other women and help them stand in a world where men have the upper hand at every turn. This is one incredibly easy way that I have changed my manner at work. Previous to the conference, it wasn't something I thought of and my interactions with other women were quite neutral. Now I am actively trying to boost the other women at work to a higher level of confidence and the connection serves to bolster my own confidence as well.

I am so incredibly proud to become more knowledgeable and active about feminism. It has filled a gap in my life and I can see a change being made in the people around me. I am grateful for the opportunities to participate in these conferences and plan to attend in the future and I hope to impress the value of this conference on any who read this paper.