



## On Being a Leading Lady

So often, in both the workplace and ministry, women assume that they need to downplay their own uniqueness and conform to those around them in order to succeed. I believe that just the opposite is true. God created us with unique gifts and personalities and intends for us to use them for his glory. We need to ask our Creator for the confidence and the courage to express our outside-the-box and/or unpopular opinions, to be both outspoken and humble.

Sometimes labeled a rebel, I have tried, albeit imperfectly, throughout my career and ministry years to listen to the inner voice I attribute to the Holy Spirit. That voice has often urged me to take a different approach from those previously tried and tested. Most of my regrets stem from decisions I failed to make because I thought somebody else knew better. Sometimes, of course, someone else does know better, and as leaders we need to gather information, listen to our support team, and consult with those involved. But ultimately, the decision—and the responsibility for its outcome—falls on us.

I think most of us women have to deal with the nagging suspicion that another person might be smarter than we are or possess some secret knowledge or formula for reaching the right decision. I know I have to fight against that sometimes. But if you come to a leadership role on the basis of your experience, knowledge, and ability, you need to assume ownership of that, which means embracing the reality that God's grace has brought you to where you are, and for good reason.

But you're also required to withstand disapproval when those decisions

turn out to be unpopular or—occasionally—unsuccessful. Being in a leadership position means being in a position to be criticized. There will be times when you look the fool or don't express yourself as well as you'd like. Sometimes you are criticized for real mistakes; other times you are attacked for your successes by those who are threatened by them and seek to undermine you. Some people will say that you're too assertive; others will question your judgment simply because you are a woman. You have to accept and deal with criticism simply because it is part and parcel of being a leader.

At many times in my life, my ideas appeared to some people to be overreaching, too grandiose, impractical. It took marshaling lots of groups and dealing with plenty of naysayers to see those ideas realized. But looking back, in most cases people have asked, "Why didn't we do/think of that before?" Leadership is all about enabling people to envision the potential of their group/themselves, to point to and help realize what they would actually like to accomplish but are too afraid to undertake. Helping others take risks—which always implies the possibility of failure—is what good leaders do.

Here are a few things I've learned so far as a leading lady:

### **Understand that your unique life story informs your leadership and legacy.**

Everything you've been through—from the gory to the glory and everything in between—is part of who you are...even if you choose to hide it. You might choose to conceal or deny something from your past, but that doesn't mean it's not affecting your present. To be effective and authentic, you must embrace your whole story and allow God to redeem and use it. As Stephen Arterburn asks in *Healing Is a Choice* (Thomas Nelson, 2005), where would Chuck Colson's ministry be today without his prison sentence? Where

would Joni Erickson Tada be without her broken body? Remember that in God's hands our pit can become our pulpit.

**Believe you are where you are because God put you there.** Many of us women second-guess so much of what goes on in our lives, especially if we ourselves decided to walk through an open door. If we believe that God is in control and that he means for good even what we mean for evil, then we need to accept where we are, even if sometimes we can't believe where we are—whether the mountaintop or the valley.

**Don't be afraid to take risks.** Answering God's call requires not just faith but also courage—which implies the presence of fear—but the key is to do it anyway. Risk-takers are the only ones who contribute lasting benefits to our world.

**Never underestimate the value of failure.** Go back and take a stroll through God's Hall of Fame in Hebrews 11. Did any of those greats of the faith escape failure? In life, the people God chooses to be leaders are the ones who are willing to risk it all. And remember, failure is a whole lot easier to live with than regret over what was never attempted.

So stop and take stock of who you are, how God has gifted you, and what he is asking you to do. As the apostle Paul once asked, if God is for us, who can be against us? ■

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