

## **LEADERSHIP NETWORKS**

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Many people say that leadership comes from somewhere outside. Some have argued that you have it innately, that you are hardwired, and fine-tune it with training. Leadership has to do with timing, a gut that has been informed by personal experiences, and having the right support network around you.

My own background shaped my leadership style: it is rooted in tenacity, deep empathy for those around me, and an unfettered curiosity. This has translated into an evolving set of skills that has helped me grow into the leader I am today. This also defines how I approach my work and my life.

I grew up just outside of Buffalo, born in the early '80s to parents who lived through the rise and decline of the "Queen City," the crown jewel of the state, second only to New York City. My Buffalo roots are deep, running through large middle-class ethnic families that value honest hard work and Sunday suppers. My passion for workforce development is rooted in my love of Buffalo. Long before politicians started to notice it, I had seen a beautiful, complicated city. This inspired insatiable curiosity that led me to take every single internship I could get; earn two graduate degrees, in Urban Planning and Public Administration; and travel to the far reaches of the world. This curiosity and need to create change led me to spend years learning and working to solve some of society's most complicated social issues. I deeply believe that most people in this world are good,

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useful, and underutilized. I feel a connection to the underdog nature of my hometown, and more importantly, the need to see the good in the city and its people.

I have also been shaped by my family's experiences. My mother's father was an entrepreneur, always scrabbling to keep afloat or to grow a range of enterprises. From men's clothing to light manufacturing, he strove to turn ideas into things, and then into profit. My grandfather on my dad's side was a "union man," an operating engineer, building some of the most recognizable structures across Western New York. In personality and presence, the two men could not have been more different—one in flashy suits, drinking Manhattans, and the other wearing work boots, with a Genesee Cream Ale in his hand. While they were remarkably different, the pride they took in their work, and their persistence, were common denominators.

However, as significant as my grandfathers' stories are to who I am, it is the stories of my grandmothers that have served as the basis for my inspiration. Both are smart, creative, and industrious, and raised five and seven kids, respectively, but it is not just their roles as mothers and grandmothers that define them. They've put themselves out on a limb, taken chances, and worked to defy the norms. They are compassionate, quick-witted, and organized, and have demonstrated immense empathy in some incredibly challenging circumstances. They are not only capable, but remarkable. I see many of their characteristics, most notably, empathy and openness to others, in myself and in my own parents.

Those who know me well can sense the undercurrent of urgency in all that I do. My mom was diagnosed with cancer for the first time when I was a teenager, and she was 39, just a few years older than I am now. Because of this, I grew up fast, and without the luxury of feeling invincible in my youth. As I watch my mom continue to fight, I know my time is limited. The result is that I struggle with complacency and feel a profound need to continuously march forward toward an ideal, even if I never get there. I am not easily fazed, and remain dedicated even when others start to falter. I don't see insurmountable challenges but, rather, the big, hairy stuff that builds our

character and a puzzle that needs the right pieces or resources to be solved. I thrive in settings where I have huge, systemic issues to tackle—it just means more data, people, or puzzle pieces to fit together.

It wasn't until I began to work, and saw these big, hairy issues with my own two eyes, that I recalled a conversation I had at my grandmother's kitchen table. We'd been working on a middle-school project about careers, and I asked, "Granma, what did you want to be when you grew up?" She described her fascination with the women in the Air Force who helped build and test planes during World War II, and how she had dreamed of being one of those women. She spoke wistfully of traveling the world, being part of an effort that mattered, and doing something interesting. I was floored. I had only known my grandmother as a housewife. I asked why she hadn't pursued her dream, and questioned whether she should have tried harder. She tried to explain that it just wasn't in the cards for her. Even though she was a good student, she didn't graduate from high school; not because she didn't want to, but because her father didn't think it was something a woman needed to do, so she was pulled out just weeks before graduation. Hearing this, I remember feeling stunned. A combination of the creeping flush up my 12-year-old neck, and the apparently sudden hardness of the chair, made my skin tingle. I felt embarrassed, but I didn't know why. Was I embarrassed for her, or that I had even asked? How could a woman so smart, so charming, and with so much ambition be told that this was how things would be? How was her recent history so completely out of line with what I had been told my future would be?

I am part of the generation that immediately benefited from the women who demanded change. Those who came before me ensured that my grandmother's story wasn't the future for all young women in this country. This also means that I live in a kind of purgatory, as that generation which came immediately after the fight. For me, it meant that I had an unrealistic expectation that the world had changed and everyone was on board. I came of age after historic shifts like Title IX, the push for equal pay, the right to birth control, and the market demand for more college-educated women. In my

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youth, girls were told they could do anything. We could be astronauts and executives, or take on “non-traditional” jobs; as engineers, for example.

I also grew up in the era where *All in Family* and the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* were in syndication—both considered revolutionary at the time. One night, I watched the portrayal of a vibrant, single woman making her way and choosing career over a husband and family. Another night, it was Archie insulting Edith as a “dingbat,” and America providing a pass to a “guy who was just afraid of change.” Just think about the mixed messages; not just for young girls, but for everyone.

When I get to speak with the rare female executive who is nearing retirement, much of what we talk about are her experiences on the way to the top: the constant need to prove that one is an authentic leader, the need to be known as someone who can run with the “big dogs,” make the tough decisions, and “hold one’s own”—all without showing too much leg. These women dealt with constant sexism; so much so that it seemed like part of the job. They were called *shrews* and *bitches* when they were tough, and *girls* when they were emotional. They also talk about the sacrifices they have had to make when their careers had to be their priority, at the risk of losing it all. They talk about being out there on their own.

In the late 1990s, in some of my earliest work experiences, I was shocked at just how antagonistic the environment was toward women; even forward-thinking colleagues, including other women, just accepted it as the norm, or “part of the game.” I can still vividly picture a colleague laughing at a horrific biased joke because she felt she had to. It took me a while to untangle the fact that this was not just an isolated “bad work environment.” This kind of thing happens nearly everywhere, and to every woman, with varying degrees of intention. Now, in retrospect, with Archie Bunker and Mary Tyler Moore in our vast pop-culture archive, I should have anticipated the immensity of the challenge of unbraiding the current culture from the past.

In contrast to the women at the start of the women’s movement, my generation grew up with moms who worked. Increasingly, they

were college-educated, and in some cases, were women, like my mother, who had climbed the ladder in their careers. Now the rhetoric is about the new imbalance of highly educated women flooding the workplace, the power of the female consumer, the new definitions of traditional gender roles, and the work-life balance. However, despite all these gains, women are still at a loss. Women currently make up only 5.3 percent of the Fortune 1000 CEO positions, and the U.S. Congress is comprised of only 19 percent women representatives, even though more than 50 percent of the nation's population is female. I believe it comes down to a simple fact: women are still faced with, and then scrutinized for, making the decades-old choice. You can either sit at the head of the boardroom table or at the dinner table in the evening with your family. I don't want to have to make a choice like Mary Tyler Moore; I want to be a great mom and a great leader.

So, in addition to changing the outcomes for the underdogs of society, I also feel the need to live the change I want to see for women's equality, especially in the workplace. I feel as though I am constantly pushing the envelope to redefine norms, and it is exhausting. No longer should it be about the choices women make to "do it all" (and putting those choices on a stake in the courtyard for all to see), but about creating an adaptable work environment that increases productivity and allows for work-life balance. This means creating policies and practices that allow each employee to maximize their work and their life.

Because of who I am, and how my life and work experiences have shaped me, I refuse to keep quiet when I need to shout about things I care about, or to be defined by someone else or the world around me. Some have called this tenacity or youthful idealism; others call it stubbornness. For example, in eleventh grade, I shared that I didn't think my high school was adequately preparing me for college in a piece that ran in a local newspaper. I experienced a severe backlash from the teachers within the school, even though I was the president of my class and a good student. Over 10 years later, I worked on a Gates Foundation project specifically geared to increase

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the college readiness and success of high school students in New York City public schools. Even with the mounting pressure, I knew I was right; it just took me 10 years to prove it.

Looking around the field of workforce development from my perspective, I see another “Buffalo”: a deeply important network of hardworking, underutilized gems that needs to reclaim its place in history. When I get up every morning, and think about what we do, I do not see us as a network of misfits or idealists. I see us as advocates; as the persistent drumbeat saying that we all matter, and that education and skills development are the great equalizers. There is a famous expression that says, “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.” My organization ensures that New Yorkers have access to both preparation and opportunity.

The work our members do is hard, thankless, and often viewed as “tarnished” in some way. From the outside, some people don’t view those we work with as good, useful, or underutilized. They see them as takers, slackers, and never good enough. They don’t recognize that “those” people and local employers are part of their own community.

By now you know that this field is my life’s work. This is not just a job for me; it is who I am and what I believe. I am engaged in complex, systematic change that makes my heart skip a beat. Many readers feel connected to this work the same way I do. You share my frustration with the pace at which the world is moving and the challenges we face. But our time is here. I need each of you to succeed. We need to translate the passion each of us has for helping people become great into propelling forward the change that will make our issues everyone’s priority.

At the same time, let’s balance our work lives with family and community. I am committed to my family, as they are to me. I have the incredible fortune of having amazing mentors and a supportive husband and family who will do whatever it takes to help me be successful. This means helping me find the elusive work-life balance. They step in and pick up the slack when my time or energy is waning, or reinforce what is going well inside and out of the office.

Without these supporters, I may not have had the stamina to keep it up my entire career. They remind me that doing meaningful work means working within boundaries to create change, but also taking risks to put what you believe on the line and push the goal posts back, even if it is excruciatingly slow. Most importantly, they remind me that anything worth changing can be changed, and I have to be that change—even if there is a backlash. When I think about how this translates into creating new norms, what I see is that new battle lines have to be drawn by my generation, especially as we try to coexist with the generations before us, and for those that follow.