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Voices of Women in the Field

Great Discoveries and Painful-at-the-Time Mistakes

Shari Cole Hoffman

My professional career has varied in leadership experiences. Unlike women who are coming of age today in leadership positions, I never had a “plan” for my professional career moves. I simply went about selecting the next interesting opportunity. Looking back, this may not have always been in my best interest, but I certainly had a full life of experiences because of this serendipitous approach.

Here are some ideas I learned along the way. In some cases, they were great discoveries. However, in most cases, they were painful-at-the-time mistakes that turned into life lessons.

- Your peers *do* have political agendas, even if you don't. I used to think, “Let's just work together ...” I assumed we shared the same purpose and wanted what was good for the organization, the team, or the students. Wrong. Some peers do not share this belief and use whatever means necessary to advance in the organization, to be on top, or to be the best. Being cognizant of the motivation of others will help keep a healthy perspective.
- Relationship building in a leader is finally appreciated. For years, women were subtly encouraged to abandon their “soft skills” and to focus on developing problem - solving capacities. It seems that the skills of caring about others, participating in personal conversations, and listening to someone vent are prized. Today organizations encourage that type of leadership behavior because it promotes a collaborative environment, which is what most women thought all along. Now that I am closer to retirement, I am finally a good fit for what is desired in a leader.
- Have the courage to initiate necessary but difficult conversations. This used to be the toughest leadership responsibility for me. Nevertheless, I have learned being brief, kind and considerate during these uncomfortable times allows others to maintain dignity despite the message.

About the Author

Shari Cole Hoffman is a Ph.D. candidate and graduate research assistant at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her specialization is Educational Leadership. She has held faculty and administrative leadership roles in the K-12 system for 20 years. At the community-college level, she has extensive experience in institutional planning, quality improvement, and accreditation. Email: shoffman@bigred.unl.edu

- It is OK to say, “I don’t know.” We expect leaders to always have the definitive answer. That is unrealistic. When I have admitted aloud that I didn’t know, possibilities crept into conversations and I learned more from those “what if” discussions.
- If you think they don’t like you, they probably don’t. Cut your losses and find the next great adventure. Women tend to be more intuitive about reading between the lines. I stayed in a position for sixteen years, sure I was misreading the unspoken messages. One day unexpectedly, I decided to move on and didn’t look back. When a door closes, life gets scary in the hallway before the next door opens. Nevertheless, it will open. If not, just keep hammering away to create your own window of opportunity.
- Only follow a leader whose vision you support. I have worked for leaders who lacked vision or direction and I was miserable. I discovered how important it is for me to follow a leader with vision. I also discovered I have to buy in to the vision to stay. The leader’s vision was a daily inspiration for coming to work. I was excited to see how my day unfolded under this type of leadership.
- When good leaders go, you might consider going too. I used to think this was not necessarily true, that one should stay with the organization for the sake of the organization. I am not so sure anymore. In three of my professional experiences, poor leaders followed strong ones. The disappointments were overwhelming at times. It was tough on the new leaders too. Sometimes, it is in everyone’s best interests if you quietly move on too.
- Admit when you make a mistake. Not only is it the right thing to do, it diffuses the criticism quickly. It also moves the focus from the problem to the solution by following with a question, “What do I need to do to make it right?” In most cases, minor repairs solve the problem.

- Find someone you admire and want to emulate and ask them to become your mentor. Meet with them periodically to make you accountable for your professional growth. They will push you relentlessly and question your actions or decisions. A mentor is also someone to think aloud with and share ideas. However, be very selective in picking a mentor. They have the capacity to significantly influence your future.
- Almost every position I thoroughly enjoyed and grew from, I almost didn't accept because the positions did not fit my vision of the perfect job. In two cases, I stumbled upon them. What I learned is to be open-minded when pursuing a job, especially if it is a career change. These two initial positions eventually evolved into what I valued professionally. Had I not been flexible and open to possibilities, I would have missed these growing experiences.
- Schedule time each day on your calendar for one creative act. Most days we get so caught up in putting out fires, we forget to exercise other strengths. You deserve creative playtime. Review your job description to see if you were hired to be creative in some way. If not, find another job. If you are to be imaginative, give them their money's worth and play.
- It is important to be at the job 100% when you are there. Make sure you get enough rest, establish an exercise routine, and eat right so you can do your job. Leave work when it is time to leave. Consistently staying late and taking work home may be a clue that your time management skills need adjusting.
- My job does not define who I am. It used to, when I was younger. Today, it is a rich addition to a full life, but it does not complete my life.