

Top of the Mountain

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When it comes to women in higher education there seem to be three truths: women are uniquely positioned to mentor other women, there is way more room for others at the top than is realized, and everything we need to know about women in higher education can be learned from female comedians.

Think of your favorite motivational poster. It is probably the one with a small group of women holding hands triumphantly on top of a mountain during a sunset labeled 'Empowerment' or 'Determination' or some other buzz word that implies they overcame something to get to the top. Trust us, we did a Google image search. What the poster doesn't show is the women they kicked off the top because it was perceived there wasn't enough room. We would like to contest that there is plenty of room on top of the mountain for everybody, and we need to stop trying to push each other down or hold each other back from the top.

"Rooting for other people's failure does get in the way of your success," said Amy Poehler. When we look at situations where someone will win and someone will lose, it should be for college football, thumb wars, and checking in for a flight on Southwest Airlines; not the workplace. When we start to view success as something that can look different and can be obtained by many people, we can support others in a way that does not take anything from our own achievement. Now, don't get us wrong: we encourage working hard, striving for what you want, and aiming to be the best. There is just no need for it to be at the expense of others.

Let's time travel together, specifically to 1848. In this epic year, our favorite female superheroes of the suffrage movement gathered together for the First Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. Many participants there crafted and signed a 'Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions' which set the agenda for women's rights activism for years to come (National Women's History Museum, 1997). These women who gathered together knew they could not do this alone and needed each other.

We truly believe women are uniquely positioned to mentor other women, and mentorship can significantly benefit young professionals. Everyone is climbing their own mountain and has their own version of success, but for those individuals who have gotten there, try and reflect back on those who helped you. If you cannot think of someone, think of those women who gathered together in New York. Someone was there along the way. If you still feel like you did it alone, now is the time to make sure other young female professionals never feel alone in their journey. This leads us to another gem from our pal Amy Poehler, "The biggest lie and the biggest crime is that we are all doing this alone and look down on people who don't." It is not a weakness to seek out and accept support from others.

Women are still underrepresented within the top level university and leadership roles within higher education. Last year, Lucie Lapovsky pointed out in a Forbes article titled 'Why So Few Women College Presidents?' that less than 30% of institution presidents are female, and those who are have been labeled "barrier breakers" and "pioneers." Women leaders should be the

norm. Sarah Thomas, the first female referee and Jen Walter, the first female coach in the National Football League, should not be headline news.

There is a fundamental discrepancy in most people's perceptions of women's competencies to serve as a leader. Our minds often trick us into associating stereotypical "male traits" with typical "leadership traits." Mary Hogue and Robert Lord (2007) presented a great explanation of this phenomenon by articulating that perceptions can come from many sources such as an individual's own expectations, their personal history, their professional experiences, and their current workplace experiences. Hogue and Lord go on to explain it is difficult to eliminate preexisting gender bias because "leadership is a complex social process involving relationships that occur at many levels, and it also is a perceptual process that requires the recognition and acceptance of leadership in others or the recognition of oneself as the most appropriate leader" (Hogue & Lord, 2007). We have to get to a point where women recognize they hold the skills and abilities to rise into high ranking positions. This starts long before women enter the profession. Real life example: one of our favorite activities when working with groups of student leaders involves reading a vague prompt and asking them to fill out a 'True, False, Unknown' quiz. (It's a trap – almost everything is unknown). The activity highlights the assumptions we make based on limited information. We've already done this activity with two groups of high performing campus leaders this fall, and both times women (and men) assumed the boss or person in charge in the scenario was a male, despite no pronoun usage. It is beyond time to shift the culture to one in which we assume women are leaders just as often as we assume men are leaders.

One of the biggest issues we've noticed as we've tried to navigate a male dominated profession is that it's really hard to find good female mentors. We have seen in our own lives that mentorship by same sex mentors hold a certain unique value. Are there good women role models out there? *Absolutely*. Unfortunately, they are often too busy running their campus and maybe also their family (at this point, please start listening to the Beyoncé track of your choice, we recommend 'Run the World') to mentor all the up and coming women in higher education.

We are in no way saying you have to be everything to everyone; we aren't even suggesting you try to be everything to one person. Mentorship can take many different forms. Kathy Kram, a professor in Management Organizational Behavior at Boston University, has been researching the concept of mentorship longer than we've been alive. Much of her work is just as relevant and important today as it was in the 1980's. One of the most interesting ideas Kram (and others) present is the different types of mentoring that professionals can benefit from in order to help them grow in their role. We'll take a quick break from quoting comedians to quote a researcher: "Mentors provide young adults with career-enhancing functions, such as sponsorship, coaching, facilitating exposure and visibility, and offering challenging work or protection, all of which help the younger person to establish a role in the organization, learn the ropes, and prepare for advancement" (Kram & Isabella, 1985).

Between the two of us, we supervise four graduate students, two women and two men. We know each other's strengths: we know Sarah can coach the four of them on how to be a better advisor, but when we need someone to facilitate their exposure on campus and connect them to all the right people, Melissa is the best person. We balance each other out and never try to provide all

things to the people we supervise. The more people involved in the development and education of the people we supervise, the better. We believe everyone has something to offer the younger generation of female professionals. We also believe it is the duty and responsibility of all current female professionals to help each other be successful. We're not sure if Madeline Albright or Taylor Swift said it, but we agree there is a special place in hell for women who don't help other women. That being said, think of the female professional you admire and respect most in this field. Got it? Great. Here's our challenge: think of a young professional who has potential. Reach out to her. Help her build the skills to make her one of the best. Help her get to the top of the mountain, even if you aren't there yet yourself. Helping her will make her better, it will make you better, and it will make this profession better.

References

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