

Sandra Davis shares advice for women and aspiring leaders

Having worked alongside, and coached, and cheered on so many women in leadership during my career here at MDA, I decided to record a few lessons learned from their and my experiences. Hopefully these words might be a catalyst for you to aspire, persist, claim your power, and immerse yourself in great learning experiences.

Just say “yes.” One of the first female NCAA athletic directors said two things: “If you have been in sports, use that teamwork experience to translate into leading on the job” and “When someone comes and asks you to take on something that you feel might be a bit beyond you, just say ‘yes.’”

Raise your hand. I have seen many capable women leaders hesitate to promote themselves for a particular job, believing that their hard work and capabilities will be obvious to decision makers. When they do say “Oh, that’s a job I would like and be good at,” the response is sometimes, unfortunately, “Wow, I had no idea you might be interested.”

Show confidence before the fact. Now this trait is not just limited to women, but we are more likely to be held back by a belief that confidence follows proof. So until I have learned and proved my skills, I can’t be confident. But saying “yes” often requires confidence before the fact. Yes, I have 70% of the skills now and I’m confident that I can learn what I need to learn on the job.

Act as if. This is one I used early on in my own career. I can remember one of the first times I walked into a corporate boardroom to present as the “external expert.” I was so nervous. I kept thinking “What if, what if?” But then I recalled my acting days. So how would someone who has confidence walk into a boardroom? How would she interact and present? I chose to act as if I was that confident person, and after a few times my nervousness mostly disappeared. I don’t have to act out how I feel inside. I can project myself externally the way I want to be.

Own your power. Isn’t it funny how the word “power” can cause a negative reaction in some? “Oh, I don’t want power” . . . as if it’s something to be avoided. If you want to lead, you need to be comfortable with the fact that your title and your aspirations will put you in a position of power. I like to think of it as a place from which I can have an impact, change lives, help people grow, and achieve a purpose that has meaning for them. I like that kind of power.

Step outside your comfort zone. Maybe you have grown up in Finance, HR, Law or Marketing and are comfortable in your zone of expertise. Yet if you want to lead more broadly in an organization, you need experience outside of your comfort zone. Many women who have become General Managers or Business Leaders or CEOs made lateral moves into Operations or Customer Service or other areas of the business, so they could learn the organization from a different perspective. Take a risk. Branch out.

Create a growth network. Just find two or three individuals who are willing to be part of your leadership journey. It’s kind of a personal board of directors. These are individuals you can come to for career advice, for ideas about how to navigate political waters, and for support. They can be a great sounding board, and individually you can count on them to listen to you.



Give a hand to other women. A woman I admire, who served as CEO of a manufacturing company, talked about how we need to do all we can to help other women. Those other women are also on career journeys. It's not just about me. She often repeated the words of Madeleine Albright: "There is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women."

I hope something from these words of wisdom acts as a catalyst for you. I can't wait to celebrate your accomplishments.