

What I Learned

Whether they're running universities, political campaigns or major corporations, these 11 remarkable women have found their own ways of overcoming obstacles.

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President, the University of Pennsylvania

I've had terrific male and female mentors, some of whom surprised me by taking an interest in me and my work. Some people think that mentors are people who sit down and give you advice on how to succeed. I don't think that's the way the best mentors work. I think the best mentors are people who are talent scouts and show you how to succeed by modeling it themselves and being supportive of very talented people. I feel that when I am launching talent myself, I am doing something that is not only good but was also essential to my own success.

I was a university professor for two decades, and I have former graduate students who are now professors at major universities all over the world. It gives me great satisfaction to have helped launch these amazingly accomplished people.

At Penn, half of my executive team and deans are women—not because I set out to have women, but because I hired the most talented, hardworking people. So many women in these jobs would not have been conceivable when I started out in academia. I have women running my computer operation, my budget operation, my police force. My deans of the veterinary school, arts and sciences, and nursing are all women. That's a revolution in academic life.

Janet Murguia

President and CEO, National Council of La Raza

Public service is still a noble calling, and it is an incredible opportunity to make a positive difference. When I got out of law school, I didn't mind starting as a legislative assistant, even though I was making very little money. You need to get the experience and learn. You have to be patient. You have to be willing to work through a few stages before you get to the exact ideal job that you want. I run across a lot of young people, and they immediately want to be in that ideal job. You don't want to discourage them from chasing their dreams. But there is a road, and you have to be willing to follow that road and overcome obstacles.

My parents came to this country with no money and very little education. There were nine of us, my mom and my dad and seven of us kids, in a small house. Coming from a big family helped when I worked on Capitol Hill. I knew how to deal with people who I didn't agree with and who didn't agree with me. That means working with Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, and building coalitions to help accomplish your objectives.

You do ultimately have to have a moral compass. For me, it is the ideals and values that my parents passed along to me when I was young. A belief in opportunity and the American Dream have all come together as values that define who I am. My dad never had a brand-new car. When he retired, he was making \$18,000 a year; that was the most money he ever made. These are parents who scrimped, who sacrificed, who put in overtime. We wanted to honor their sacrifices by pursuing our education. Six of the seven of us have postsecondary degrees.

I'll never forget taking my parents into the Oval Office when I worked in the White House. My dad, standing up so straight and proud, stuck his hand out to meet President Clinton and said, "Thank you for giving my daughter this opportunity." And President Clinton said, "I hired Janet, and she walked you into this office, but you're the ones who got her here." I know the power of the American Dream, and I want to be able to give that to others.

Donna Orender

President, WNBA

When I was young, I loved sports because of my dad. He read the sports pages and he loved the New York Mets. I thought if I could talk to him about that, I would be connected to him. But at a certain age, my parents grew concerned that their young daughter was so engaged with sports. I played stickball on the street with the boys, and my dad said, "OK, enough." It was kind of an awkward discussion: "You've been a tomboy, but starting tomorrow, you'll be a girl." I continued to play stickball, but when I heard my dad's car coming, I would sit on the curb. My dad would pull in the driveway and I would say, "I'm just sitting here cheering, Dad."

Now I see that everything I've had the opportunity to do began in sports. Being a competitive athlete gave me a

sense of myself—of accomplishment, commitment and achievement—that has sustained me every step of the way. I played, ultimately at a high level, at a time when most women didn't play sports. I learned that your choices can put you in places that are not in the mainstream, and that impacts how you deal with other people, how you deal with yourself and how other people look at you.

It is because of those experiences that I was able to move from working at the PGA Tour, the center of male professional sports, to the WNBA, which really is the iconic brand for women's professional sports. I had the strength of my convictions and I knew what was right for me—much as when I was a young girl, I felt I deserved to compete.

As a professional athlete, I always felt that I was part of a unique group of individuals on this planet who get paid to play a sport. I knew that the experience of competing on that high level would take me wherever I wanted to go. I also knew that it allowed me to compete in a male world. Many of these guys were sports wanna-bes. Well, I wasn't a wanna-be.

As a leader, you have to recognize that you are a touchstone for people around you. They look to you for so many different cues about how they should be feeling about issues. You have to have the ability to convey that you have command of a situation (even if you don't).

I do think there are gender differences in leadership. In general, what you find is that women are much more collegial and team-builders, not as hierarchal. That's a good thing. We are wired differently. We are socialized differently. Why do companies prize diversity? It's that healthy mix that gives you a broader spectrum of what's important.

Ethel Person

Psychiatrist and author

I think the journey is always interesting if it's taking us somewhere, although you may have to navigate around some dead ends—jobs where bosses don't support or encourage you. At each stage of my life, I have been very lucky to have special mentors. It is important to have a mentor—a relationship in which a more experienced person treats a younger person with respect. If the person you work for is interested in what you think, that means they believe you have potential. I think the best managers want people who will be straightforward, who will tell them the truth. But there are some bosses with whom you have to agree because they're not interested in what you think. It's best to stay with them for a while, but then move on.

Liz Cheney

Attorney and Middle East specialist

Find something you really love and make it your career. Don't let anyone discourage you or tell you it's not practical. I have loved the Middle East since I was a little girl. I read my first book about ancient Egypt when I was 10, and I've been hooked ever since. My career has taken lots of turns, but the Middle East has always been a constant. When I was in law school at the University of Chicago, I spent every spare moment taking classes on Middle East history at the Oriental Institute. When I was practicing law, I focused on projects in the Middle East. For the last five years, I've been working inside and outside the U.S. government on U.S. Middle East policy, women's empowerment and democratic reform in the Arab world.

I have been blessed to have had great, strong women mentors, beginning with my mother. I have also met incredibly impressive women in the Arab world. They are demonstrating enormous courage as they work to expand women's rights and human freedom in their countries. I am inspired to work harder every time I spend time with them.

My mother and father taught my sister and me that we could be anything we dreamed of if we were willing to work hard enough. That was a tremendous gift. Now I have three daughters and two young sons of my own. When I think of my girls playing soccer or field hockey, or riding horses across the Wyoming plains, I am just in awe of them. If someone told them they were less able than boys, they would laugh at the absurdity of such a claim. They have benefited from the trails blazed by their grandmothers and the generations before them.

I don't agree with Senator Clinton's views on the issues, but I think it's terrific that she is a credible presidential candidate. It's a measure of progress in this country that she will be judged not on the basis of her gender, but on whether she is right or wrong on the issues, whether she is up to the task of being president. That says a lot about us as a nation. It's about time we got to that point.

Betsy Myers

Chief operating officer, Obama for America

No one is going to invite you to the table; you have to take the initiative. That means you have to have a thick skin. Ninety-nine percent of the time it isn't personal. People aren't sitting around thinking how they can exclude

you.

Do your homework. Know your issues. Know them better than anyone else. Study. Listen. Show up on time—preferably early. Don't think you know everything. No one knows everything. Don't act like you know everything. Don't be afraid to ask questions and to be comfortable with what you don't know. Get experts to brief you and guide you on what you don't know. Your ability to get things done in any organization is all about relationships. Never burn a bridge if you can avoid it. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Our reputations follow us throughout our lives, so how you treat others will be remembered.

Erskine Bowles, who was my boss at the White House when he was deputy chief of staff, told me two things that helped shape my ideas about leadership. The first is that it's important to know what you're good at, but it's more important to know what you're not good at. Surround yourself with people who know more than you. The second thing is, don't think you need to be in every meeting. People make the mistake of thinking that if they're not in a meeting, they're not important or they're going to miss something. But if you go to every meeting, you don't get any work done.

There are two types of people in the world: people who create chaos and unnecessary work, and people who eliminate chaos and get the job done. Every organization has people who will attempt to waste your time—and take you off your focus—with the downward-spiral conversation about the negative aspects of the organization, a co-worker or new project. It's energy-draining to talk about all the things that aren't working.

Don't talk in a meeting unless you have something to add. A lot of people think that if they sit in a meeting and say nothing, people will think they don't know anything. And then they say something that's not relevant just to participate.

Don't send long, flowery e-mails. To be taken seriously as a woman, you have to understand how men's brains work. Be very succinct in your response and very clear about what you are asking in the e-mail.

And lastly, thanks and gratitude are sadly underrated. Your team will be significantly more productive and happier if they feel appreciated.

Mich Mathews

Senior vice president of marketing, Microsoft

My philosophy is that business is one big fun game; it's all about strategy and facts and logic. If emotion gets in the way, it can color judgment. I also believe attitude is everything: you always have to keep perspective and bring a sense of humor to your job. I often say to people, "Hey, look. You know, no children have died here. There's always tomorrow. At the end of the day, it's only a job." I think you can deal with the toughest, gravest, most miserable day if you keep a positive attitude.

I'm a believer in connecting with people personally and knowing them as human beings. I guess some people might say that's more of a feminine quality than a male one, but I feel it's important not to lose your identity just because you're in a very male culture or an engineering culture.

You can see a mile off a woman who has confidence, who carries herself well. Confidence breeds success. It's imperative that you go into meetings prepared, know the three or four facts that add value and show you are really on top of stuff. Exude confidence and people will look at you and say, "Wow! I have faith in this person. I have trust that they're going to do a really good job. Wow! I'm going to give them the promotion. Wow! I'm going to take a risk on that person to take on this next big project."

I'm big on nonverbal things. Here's a little trick I use. Say there's a meeting going on, and you're having a really hard time making your point. If you have a cup, lean forward over that conference table, place that cup in the middle of the table and put your hand down. It's amazing how it works. People look to see what you have to say. You've got the floor. Take it.

I decided about four or five years ago that I should do a lot more to help build women leaders at the company. I've seen the impact on people who didn't have the confidence or weren't thinking about the game in the right way; they didn't have the right advocates; they didn't have the right network. It's inspiring to see these women who have now gone on to get promoted and run big parts of our business. They spread it to other women, and the ripple effect is powerful.

Mara Brock Akil

Creator and executive producer, CW's 'Girlfriends' and 'The Game'

When I took a screenwriting course, I knew instantly that was what I wanted to do. I felt so alive. I could actually feel blood rushing through my body. All these characters were dancing around in my head; they were real people to me. It was a calling.

At age 5 and 6, I used to talk to myself and make up stories. I was actually writing back then. I just didn't know it. I also loved television, and I thought I could do better than what I was seeing as it pertained to African-American women. And now I have this opportunity with the show "Girlfriends," about four African-American women. I wanted to tell our story, almost like a documentarian, only funnier.

We've covered both the ups and downs. For example, AIDS is the No. 1 killer of black women ages 18 to 34. The problem is, a lot of black men do not feel comfortable being out about being gay, about having sex with other men. A lot of these women are contracting AIDS in their relationships—relationships they believe to be monogamous. For me to ignore that story just didn't feel right. It certainly was a challenge to insert it in a show when you're trying to make people laugh. I find the controversial stuff is actually some of our best work because it makes you dig harder. It scares the hell out of you, and I think from that place we tend to excel in that challenging space.

In African-American culture, our history has been riddled with a lot of tragedy, and we have this amazing sense of humor. That humor has been part of our survival, and so I think it's probably inherent in me that I can find the funny in some of the hardest stuff.

People still aren't comfortable with women owning their sexuality. I am adamant about women talking about sex because I feel while a young woman is watching my show she sees these beautiful, professional and fashionable women talking about their own opinions about sex. I think that subconsciously tells that young woman (and all women), you have a voice about sex—whether it be insisting on using a condom, refusing when you're not in the mood, asking him to do it better, or take an HIV and AIDS test. It's very empowering thing to see women talk candidly about sex so that it doesn't feel like something that men own.

I've gotten the most flak from the African-American community, particularly women. They feel that the characters on "Girlfriends" are too sexually free. I wanted to say sex is normal. You are not a whore, which is how television and films have depicted you. I want to give young women a road map of how to have an honest conversation about sex so they can be safe and healthy to live their fabulous lives.

Agnes Gund
Philanthropist and art historian

At the Museum of Modern Art in New York, I was president of the board when we had to redesign the largest modern-art museum in the country. It cost more than \$800 million, which we had to raise mostly from individuals or their foundations. We needed to choose an architect who would design a good home for a super collection, not merely a building that was its own work of art. I think the most important thing for me during this process was working with every department of MoMA. It is a lot of work to get everyone to agree. You have to have people who love the institution to make something this big work. MoMA trustees and staff wanted to see the building happen. The staff especially had to sacrifice a lot to get the building to happen, and I was anxious about that.

It's important to get everyone on the same page. My role was making them see that we all agreed even if we didn't start out with the same thoughts. I had to develop skills to persuade people to understand my point of view and to accept what I thought would work best.

I grew up in a family of six kids born a year apart. I'm used to never being listened to, so I don't always listen so well on my own—though I'm learning. I wasn't always flexible. If I thought I had an idea that I wanted to pursue, I would think, Oh, this matters so much. I had to learn to listen to other people and take in their perspective.

It's hard to make people understand the inclusive nature of working with a board. People don't always get what they want. I've learned to bring the ball down gently, and make things palatable.

Swanee Hunt
Founding director of the Women and Public Policy Program, Harvard's Kennedy School of Government

When I studied World War II, I always wondered about the policymakers sitting behind their big mahogany desks as Hitler overran Europe. Then, during the Bosnian war, I was the U.S. ambassador in Vienna. Suddenly I was behind a big mahogany desk of my own, hearing horrifying reports from embassy personnel who were interviewing the refugees pouring into Austria. The responsibility was awesome. I couldn't sleep at night. I wondered if I should resign my position to protest the fact my country was not intervening. I decided I could do more by working inside than I could by leaving, but it was a terrible, terrible moral dilemma for me. I used every bit of connection I had to try to convince the president to intervene. And when Clinton finally intervened, the war was over very quickly. Meanwhile, 200,000 people died needlessly.

What I learned is that women in every conflict are trying to prevent war, are trying to stop it once it starts and are trying to stabilize after the peace agreement is signed because they don't want their kids getting killed. So we would be so much smarter at a foreign-policy level to support their work, and for the most part, Washington is clueless and the U.N. is clueless about that.

Women tend to be less corrupt, and when you're talking about developing countries, that is enormous. What they tell me is, "We know that any money that we put into our own pockets is not going to go to hospitals and to schools that will help the children in this country." They think of the whole country as their family.

All over the world, women leaders struggle to balance the responsibilities of their families and their jobs. We need to pass on to the next generation the idea that your family is more than your own children. This will allow women to let other people help raise their kids, for one thing. You don't have to be the sole person, the sole influence on your kids. That will then allow more women to be out in the world, working with their passions, shaping the future of many, many, many, many more kids.

Sherry Lansing

Philanthropist, former movie executive

When I was growing up, I loved to get lost in the movies. I saw that they could affect your emotions, they could affect the way you think or feel and could actually sometimes change lives or social legislation. At that time, women really had two options: teaching or nursing. Those are great careers, but my passion was to make movies. When I told people that was what I wanted to do, they laughed at me and said, "Who do you think you are?" It was like telling someone you wanted to go to the moon before anybody had gone to the moon. So I learned to keep my dreams a secret.

The day I graduated from college with a degree to teach math and English, I packed my bags and I came out here to Los Angeles. Eventually I got a job for \$5 an hour reading scripts and worked my way up. By the time I was 35, I was running Fox. But I don't think I ever felt powerful. For me, it was really all about making movies. I felt the power resided in the director, the writer, the actor—the real creative people. My job was to give them the chance to fulfill their creative vision. So I didn't walk around saying, "Look at me, I got all this power." All I thought was, Look at me, I got all this work to do!

Eventually I left and formed a partnership with a man named Stanley Jaffe to make great movies ourselves because I felt that's where my creative heart was. We were lucky. We made "Fatal Attraction" and "The Accused"—movies that really affected the culture. But that wasn't the only reason I wanted a change. I woke up one day when I was 38 years old and working 900 hours a day with no time for a personal life, and I felt that I didn't have the quality of life that I wanted. I felt that if I produced movies, that I would have a more balanced life. And I don't just mean a boyfriend, which is where I was at that time. I mean travel. If Stanley and I had a successful movie, I could take off for a few weeks and he could cover the office. Then Stanley became the head of Paramount. I took over our productions and met my husband, William Friedkin, who is a director. At the same time, Stanley asked me to run Paramount. I thought the job would have more regular hours so I could be home for dinner with my husband and my stepchildren. And I said to Stanley, "I can do this, but don't expect me to be out every night on the town."

Life is constantly evolving and changing. My life is a search to find balance. So there I was. I just got so lucky at 47 years of age to meet my husband. It was just the greatest thing that ever happened to me in my life. And to get two wonderful stepchildren on top of it all and to really, with their mothers, help raise them. And so I took this big job, which I loved. I loved it for 12 years. I was home for dinner—maybe not as much as I sometimes wanted to be. But in my mid-50s, I started to say, "Well, I want my life to be more than just making money. I want my life to have some social relevance to it." I wanted a completely different life, and I even wanted more balance now that there was no need to be home for the kids. They were gone, out of college. I wanted to do good.

I quit and I started this foundation, which is dedicated to cancer research and to health. I want this third chapter to be a chapter of relationships and intimacy and the work of the foundation. It's the payoff for all those years.

I loved my old life then and I love my new life now. I don't want to be in my old life, but I wouldn't have wanted my new life then. There's not one thing I miss. There's a season for everything. It had a beginning, middle and an end. I felt complete. I had gone way beyond anything I ever dreamed of—way beyond. And I wanted a change and I wanted something new.

I still have old friends I had in the movie business. I see them all the time. Only my world has expanded because I am meeting scientists who are doing work in stem cells, scientists in cancer research. I'm

starting a movement now called Prime Time, which takes people who are retired and creates a Peace Corps so that they can give back. I've got this Encore teaching program, where I made a partnership with private corporations that are funding their retirees to go back to school to get their teaching credentials. Every day is filled with something new.

These interviews were conducted by Barbara Kantrowitz and Holly Peterson

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