

“How to Become a Leader and Stay True to Yourself”

**Texas Diversity Council
Women in Leadership Symposium**

**Keynote Address
by
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Thank you, Alice.

This has been a wonderful morning. How lucky you are to get such insight from these very powerful women – each with her own journey and experiences.

When I talk to you today, remember it's from my personal experiences and choices, including the industry I've worked in. Very male, very conservative. Having said that, let's go back to where you started this morning.

- What is leadership?
- Where do you want to take your career?
- Which path do you take when your road forks between the fast track and family?
- Who do you turn to for advice?
- When will there be no more talk of a “glass ceiling” impeding the rise of women up the corporate ladder?
- How does a woman become a leader in a corporate culture dominated by men without sacrificing her own authenticity?

FROM CARHOP TO COO: A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

To address these questions, I'd like to take you on my journey. You might discover some answers along the way.

Some of you, like me, may be nearer to the end than the beginning of your career journey. You may have answered some of these questions . . . and then asked them again.

Others of you have just begun.

My journey hasn't been a leisure trip – at least in the early years – it was a matter of survival.

I grew up on the sandy beaches of St. Petersburg, Florida. Spent my summers in the mountains of the Blue Ridge with my grandparents. My dad died when I was seven; my mom died when I was in my early twenties. Survival skills kicked in early for me.

The matriarch of my mother's side of the family was my aunt Nan. She was a very strong woman. Strong willed, proud, a perfectionist, never satisfied, always pushing us, as children, to do better.

As a young girl, I hated her. Little did I know how much she really shaped my life.

She was my first boss.

She was a business woman. She owned and operated the drive-in theater in Mount Airy, North Carolina.

When I was twelve, I began working as a carhop at my aunt's drive-in. She was very hard to please. I never chopped the slaw small enough or peeled the potatoes fast enough. I can still hear her say, "Georgianna, I know you can do better than that."

Today she's 91 years old, and the Bright Leaf Drive-In theater has been written up in national publications as one of only a handful that's still operating today.

Now when I look back at my professional growth, I see her influence. She taught me a lot about working through hardship.

Later I had another job that changed my life forever. Renting cars at Avis. If you were around in the early 70s, then you remember the red hot pants and go-go boots that were my uniform.

Then one day I had an epiphany. I looked in the mirror and said to myself: "I'm not sure if this is gonna look good at fifty."

I had begun the journey to discover myself. Who I wanted to be ... but more clearly, who I didn't want to be.

If you don't know who you are or what you want, you need to find out. That's what the journey is all about.

Everybody has their own way of finding out who they are. But if you don't find yourself, don't make your own choices, don't live your own life, in the end you'll discover that money and power don't buy happiness and the sacrifice you made was your self.

I married right out of high school. I didn't go to college right away. Not until I was 25 – divorced and with a little girl to support.

I realized that if I wanted to change the path of my life and my child's life, I needed to get an education.

After two years at the local community college and another year at the University of South Florida, I got my degree.

And I remarried. Thirty-two years later, we're still together. But consistent with my life, it's in a non-traditional way. He retired last year. He lives in Florida, and I'm continuing my career in Houston. It works for us. You see men reach crossroads too, and his heartstrings pulled him back to be a grandpa. And he's a great one.

You see, change is constant.

But let's get back to the late 70s: Florida was in a recession, much like Houston in the 80s, and we had a hard time finding work.

I was still living in the house I was raised in when we decided to pack up our family, including our cat, Sam, with a cast on his leg (car accident), our last two hundred dollars and all our possessions in a U-haul and headed west. It was just like the Beverly Hillbillies.

I-10 never saw so many tears. The floodgates really opened when we hit Baytown. Remember, my world, although somewhat poor, was sandy beaches and Blue Ridge mountains. I didn't know any place in America like Baytown.

Life was never the same – you see, life is simple when you don't have choices. You just do what you have to - to survive.

It's choices that make life more difficult, but it's also what makes it great.

I didn't want the simple life.

WORK / LIFE BALANCE

The question working women – young and old – most often ask me is “how do you balance a career and personal life?”

Whatever choices you make, you need balance to keep you grounded, to stay true to yourself.

Make time for family, friends and interests outside work. Especially as women, we need these relationships and activities to keep work life in perspective.

But we can't always have it all.

My generation of working women thought we could be all things to all people all of the time.

Once you realize there is no Superwoman, you have to decide where you want to compromise.

What can you sacrifice? Maybe you buy the birthday cake instead of bake it. You're not a bad mother if you don't sew your kid's Halloween costume. You don't have to stay up all night making puppets out of her lunch sacks.

If you do choose to have children, they demand a big part of your life. You are responsible for them – at least until they're old enough to move off your payroll.

Staying home is a viable choice. My daughter was a latch-key kid. As a mother, she wanted to be at home for her kids. So she is. Her family has made financial sacrifices to live the life they choose.

Other women are taking time off to raise children after first getting a leg up in their career.

Family dynamics certainly have changed since I entered the workforce when child-rearing was mostly considered “woman’s work.”

Nowadays, in dual-working couples, husbands are taking a bigger role raising their kids than their fathers did. Some men are leaving successful careers to be stay-at-home dads.

But before I get too far off, let’s get back to my story.

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

Not long after we arrived in Houston in 1978, I got my first real professional job as a power consultant at Houston Lighting & Power – the maiden name of CenterPoint Energy.

When I started with the company, I worked for the most unsympathetic, difficult, un-personable boss.

He was great.

He wasn’t abusive; he just wanted perfection.

One really nice thing about him – especially for that day and age – he was absolutely blind to color and gender. He believed in equal opportunity. He was tough on everybody.

What he looked for in an employee was guts. The courage to challenge him and challenge yourself. He knew I could do things I didn’t know I could do. He constantly challenged me out of my comfort zone.

Because of him, I really grew professionally. Like my aunt, he gave me fortitude.

Another boss was a more conscious mentor.

He prompted me to think strategically by asking tough questions . . . and waiting around for my answers. He was a rare leader who invited discussion. He would create moments of debate to challenge my thinking.

In many ways, I’ve patterned my leadership style after him. Primarily in fostering discussion and empowering others.

As a southerner, I'm uncomfortable being loud, boisterous or aggressive. My style is to speak out of conviction.

I like to describe it this way As a lone woman among men, I came into my company's leadership through the back door, walked through the house, and took my seat at the table. They didn't really notice I was there until I had already influenced the discussion.

It worked for me because I understood the culture I was in. And you will have to understand the culture you're in.

Today it can remain a challenge for working women to transcend gender stereotypes and be taken seriously by their male peers.

My advice? Don't try to be a man.

When I was coming up in my career, young women wishing to climb the corporate ladder often tried to be like men, to think like men, dress like men.

It doesn't work because as soon as you try to be something you're not, you lose credibility. If you aren't true to yourself, people won't really like you, believe you, or trust you.

If you want to be taken seriously – by men and women – project your authentic self. Stand up straight, hold your head high, speak in a clear, strong voice and make your presence felt, not always just heard.

Don't oversell yourself. Know when to be quiet. If you talk too much, you may turn your advantage into a disadvantage. I see women do it every day.

Trust me, they heard you. They just won't tell you they heard. They may even take your ideas as their own – consciously or not.

Get over it. It's the privilege of being your boss.

Your peers will do it too. It still happens to me.

There are a lot of ways to be heard. It doesn't have to be in a staff meeting or public forum. You can make your ideas known in private through one-on-one, face-to-face discussions or by e-mail.

People tend to be more comfortable and forthcoming in private, and sometimes a written communication, such as e-mail, gives the writer and reader a chance to think things over without an immediate response.

A word of caution: don't assume that e-mails will remain private. It takes one click to hit Forward.

When it comes to war, pick your battles carefully. Many issues that seem big are in fact petty, and if you fight the small stuff, you'll be the one who looks bad.

Nurture your soft side, but hang tough in your convictions. Be a Steel Magnolia.

My early mentors helped me get started in my career, but it was up to me to chart my own path.

There were no female role models then. Now, look around this room, each one of us is a role model for other females.

Having gotten a late start, (after all, I didn't even start my professional career until I was 30) I wanted stability. I knew I wouldn't achieve financial stability by job hopping from employer to employer. So I sought broad experience within the company.

Throughout my career, I have networked across departments. I let it be known that I wanted opportunities to grow.

And over the years, I made some untraditional moves. At one time I was in Customer Relations and wanted to move to Electric Operations.

I went to the V.P. of Operations, introduced myself and said "I want to work for you. I'm not an engineer. I'm not a lineman. But if there's some way I can help you, let me know."

I never thought anything would come of it, but lo and behold if he didn't call and say, "I can't let you run one of our crews, but you can lead the Contractor Relations office."

Today it's my good fortune to be President of the company.

And I am where I am today because of such networking and initiative.

Don't wait until you're unhappy to expand your knowledge, build relationships and create options.

Don't be afraid to ask for things. Be honest and be diplomatic about it and don't expect to get EVERYTHING you ask for, but you'll be surprised what can happen.

There's nothing wrong with sharing your desire for opportunities. It's not disloyalty. It's about growth.

When you are faced with choices is when you most need to be true to yourself.

Ask yourself, "Who am I? What are my strengths? How can I make a difference?"

Not everyone is a leader. Some folks don't really want to manage a bunch of people. And that's O.K. Don't try to be something you're not. If you're striving to be CEO, but you don't have passion for it, you probably won't get there and you wouldn't be effective if you did.

Do you have knowledge, expertise, and passion for a supporting role? Corporations need to recognize and reward individual expertise. We depend on staff members, and good ones deserve to be rewarded.

Success is not a position on an org chart.

Find out what you want to do, then do your very best. No one but you can shape your life. Happiness is being true to yourself.

You may decide to step off the corporate ladder. Start your own business.

My son didn't go to college. He started his own business, worked his tail off, and now he's as successful as any executive in my company. He has a family, he sets his own schedule, and he sleeps well at night.

If you do want to be a leader, you need broad knowledge. Know your company, know your competition.

A WORD OF CAUTION

A word of caution: *nobody owes you anything.*

To get to the top, you have to work really, really, really hard. Punching in your 40 hours a week alone won't cut it. You have to be exceptional.

If you choose to focus exclusively on your family, it may slow your rise to the top. And if it does, you need to accept that reality and go forward. If you want to be a corporate CEO, you're going to have to make it your life.

Each one of us has to define what having it all means. And it can mean different things to different women.

I think all of us must understand: *if we're unhappy with where we are in life, it's not our company's fault.*

To wake up nearing the end of a career and blame your company for your choices is misplaced frustration. It's human nature to get in a rut. It's easy to stay in an unsatisfying position because you're afraid of the unknown. You've chosen to stay safe.

But we all have free will. We always have choices.

If things aren't working the way you want, you can always move on. Your heart will know when it's time.

But you have to take the initiative.

After a few years, I left my company. Then five years later, I came back.

Of course, I'd like to have that five years added to my retirement. But in reality I wouldn't trade that five years of different experiences for anything because it helped me get where I am today.

As I've said, this is my experience, from my perspective. Your experience will be and is different. As the next generation takes leadership roles, they will change the environment at work and home.

Senior executives are younger today. They are more educated. Many go straight for their MBA after getting their bachelor's. They are more ambitious with higher expectations.

I hear young women say, "I want to be an executive in five years. And if it doesn't happen here, I'll go somewhere else."

But in the rush for degrees and titles, don't underestimate real-world experience and wisdom. Sometimes, these are more effective than education.

As younger leaders, both men and women, move into the executive suite, I think they'll build organizations that better accommodate families and life outside work.

But today you have to ask. The envelope doesn't push itself.

THE VIEW FROM THE TOP – NOW WHAT?

So, you've finally made it to the top, now what? What do you do with the power?

First, and foremost, you have to meet the needs of your customers, shareholders, employees and community. Being competent is a given.

As a leader, you must inspire others to understand and pursue your common vision. If you want to be a *leader* and not a *dictator*, it's best to use persuasion rather than coercion. That way you empower subordinates to achieve results on the power of their own conviction.

You don't have to be the best, the brightest, the most articulate. You can't do it alone. That's why you have subordinates. Trust and empower them.

Surround yourself with good people. Build teams with strengths that complement each other. Harness the power of people's unlocked potential.

Respect for others is a powerful leadership tool. Basic professionalism goes a long way. Make people comfortable. Be non-threatening. Don't cut them off. Listen!

Meet with your people, listen to them, gather collective ideas to drive collective action.

This is a very "female" style, but it's not to say some males don't have it. There are even books written about how women make better managers.

But don't just trust the authors, trust your own intuition.

Often you won't have all the information you need to make a decision. All else being equal, go with your gut.

Even when others say you're wrong, your intuition often knows best. There's a time to build consensus, and there's a time to earn your paycheck. Sometimes you have to make a decision and be firm.

If you make a mistake, make a bold mistake, and learn from it. Never stop learning, never stop growing. Keep building value for your company and your life.

As I close my remarks today – I ask the question again. What is leadership?

I believe leadership is making a difference in the lives of others. That's the most satisfying aspect of my job.

Seek out the potential in others that they themselves may not recognize. It may be a project, a promotion, or a degree. If you know they can do it, challenge them. Don't do it for them, but don't set them up for failure. Help people succeed.

Change the course of a family's life. That's powerful. That's leadership.

Can a woman become a leader and stay true to herself?

I believe there's no other way.