

Women at the Top Leadership Research

It is always interesting to be curious about the ripple effect of role models, inspiring teachers, trail blazers bravery. How are those doors opened, glass ceilings dissolved, seemingly insurmountable cliffs scaled, limitations challenged, assumptions overturned? Is it simply one courageous or foolhardy person or a combination of many making those ripples spread way beyond what might be thought possible?

With BWB – Bristol Women in Business – now in its 4th successful year connecting women both from corporates and large businesses in the city the opportunity to input another dimension became clear. Inspirational women at the top by sharing their story have influenced, intrigued and encouraged the realisation that we are all role models, inspiring teachers, brave trailblazers.

As a result my inspiration has been to invite women at the top to share their thoughts regarding leadership and create this series of interviews. I began with five questions and as the first interview was coming to a close two more questions were determined to be asked:

- What question would you like to have been asked? Which some interviewees chose to answer.
- Who would you like to be interviewed or suggest that I interview?

Michelle Crossman - Senior Leader in Defence

second in the series - interviewed on 24 March 2017 by Halina Jaroszewska

You have no doubt inspired a lot of aspiring leaders – from where (or from whom) do you draw your inspiration?

I thought quite hard about this question. It is one of those that perhaps demand a response along the lines of a famous leader from history or the current day, but, for me, the reality is I have always drawn on my instinct and my internal drive. I have been fortunate to be able to participate in many varied leadership and management professional and personal development opportunities; these occasions for reflection have challenged or reinforced my views on leadership but I have always walked away more insightful and inspired in some way. As I have got older I have realised the impact that my father, a military man himself, has had on my own leadership style. It's also working alongside people and taking what you like about how they lead as well as how you have been treated.

I have taken much inspiration from the working relationships I have been able to foster with senior other ranks. The relationship between a military officer and their Sergeant Major or Senior Non-Commissioned Officer [a senior manager at the coal face) who is very experienced and capable can be a make or break one. Developing an open, honest relationship is key and inspiration comes from the relationship not just the person. Such a working relationship enables open, honest feedback to be shared and confidence to be built.

What would you say have been the biggest developments in leadership that you have witnessed in your years as a leader?

From my own large public sector organisation, leadership is more frequently having to be done at reach across a large geographically dispersed area. Previously one might not have been in the same building but would certainly have been in a position to access face to face. There is much more 'matrix management' which can complicate and strain relationships particularly when other leaders invariably have different agendas. I have also witnessed how the use of technology and information impacts the traditional leadership techniques.

I have seen a greater acceptance of the need for more reflection and self-awareness by senior leadership. In particular there has been an increase in the use of personal coaches to enable leaders to reflect on their leadership style and unconscious bias training. These are really positive developments that are helping people to understand and address the diversity challenge.

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What do you think are the most significant trends and challenges faced by leadership today?

I think information overload, expectations placed and the resultant risk of burnout. My instinct says that expectations are higher and broader. People can sometimes have unreasonable expectations of their leaders who are for the most part human beings not superman or woman! Motivation of the de-motivated is a challenge. I see an increasing trend where leaders themselves want to have decent leadership roles but not at the expense of other commitments and the work/life balance. I think that leadership is straightforward but complicated by organisational structures and process. Sometimes there's lack of clarity which can be a real challenge when trying to do the right thing by your people.

What do you think today's leaders should be doing to keep moving leadership to a new level?

I think finding more ways to facilitate different ways of working so not just full-time. I think reflective practice and seeking external training such as the Windsor Leadership Trust programmes are vital to be the best leader you can be. Their Women in Leadership - Tackling Progression was an incredibly empowering experience for me. I was with a group of other women in senior positions across all sectors at Windsor Great Park for 2 days. We were totally immersed in an amazing setting to reflect on the challenges women face today with space to discuss the reality and adaptability of these. We all realised that we shared the same confidence issues and challenges. So we got that we were all doing incredible things and the importance of support.

Technology has transformed our working environments and can be distracting so it's more important than ever to engage and really listen to people. Since leadership is about relationships you really need to listen more than talk. I'm not sure the fundamentals of good and poor leadership have changed.

What advice would you give to young aspiring leaders?

I would say to build a network; have a confidante; understand your conscious / unconscious biases; seek diverse leadership opportunities. If you want more senior / Board roles go and find different environments to be a leader – maybe volunteer as a youth leader, become a school governor or work towards becoming a trustee for a charity. You need to constantly challenge yourself to grow both as a leader and a follower but don't place too much pressure on yourself. The journey is more important than the destination. And go check out the Windsor Leadership Trust programmes.

What question would you like to have been asked?

What advice would you give yourself about being a good leader 10 years ago from what you have learnt over the past decade which would have helped you operate more comfortably at Board level?

Who would you like to have / recommend to be interviewed?

Baroness Dame Tessa Jowell DBE – I have heard her speak about leadership and it was a very heartfelt, honest and inspiring account.

**To discuss how Halina Jaroszevska can help
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Outstanding Executive Coach | Chosen By High Potential Leaders, Key Teams |
To Deliver Remarkable Results | Inspires Change

Halina helps fast track and aspiring leaders, also key teams, to turn uncertainty into a powerful tool for exponential growth. Her aim is to enable clients to switch surviving into thriving, take business and personal performance to the next level and maximise their potential during challenging times.