

Developing Women Leaders: Five factors that matter

There are five universal factors that, no matter where people are, where they are from, or what sector they are in, make a real difference in encouraging young women to reach success.

Though they are prone to credit luck for their success, it is mostly hard work and perseverance that brings women to the top of their field, be they artists, scientists, entrepreneurs or academics. These are the women who never settle for the mediocre, are perpetually restless and striving, and who know that real success can only be found by crossing time zones, cultures, and cruising through stop signs.

The most successful women in the world have grabbed every opportunity afforded to them, and have created opportunities for themselves, harnessing their fears and doubts as rocket fuel instead of rocks in their pockets.

The factors that contribute to the development of the next generation of women leaders can be gleaned from their experiences.

Some of the characteristics of successful people, such as motivation, natural curiosity, courage, self-management, enjoying being stretched and rising to a challenge, personal will and fortitude, drive, and flexibility may be innate, but there is no doubt that these characteristics also need to be nurtured and encouraged.

Five factors stand out that help to support developing women leaders. Not particularly costly or demanding, they have proven to be very effective.

1. Basic Skills

There are certain basic skills that everyone should be given access to beyond the standard education. We need to ensure that young women have access to building these skills that help them move to success early in their careers. These include public speaking, writing, negotiation, and effective networking. People might have nature skills in some of these areas, but if not, then seeking out courses and opportunities to practice these skills is worthwhile. Also, some employers will give women access to courses in these areas through career development opportunities, but that can often be in their mid-career, and it is actually more valuable and impactful if it started earlier on. If these are not forthcoming from work, they are worth seeking out independently.

2. International Exposure

Travel brings an invaluable exposure to other cultures and ways of thinking. It is essential for advancement in any profession, even in those that seem local, cloistered, or sheltered. This is particularly the case as the world becomes increasingly globally interdependent and actions that occur in a place that seems far away, inevitably affect, directly or indirectly, everyone. International experiences challenge thinking and certainty in a way that can be very healthy. The skills that come from living and working in unfamiliar settings are valuable in themselves, and so are the experiences that can be gleaned from seeing how other cultures deal with issues. It forces people to think outside the box and challenge them to find, and apply, solutions beyond their comfort zones.

3. Mentoring

Mentoring plays a big role in developing any career. It is important, though, to distinguish what kinds of efforts are most useful at different stages of career development. At different points in a person's career, they need different types of mentoring. The needs for mentoring change from student years, to the first years out of school, to mid-career, to the most senior career positions.

- Student Years

During student years, meeting, shadowing, personal exposure to senior figures in the field all help to inspire young women to aspire to something greater. It helps to be able to see what success looks like in any given field, and to get a sense of accessibility. Seeing the fruits of hard work and hearing the stories of career paths – more often than not, anything but linear ones – can help inspire young women. Access to as many people as possible, in as many fields as possible, helps to open up the vast horizons of opportunity that are available. It can spark the imagination of young people about where their paths can take them. University alumnae networks are useful – and alumnae returning to speak openly about their experiences can make a real difference by making success accessible.

- First-Third Jobs

The early period in a person's career is a time of exploration, of further learning, and of discovering career options, preferences, and interests. During this period, it is most useful to have exposure to a wide array of people in a chosen profession and perhaps to create a group of “go-to” people where a young woman can seek advice and ideas and begin to hone her ideas on her true career path. These mentors can be found many places – speakers who inspire, professionals who are admired, colleagues and managers who they know well. People are often receptive and flattered by emails – it never hurts to try.

- Mid-Career

It is helpful to have networks as a means of meeting people in their field and getting to know like-minded and like-skilled people. Equally, if not more important for individual development, is having one or two people who know the individual well and can help to council them directly and specifically about options, choices and direction and concrete ways of achieving goals. This can be a vitally effective means of creating clear paths for career development.

- Career Success

The years when women are at the top of their careers are a time of consolidation, solidification and fulfilment. It is a time when women can stretch themselves or get greater depth in areas of interest – for example, in business that can be directorships, in politics it can be senior policy making or influencing positions. Mentoring one another via peer relationships and networks can be very effective and satisfying. Having a close group of trusted friends and peers who can be frank, generous, and root for each other's success can be the thing that helps bring the goals that seem distant even at this point much more achievable.

4. Role Models

Role models are an extraordinarily fruitful way to inspire women to aspire to great things. Role models can be found close to home or in the people around them, as well as in those at a distance - seen only through the news even in faraway places.

There are two kinds of role models: first, those who help us to think about the kind of people we want to be through examples of kindness, fortitude, courage, bravery, integrity, and other admirable characteristics, displayed equally by women and men, in their everyday lives and in the way they conduct themselves in the workplace. Second, there are those who help us to aspire to roles that perhaps we've not thought of before or not encountered personally, particularly for young women – heads of state, heads of multinational corporations, leaders in political, cultural, or social movements. Seeing women in particular, anywhere in the world, succeeding in an ever widening array of roles helps inspire young women to broaden their expectation for their own possibilities.

It is vital to openly and publicly acknowledge and celebrate the work that women leaders do around the world. It is important to recognize the critical roles that women have played in developing societies and economies. By highlighting this work, it begins to help countries, societies, and companies realize that this is not unusual, but rather that it should be the norm. It also helps to bring to light the ways in which these women have made the journey to their positions and make that journey more accessible.

5. Starting Early

We need to start early to make sure girls know they are capable of reaching great heights. It starts in the youngest years of their schooling with words of encouragement and aspiration. Equally important is ensuring that boys and young men absorb these messages both openly and through example. Even the most closed societies and cultures have the ability to make shifts over the generations and if we begin to change the mindsets of girls and boys alike.

Creating an environment where women can succeed is vital. Public policy that encourages women to be successful, workplaces that reward for encouraging and advancing women, education systems that educate women to the highest standards are just some of the things that are needed to help create an environment in which women are prepared and encouraged to rise to leadership.

Never settling, always being driven, and always seeking new experiences – these are the hallmarks of the most senior women, and indeed the most senior men, in the world. We must all play a part in helping them succeed, as our countries, economies, and futures depend on their success.

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