

Women and Effective Leadership

Jo Young Switzer

April 5, 2016

Jo Young Switzer is President Emerita and Professor Emerita of Communication Studies at Manchester University in North Manchester, Indiana.

The role of women in leadership has changed dramatically in the past three decades. We have more women CEOs. Two presidential candidates at the start of the 2016 campaign were women. There are more women college presidents. We see a slow improvement in numbers of women leaders, but not a sea change in the numbers or the culture.

Today, only four percent of Standard and Poor companies are headed by women.¹ The Pew Research Center reports that 40% of those surveyed in 2014 think that there is still a double standard for women “seeking to climb into the highest levels of leadership in politics or business.”² Where do we find progress for women—and ultimately for our culture?

What does this issue mean for people like us—both women and men—who will lead our professions, colleges, churches, schools, businesses, neighborhoods, Girl Scout troops, and Little League teams?

My reflections tonight come both from my personal observations, as well as from three research projects I completed when I was still teaching. For some mysterious reason, my focused research stopped completely when my presidency began.

- One research project published in *Journalism Quarterly* was about television women news anchors from across the U.S.³
- Another focused on interviews with women in the top levels of the federal government—women members of Congress and the then-sole woman in the Cabinet. I was unable to secure an interview with the then-only female member of the Supreme Court, but Sandra Day O’Connor sent me a most elegant hand-written note declining the interview.
- The last project focused on extensive interviews with current women college and university presidents.⁴

Here I combine some stories about my experiences as a leader and my research about other women leaders. I will organize these stories around the lessons I have learned about leadership from my own experiences and will draw from the interviews with women leaders in government and in college

presidencies. In my 1986 paper with women television news anchors, the overwhelming conclusion they shared was that they just wanted people to stop focusing on their hairstyles.

An underlying conclusion of my reflections comes first. While there are differences in leadership styles between men and women, those differences are not as dramatic as even twenty years ago. A 2014 article by Samantha Paustian-Underdahl, Lisa Slattery Walker, and David Woehr in *Journal of Applied Psychology*, for example, analyzed ninety-nine different data sets from fifty-eight journal articles, thirty dissertations, five books, and six other sources. Their conclusion was direct: “men and women do not differ in perceived leadership effectiveness.”⁵ In a *Huffington Post* piece that same year, Chad Brooks looked at the same body of data and added two observations: “Men rate themselves as significantly more effective leaders than women do,” while women were actually perceived by others as being more effective in management, especially in senior management positions.⁶

At this point in history, we simply do not know with certainty how gender affects effectiveness or perceptions of effectiveness. The rhetoric of the 2016 presidential campaign shows a dramatic mix of attitudes, from welcoming and affirming to aggressively hostile. It is clear that the dynamics of leadership are changing along with the changing social patterns related to gender. More women are in the workforce. More men are stay-at-home fathers. More services, jobs, and opportunities are available for persons who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, and transsexual.

I do believe that effective leaders share important qualities, and that is what we will focus on here.

Lesson #1. Effective leaders are simultaneously goal-driven *and* flexible.

They have ambitious strategic plans and clear measures for determining whether their plans work. They focus on “big picture” goals for their organizations and at the same time, they pay attention to the details. They can be data-driven or intuitive or both. Regardless of style, they work to achieve results that help their organizations.

Flexibility is also an essential attribute. I know very few, if any, respected leaders who are not flexible. One sitting here tonight was flexible enough to realize the huge potential of the gift of a large, perfectly-located farm for the well-respected college he leads. Students will benefit for decades from this resource.

I got some early training on flexibility when I was vice president and dean for academic affairs at Manchester. I accompanied the Brethren Colleges Abroad (BCA) director on a site tour to Cheltenham, Strasbourg, and Marburg. We lived out of our small suitcases for two weeks. On our last day in Strasbourg, we ate a long lunch with two French faculty members at a small café in a quiet neighborhood.

It was a very simple, inexpensive, and elegant place. Conversation over lunch was the epitome of French hospitality—good conversation, great food. It was lovely.

Then the BCA director and I got on the train, hoisted our heavy bags onto the tall racks above the seats, and headed to Marburg, Germany, north of Cologne. The BCA site director there greeted us with a hearty handshake and said we would eat dinner at a restaurant right by the train station. We walked a few steps and entered the crowded restaurant where a blast of heat and humidity hit our faces.

Our small table was ready, and in the middle was a large, hot metal surface, surrounded by mountains of raw turkey and pork—with a large grill fork for each of us. The server asked if we were ready, and when our host said “yes,” the server hit the button on a timer at our table. All we could grill and eat for the next sixty minutes was ours.

We were not in France anymore. If you are flexible, leadership may follow. If you are a leader, flexibility must follow. Good leaders are simultaneously goal-driven and flexible.

Lesson #2. Effective leaders listen to people they trust.

When I work with other leaders, I find it surprising how some of them do not understand the essential need to listen. Some believe the most recent book on leadership tells them all they need to know. But listening to others is more important than many realize.

When the presidency of Manchester was posted, my husband Dave and I talked a lot about whether I should apply. We understood that if I applied, there was actually a chance that I could be selected. We knew the job would change our lives. The freedom we enjoyed for spontaneous get-togethers with friends in our contemporary, casual home would be replaced by life on campus in the very formal, isolated president’s home. It would mean being recognized in the local grocery store where people would watch what we put in our cart—I’m not making this up. Dave was at the grocery once when a woman came up and asked him what we had made from the peaches she saw him buy the week before.

During those months of family deliberation, I was walking on campus when a grizzled old campus carpenter named Elbert said: “Jo, you should apply to be president. You would do a real good job. You listen real good.” Elbert knew that I called him and all his physical plant colleagues by name. He knew I thanked people when they were helpful, and he took the time to tell me. As it turned out, I listened, I applied, and the rest is history. I eventually even got an honorary degree from Juniata College!

When I interviewed Elizabeth Dole, then U.S. Secretary of Labor, she spoke about the important role of a few trusted mentors for her. She was the only female member of the president’s Cabinet at that time. She and the just sixteen female members of Congress (both the House and the Senate) spoke of the ways women seek out people they trust and listen to them. Incidentally, in the most recent Congress, 104 women were in the House and the Senate, in other words, 19%. Some improvement, but it is slow.⁷

Lesson #3. Leaders are both bold *and* patient.

When I became president at Manchester in 2004, millions of dollars were yet to be raised to complete a campaign whose final project was to expand the student union. The union's design was flash frozen in the 60s. The easy-to-get donations were already in. There was no more "low hanging fruit." But our students deserved a better union. So I rolled up my sleeves, hoping to find one or two big gifts to finish the campaign. I scheduled dinner with a wealthy alumni couple. We met at their favorite Indianapolis restaurant—St. Elmo's. Sitting with them at our table, I realized my stomach was turning into a tight knot. I remember looking at my salad and thinking: "Jo, you *have* to ask."

So I took a deep breath and said, "Manchester has played a huge role in your lives. I know you love the place. I am hoping you will consider a gift of five million dollars to help us finish this campaign." Then I waited. And waited. After four or five seconds of silence (which seemed like a year), the husband burst into a big grin and said, "Jo, I'm really proud of you for asking for that much."

Now remember, I said that leaders have to be bold and patient. Manchester did not get that money in time for that campaign. In fact, written documentation of the pledge was finalized just before I retired, *ten* years later. A bold ask and a very long wait. Just so you don't lie awake wondering if the Manchester students are still in that crummy old student union, the answer is no. We finished it nine months after I started my presidency, and we had raised all the money to do it.

In 2010, along with the cabinet, I proposed to the board of trustees that Manchester develop a School of Pharmacy and locate it in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The reasons for this decision were interconnected:

- Manchester has a long history of success in the sciences, including graduates like Paul Flory who won the Nobel Prize in chemistry, Roy Plunkett, who invented Teflon, and a leading environmental scientist who discovered acid rain in North America, Gene Likens.
- Demographic changes predict an aging population that will dramatically increase the need for pharmacists.
- Manchester itself needed to increase its enrollment and establish more visibility in northeast corner of Indiana, including Ft. Wayne.

The insurmountable roadblock was that the Manchester board refused to borrow money. For decades, this was the unwritten rule. Unwritten, but not unspoken. No borrowing. But we knew we could not start the pharmacy school with the funds in our operating budget.

So at the fall Board of Trustees meeting, I put all my persuasive talent into a proposal to the board to approve development of a School of Pharmacy that would serve 300 students when fully enrolled. We would seek national accreditation of the pharmacy program, a six-year process. I presented the financial

analysis and said we might have to borrow up to twelve million dollars. “Might have to borrow”—words that caused at least three trustees to shudder visibly and several former trustees to turn over in their graves.

When I finished my presentation to them, I sat down and thought, “Oh my gosh. There is a chance that they might actually approve this.” And they approved it unanimously. We rolled up our sleeves and intensified our work.

I had already scheduled my regular fall meeting at the Lilly Endowment where I met with the education vice president—Sara Cobb—twice a year. Each visit, I shared updates on Manchester and always asked whether they were considering any specific grant opportunities for schools like Manchester. Every single time, Sara would smile and say in her soft, gracious attorney voice: “We do not have any initiatives at this time.” I would drive home with nothing. Twice a year for seven years. Nothing. Nada. Those were discouraging drives—almost two hours each way. Nothing to show for it.

At one meeting, however, I introduced our new pharmacy dean and our vice president who was helping oversee the start-up process. We shared updates and Sara said, “If you might be willing to meet a very short deadline, we would welcome three proposals for your program—one for \$2.5 million, one for \$5 million, and one for \$7.5 million. You would need to keep this completely confidential. Are you interested?”

Of course we were interested! She gave us more specific information, and we roared back to campus, thrilled at this unexpected opportunity. We assembled a team of five people to prepare the three confidential proposals. The proposals themselves were not long—about ten pages. The appendices, however, were lengthy and very detailed.

Several times, I called Lilly Endowment to make sure we were assembling what they needed to answer their questions. One of those conversations led me to sense that there might be even more money available, so I asked Sara Cobb straight out: “Would you consider a bold proposal for an even larger amount?” She surprised me when she said they would.

So, an even smaller group of three of us developed a shorter proposal to ask Lilly Endowment to support all the start up costs for the pharmacy program, including money for a building. By the October 1 deadline, we had four proposals ready to go:

- One for \$2.5 million;
- One for \$5 million;
- One for \$7.5 million; and
- One confidential bold proposal for \$35 million.

The last proposal was only two pages long (with nearly forty pages of appendices). We called it the Bold Proposal. The Lilly Endowment said that we would know by Christmas Eve. My executive vice president told me later that he thought I had “lost my mind.”

Right before Thanksgiving, my assistant asked me to take a call from Sara Cobb at the Lilly Endowment. After the “hellos,” Sara said: “Jo (pause), the Endowment Board met this past weekend and voted to award a grant to Manchester University for its pharmacy school . . . for thirty-five million dollars.” What did I say? “Thank you! Thank you! Wow! Thank you! Wow!” I could think of absolutely nothing else to say.

Bold and patient. Don’t underestimate either. Just so you know, the Pharmacy College located in a fully-paid-for building in Fort Wayne, Indiana, just received full national accreditation and will graduate its first four-year class in May.

Three lessons so far. Effective leaders are simultaneously goal-driven and flexible. They listen to advisers they trust. They are both bold and patient.

Lesson 4. Leaders don’t become leaders the same way.

The journey is different for everyone. My predecessor at Manchester had structured his academic career from the time he was in graduate school to move up the faculty ranks (assistant professor, associate professor, full professor), then become a dean, and then become a president. Step by step on a path that was at the core of higher education leadership development. My successor at Manchester has been very public that he wanted to be president at Manchester since he was in junior high. That dream guided his life and his career decisions. By contrast, Shirley Showalter, who headed Goshen College, said her journey to the presidency was “a very crooked road.” Many women have careers that seem like crooked roads. I certainly did.

My research with women political leaders and college presidents found that most did not follow a carefully-planned process to become leaders. Some did, but many more described how they simply responded positively when their talents were needed at their organizations over time. When their employers needed someone to take on leadership, they stepped up. People noticed.

When they became presidents, they prepared well, surrounded themselves with trusted people, listened well, and worked very hard. Both routes to leadership are fine, and I hope the more meandering route will gain the respect it deserves.

Lesson 5. Being a leader does not come without cost, and sometimes that cost is more expensive for women.

What are some of the challenges?

One challenge for women is the public's different interpretations for behaviors of male and female leaders. This is apparent right now in the differing responses to the campaign styles of the two Democratic candidates for president. Hillary Clinton was criticized in the press on March 16, 2016, for not smiling enough. As far as I know, that criticism has not been aimed at any male candidates. Bernie Sanders's forceful finger pointing is perceived by his supporters and the public as strong and bold and intense. If Hillary Clinton used the same gestures, I am confident she would be criticized for talking like a bossy schoolteacher or a witch stirring a caldron. Our old stereotyped notions die hard.

We may hope the standards for men and women are comparable, but they aren't . . . yet. It is much more difficult for women to appear decisive and strong and feminine at the same time. Carly Fiorina's performances in the early GOP debates were very logical and supported with data, but responses to her performance focused on her frown and speed of talking. Things are changing very slowly.

The pessimist in me says, "Too slowly," while the optimist in me says, "Things are changing." There is a bumper sticker that says, "Be the change you want to be in the world." That is good advice for all of us when we find ourselves judging women and men leaders by different standards in terms of their dress, speech, and facial expressions. In the 2016 presidential campaign and those in the future, we have many opportunities to grow past the old standards and stereotypes.

Second, people who have a high need for approval (as many women do), should be deliberate about moving into leadership. It simply is not possible to lead ethically and be popular with everyone. It takes a tough skin. Cell phones, Facebook, and Twitter can spread criticism—legitimate or not—across the nation in minutes. The words can sting.

Leaders must deliver hard messages. Tuition increase announcements are not happy messages. Salary freezes are not happy messages. Announcements of student deaths are terrible to make. But hard messages are an important responsibility for leaders. When I had to share hard messages, I felt the weight of the world. Whether I was speaking at a memorial service or speaking to the faculty about a highly controversial matter like a new pharmacy school, I felt heavy responsibility for my words. Strong leaders must be willing to receive criticism—warranted and unwarranted—without becoming demoralized. Leadership takes a thick skin.

I was surprised to see a quote from me posted on the LinkedIn page of a former student: "Leadership is not for those who need steady admiration." I still believe that. Leaders need thick skins. They should not need everyone's approval all the time.

What does all this mean for you who are (or are becoming) leaders? I hope it means you will stay open to messages from others who say, "We see leadership qualities in you." I hope you'll say that same message to others when it fits.

I hope you will think about the complexities and weight of leadership when President Jim Troha announces a decision or takes a position that you don't like. Ask yourselves, "What else do I need to know?"

I hope you will read articles and talk with your mentors about leadership, noticing that there is no one right way to lead.

I hope that if you have leadership abilities, you'll celebrate them. Don't take the road of saying: "Aw, shucks. I could never do that."

Early in my presidency, I had the good fortune to go to Washington, D.C., to attend the swearing-in ceremony for Manchester alumna, Dr. Jane Henney, to head the Food and Drug Administration. The event was in the vice president's private auditorium in the Executive Office Building adjacent to the White House. After the swearing in, Vice President Gore invited Dr. Henney to speak, and she told a story from her junior year at Manchester.

She was a straight-A student and wanted to go to medical school. It was 1968, however, and almost no women were physicians. So, she went to the office of her mentor in chemistry for advice. She told him how much she wanted to attend medical school. He said, "Jane, women don't go to med school. You should look into being a teacher." She was devastated.

With a heavy heart, she trudged down the two flights of stairs to her biology mentor, Dr. Emerson Niswander. He was known for wearing bow ties and for doing things in class with tapeworms and manipulation of nerves on dead frogs to gross out his students. He was a very brilliant and very funny man.

Jane screwed up her dented courage and said, "Doc, I want to go to medical school after I graduate." Doc leaned back and put his hands behind his head as he always did, and he said "Why not?" She did. The rest is history. I will forever be thankful that Doc Niswander and his wife Evelyn were in the audience at the White House when Jane told that story. The entire audience including the vice president, members of the President's Cabinet, and several senators gave Doc Niswander a standing ovation.

The mantle of leadership for women and men is a heavy one, and it is a privilege that I hope many of you will seek.

Michelle Obama said it clearly: "You may not always have a comfortable life. And you will not always be able to solve all the world's problems all at once, but don't ever underestimate the impact you can have, because history has shown us that courage can be contagious and hope can take on a life of its own."⁸

NOTES

1. "Women CEOs of the Standard and Poor 500." *catalyst.org*, February 1, 2016, <http://www.catalyst.org/knowledge/women-ceos-sp-500> (accessed July 12, 2016.)
2. "Women and Leadership." Pew Research Centers Social Demographic Trends Project RSS. January 14, 2015. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/01/14/women-and-leadership/> (accessed July 12, 2016.)
3. Switzer, Jo Young and A.J. Ferri, "Perceived Career Barriers for Female TV Anchors: A National Survey." *Journalism Quarterly*, 63, No. 3 (Autumn 1986), 463-67.
4. Switzer, Jo Young, "Women College Presidents: Interview about Journeys and Adaptations." *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*, vol. 21, (Summer 2006).
5. "Study: Women Leaders Perceived as Effective as Male Counterparts." *apa.org*. April 30, 2014, <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2014/04/women-leaders.aspx> (accessed May 30, 2016.) For the complete journal article see, Paustian-Underdahl Samantha, Walker Lisa, and Woehner David, "Gender and Perceptions of Leadership Effectiveness: A Meta-Analysis of Contextual Moderators," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 99, no. 6 (March 2014).
6. Brooks, Chad, "Female Leaders Viewed Just As Effective As Men, Research Shows." *The Huffington Post*. May 01, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/01/women-effective-leaders_n_5246730.html (accessed July 12, 2016.)
7. "Women and Leadership," Pew Research Center Social & Demographic Trends, January 14, 2015, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/01/14/women-and-leadership/>.
8. Obama, Michelle, "Remarks by the First Lady during Keynote Address at Young African Women Leaders Forum," June 22, 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-first-lady-during-keynote-address-young-african-women-leaders-fo> (accessed July 12, 2016.)