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Bounce Back Better

Bonnie St. John

Paralympic Medalist and Leadership Consultant



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Bonnie St. John, Paralympic medalist and leadership consultant, joins Jack Zenger in this installment of the Zenger Folkman Leadership Podcast series. She discusses her thoughts on promoting women, people from different cultures, and young people to leadership positions and the value of resilience—on the slalom course and in business.

Bonnie St. John graduated Magna Cum Laude from Harvard University, was awarded a Rhodes scholarship in Economics, and received a graduate degree from Oxford University. She worked in the Clinton Whitehouse, is the author of six books, and provides leadership consulting and keynote presentations for a variety of organizations, including Fortune 500 companies.

Bonnie is also a Paralympic medalist who lost her right leg at the age of five due to a rare congenital condition. Bonnie made her mark in the 1984 Paralympics as the second-fastest female amputee skier in the world and the world's first African-American ski medalist.

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You've interviewed some prominent women leaders. Have you seen a pattern of what they do differently as compared to the men you've been associated with in business and in government?

I think one of the concerns for the next generation of women is that they don't necessarily aspire to the top jobs in different industries, but these women are better equipped than any generation before them with more education, more opportunities, and more self-esteem.

I wrote a book with my daughter (*How Great Women Lead: A Mother-Daughter Adventure Into the Lives of Women Shaping the World*). We conducted 20 interviews, including Condoleezza Rice, Hillary Clinton, the chairman of Deloitte, an orchestra conductor, a fighter pilot, and the actress Geena Davis—all kinds of women in all fields. What excited me was to see how much these women brought themselves and their strengths to leadership.

A good example of this is Marin Alsop, the only woman conducting an orchestra in a major U.S. city. When she got the baton in Baltimore, the orchestra had problems. Attendance was down, donations were down, and the orchestra was in debt. Marin brought innovative ideas to the job: she had musicians mentor underprivileged children who also played, she talked more to the audience, and she really engaged the community. Attendance went up, donations went up, and they got out of debt.

What I love about this story is that she was unconventional. She was not your typical orchestra conductor. Part of that is that she struggled to get in and to be recognized—she almost had to do the job differently in order to do it at all. Her innovation paved the way, not only for more women to come into the field, but for different kinds of men.

In many organizations, there are slightly more women at the lower levels. At the CEO level, women represent about 3 percent. There are a number of forces that influence this: societal issues, decisions of boards of directors, and women themselves. What can we do to bring about a greater participation of women in key leadership roles?

One of the necessary conditions is for the head of the organization to make promoting women a priority and committing to changing the organization's culture.

After the CEO makes this commitment, there have to be changes in the system. According to your research, women excel at 14 of 16 key competencies, yet women are not getting top jobs. When people start to realize that the way they choose and promote leaders favors the behavior of men and is, therefore, biased towards men, they realize that they are not necessarily getting the most qualified person for the job if they do it the way it's always been done.

You've probably heard the example of when there are ten qualifications for a job and a woman meets nine of them, she'll say, "Gosh, I guess I'm not qualified. I better not apply." Studies show that if a man meets three of those qualifications he will raise his hand and say, "I can do it!" If the way we pick leaders is based on who raises their hands and tells you they are the most competent, you're not necessarily getting the most competent person.

What drives the CEOs you know that have made hiring and promoting women a priority?

Often when a CEO has a daughter or a wife and sees how they have been treated by the system, how their talents have been undervalued or overlooked, or how they haven't been given the resources to be developed, then he understands how that is happening inside his own company. When he sees first-hand how people are being treated, it becomes a personal issue.

We're talking about women in general, but there's also the issue of women of different colors. A study called "Black Women Ready to Lead" reported that women are somewhat ambivalent about aspiring for the highest roles. One of the black executives sponsoring the study said, "I don't think that data reflects the women I know." The people doing the study cut the data differently and found that black women are 2.8 times more likely to aspire to the highest jobs compared to white women.

As we look at the differences among women, we need to realize that women of color might be your most ambitious people. Often these women become invisible or they don't have the contacts. That CEO might tell his wife or daughter over dinner, "Hey, this is what's happening." But this doesn't happen across race lines unless they have someone of a different ethnicity in their family. It's much harder to hear about the challenges that occur because of ethnicity rather than gender.

I've been looking at data that suggests that as women age, they reduce their aspirations to the top jobs, but that as they are promoted, aspirations go up—kind of competing forces. Is this true of women of color in your experience?

When a woman comes into the job force, she might start out very ambitious but then her ambitions decline. Some of that is by seeing the



system she is in. There have been studies that suggest that environment can convince a woman that she can't succeed.

Another article suggests that you don't develop as a leader in a vacuum—it is your interactions with other people. If you are not treated as a leader, if you are not able to grow into a leader, and if you are not given the kind of clients you can succeed with, you can't develop as a leader. A lot of becoming a leader is being given the right situations, having people take you under their wings, and having people give you the hard feedback. A lot of women don't get this, and particularly multicultural women don't get this kind of nurturing. Men have received this for years because it is comfortable. They can go out for drinks.

There are pools of talent that we often overlook, particularly women, women of color, and younger people. What do you see as the solution for the growing war for talent as the baby boomers retire and the millennials come up, sometimes without being prepared for these senior leadership jobs?

It is hard, because we've been dealing with flattened organizations and everything's been lean. The next crop of leaders hasn't necessarily had the same level of mentoring and training that the leaders now at the top received. Young people grew up in a very different culture.

We need to do what you and I are committed to doing: to being out in corporate America helping people learn best practices of leadership and helping to train leadership as a discipline rather than letting people just step into leadership.

I think the issue of inclusion is skyrocketing in terms of what leaders need to do to be successful in today's world. We have more generations and cultures working together in the workplace now than ever before. Being able to listen to all the different kinds of people that you have and making sure that you are getting the best ideas from all those people are



the skills that the new generation of leaders will need to get the most out of this tremendously varied workforce that we're leading now.

As you work with various executives, what are the messages that you most frequently emphasize?

Resilience. I'm most well known for falling down when I was competing at the Paralympics. During the slalom, I finished the first run with the fastest time. In ski racing, you have to do a second run in order to win a medal.

A few other women went down before me and we heard that they were crashing in one dangerous spot on the course. I began the second run and I was doing well and I could see the finish line. I hit the ice, lost my balance, and fell on my rear end. I was 1# in the world and now I was sitting in the snow. My reflexes took over, I got over the finish line, and I was still in third place. The woman who won had also fallen down. In the first run, I had beaten her. In the second run, she must have beaten me by just getting up faster—she didn't necessarily ski faster, she got up faster.

I recently did a presentation for a company that was going through a lot of reorganization because of rapid growth. It was good change, but it still got painful, uncomfortable, and messy. I showed before and after pictures of remodeling a house. Between the before and the after there's a lot of construction and a lot of mess. That's where this company was. People need to be comfortable knowing that's what has to happen in order to get from here to there—you've got this messy part in the middle.

Resilience means the ability to bounce back better than you were before, not bouncing back to normal, but bouncing back better. This is my life story.

To conclude, I understand that you have a favorite quote that says something like, “What you do when everything goes right doesn’t tell me who you are. It is what you do after disaster that truly shows your character.” Could you elaborate on that?

That quote is a real touchstone for me. I remember working with an army depot that was downsizing. It was a very painful situation. Everybody in the town had jobs on the base. If the base closed, the town was going to be in crisis. People had lived there for generations.

They brought me in as a motivational speaker and I thought, “Wow, how do I motivate people in this situation?” I played a first-hand account of a fire on a steamboat. We talked about what eight or nine people did during the crisis. I had people choose who they thought was the best person and who they thought was the worst person. There wasn’t a clear answer.

The point of this exercise was really, “Who do you want to be when the chips are down?” Who you are at a dinner party or a garden party is nice, but when things are hard, that’s what shows your character and defines your life story: who you were, what you did, how you treated other people, and what your values were. Tough times are a chance to put a stake in the ground and say who you are.



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