Voices of Women in the Field: Pearls of Wisdom

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As I look back on my career, I realize that so much has changed, but in some respects many things have stayed the same. When I was a novice in a leadership role, a mentor offered me what turned out to be sterling advice. Her words ring true to this day. Situations and tools of the trade change, but the basic principles of what she told me remain constant. Allow me to share my experiences “from the field” as a woman who has had a successful career in leadership.

Pearl of Wisdom #1

*A good leader understands herself and her followers.* A good leader is confident in her knowledge of herself: both her gifts and talents and areas she is not so strong in. A good leader is also able to discern this information about her employees or those with whom she works. This leader will play to her strengths and will recruit assistance from those who have strengths in her own areas that are not as strong in order to compliment her abilities.

There are many tools available to analyze these aspects of personality. Perhaps the most well known is the Meyers-Briggs personality inventory, but it is long and cumbersome. An easier tool that is quick and group-friendly is the Emergentetics Profile. We use it for all new employees. Its four components are related to preferred thinking styles, which are Logical (blue), Structured (green), Conceptual (yellow), and Social (red). “Preferred way of thinking” refers to the main thought processes that a person automatically turns to when considering a dilemma or contemplating an action. When people understand that there are differences in thought processes, frustration over people who “don’t do things the way I do” disappears (The Browning Group, 1991).

As a leader, you may be in a position to design work groups. Take care to select people from each of the four categories to ensure a group that functions comprehensively. You may also be in a position to create work incentives or rewards. Use knowledge of your co-workers’ preferred thinking styles to choose rewards and incentives that are meaningful. Knowing your colleagues’ preferred thinking styles can create harmony in working relationships as well. As an example, my colleagues are heavily “red.” I, in contrast, have very little red in my profile. However, I do understand how fulfilling social interaction and recognition are to my colleagues and go out of my way to accommodate this. The result is a group of coworkers who feel...
that I care very deeply about them, which I do, but left to my own devices, my way of showing that I care would not resonate with them.

Pearl of Wisdom #2
*Have great role models!* Everyone needs at least one great role model to emulate, not copy. And women in leadership need female role models. In the past, women in leadership positions were expected to dress, talk, and act like men. Happily that is mostly changed now. But we still have some ground to cover. Be female, but be strong. Be fierce! Choose a role model who broke ground and use that as an inspiration to be the best person and leader you can be. My personal role model is Bella Abzug. Bella broke the mold of women who were expected to stay home, have babies, and cook and tend to the house. Well, she did tend to the house: the House of Representatives! She dressed in a signature style that was distinctive without being outlandish and she was a champion of human rights long before Bono made fighting for human rights fashionable (Jewish Women’s Archive, 2005). Choose someone whose ideals and values are close to your own. And then act like you are someone else’s role model . . . you probably are!

Pearl of Wisdom #3
*Mak e your followers look good.* Everyone likes credit and recognition. Chances are, if you are a woman in leadership who “looks good” to others, you have people working under you and with you who have contributed to your success and reputation. Take time to acknowledge and thank them. It shouldn’t be just you-know-what that rolls downhill. Credit for a job well done should travel faster than disappointment and should reach those who deserve it quickly.

Pearl of Wisdom #4
*Have a clear and direct communication style.* I believe that miscommunication is the root of the majority of the day-to-day problems women in leadership encounter. People tend to have very poor listening skills in general, and unfortunately there are also those who choose not to listen well, either so they can “get out of” doing something, or even because
they use misunderstanding as a modus operandi to sabotage someone else. So choose your words carefully. Say what you mean and mean what you say. And don’t use too many words; no one wants to listen to endless talking. I have found it very useful to follow up any important conversation with either an email or written note summarizing what was discussed. When communication ends with an agreement for someone to follow through with an action, I find it helpful to include that information along with a timeline of when I’ll be checking back.

Pearl of Wisdom #5

Be able to change leadership styles as the situation warrants. Obviously, if you are in a leadership position, you should have a good understanding of leadership theory, including different styles of leadership. Now is the time to commit to “upping the bar” and learning to finesse what you know. First you must have a clear understanding of your usual management style. But then you also have to know when it works and when a change is needed. Be flexible and knowledgeable enough to change as the situation dictates. This also takes a great deal of confidence in both yourself and in your followers who will have to make the adjustment right as you make the change.

Let me offer you an example. When I was the Dean of Nursing at Broadwater University in the late 90s, the university was struck by a tornado. As it would happen, I was the senior leadership person on campus because the president and all the vice presidents were attending a strategic planning conference in Hawaii. My usual style of leadership is very collegial; I like to have input from multiple sources and time to mull over decisions, taking everyone’s interests into consideration. However, this time of crisis was not the time for collaborative leadership. The situation required “command leadership”. Someone had to take control of the situation immediately, ensure safety, activate the disaster plan, deal with the media that descended upon our campus, and marshal resources. That person was me. I could not afford to use time functioning in a collegial fashion. I had to give direction and expect follow through. Fortunately, within just a day, things on campus were stabilized and I could return to my normal style of leadership. I had established working teams to deal with various problems on the campus as a result of the tornado, and now I could take the time to listen to input before making decisions again.

Now you may never encounter a situation as dramatic as this, but there will be times in your career when your usual style of leadership does not work. Understanding the dynamics of the situation and being able to alter your leadership style can make the difference between an issue that never goes away and one that gets resolved in a timely and satisfactory manner.

Pearl of Wisdom #6

Use proven tools for conflict mediation and negotiation. Unfortunately, conflict is a fact of life in the workplace. However, there are tools a skilled
leader can use to resolve conflict. One of the best is called Radical Collaboration.

Radical Collaboration (Tamm & Luyet, 2005) is great for women in leadership because women are socialized to exist in relationship (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarule, 1986/1997). RC’s primary goal is to maintain climates of trust that enable the continuation of long-term relationships (Tamm & Luyet, 2005). Think about it . . . can you envision a situation where two parties are either negotiating something or trying to resolve a conflict in a setting of total isolation from each other? I bet you can’t. In reality, parties to conflict and/or negotiation exist in long-term relationships with each other. Those relationships need to be nurtured, not beaten down. In RC, you are trained to recognize the interests of the other party and to use that information during the process. You are also trained to recognize signs in yourself that indicate you are becoming defensive, the first step in becoming hostile and non-collegial. Using a proven tool like RC can help the woman in leadership diffuse anger and frustration and nurture those relationships that are so vital.

Pearl of Wisdom #7

Know when to say, “I don’t know” and “I’m sorry”. No one knows everything and no one is right all the time. So don’t try to bluff your way past this one. If you don’t know something say so, but then find out the answer. When you are wrong, apologize. People will respect the person who is confident enough to do both. When you refuse to admit you don’t know something or that you were wrong, you look incompetent and rigid. People can see right through you on this. So practice saying these two phrases out loud and use them when they are needed!

I have had a wonderful career as a woman in leadership in nursing education. I have found these tips invaluable and constant throughout the years. Good luck to you in your career and I hope you get as much out of my old mentor’s words as I have.

References:


