

Mothers, Fathers, Men, Ambition

The people and values that motivate and shape women's success

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Good morning and thank you for joining us today. I must say, I find the 7:30 start particularly ambitious for me, and probably for a few evening people in the audience. Why is it that we always admire morning people? Like it's the only virtue, as in the apologetic "I'm not a morning person." Why isn't being an evening person just as virtuous? Anyway, for those of you who are evening people, thanks for getting up, for those morning people in the audience, well I suppose there are other things which don't come easy to you.

That's a bit of a segue into my theme this morning, because I want to talk about Ambition. Freely, frankly and non judgmentally. Which is not often the way ambition is thought about when used adjectivally with women. Somehow ambitious is right up there with aggressive when it comes to linkage with the "b" word.

I want to start with a story, a girls' week away story. And by the way, for those of you with careers, partners, kids, dogs, employees --- there is no better stress reliever and no harder plan to execute than a girls' week away. Those of you who have experienced this singularly selfish pleasure will no doubt corroborate my conclusion. I'm not talking weekend, which is good, I'm advocating week, which is infinitely better.

Anyway, this story is true and it came to be a life altering experience in self awareness, certainly for me, and I suspect also for the friends I shared it with. The title of this talk is stolen directly from this tale, hence the slightly pretentious *Mothers, Fathers, Men, Ambition*.

Imagine if you will, six thirty-and forty something women rendezvousing at the Villa Mimosa, a gloriously secluded villa in the hills outside Lucca, in a splendid Tuscan September. We'd managed to leave behind the jobs, husbands, kids starting school that week, parents, at least six crises of monumental proportion. Five of us came from Toronto, one from Germany. Only a couple of us worked together, one of us didn't even really know the majority. Pulling this trip off was so miraculous given our many commitments and guilts that, try as we might, we haven't ever been able to repeat it, and we've been trying for five years.

As we pull into the villa, fig tree in full fruit, surrounded by olive groves, a rosemary bush the size of a Christmas tree, a perfect swimming pool immaculately maintained, we are graciously greeted by the extremely elegant landlady, dressed for villa renting in some amazingly understated Armani-type skirt, blouse scarf-combo. We of course, look like typical North American *schlubbs* without so much as a smear of lipstick. The contessa, after spotting at least three wedding rings in the crowd, and despite her normal discretion, can't help but enquire of us "*how come, six femal-e?*" We stumbled to explain "*amiche, amiche, si?*" - but I think she was unconvinced!

We arrived in the afternoon, well provisioned with food, sunscreen and much wine, and discovered to our delight that the place sported a well-equipped kitchen, an

outdoor Italian style bar-b-q, and a massive hearth in front of the expansive dining room table. After a swim and a few sips, we set about the challenge of preparing dinner. With 6 self-described keen cooks, we had lots to do and plenty of time to do it, and plenty of wine. Dinner prep seemed to take a few hours, and dinner consumption a few hours more with the commensurate number of dead soldiers and wicked first night hangovers the next morning.

Clearly, in order to avoid certain cirrhosis, we needed a more organized and formal structure to give shape and purpose to the long fragrant evenings at Villa Mimosa. The notion of a topic a night was born and we quickly declared the topics, one per night, to be “Fathers, Mothers, Men, Ambition”. The goal was really quite simple, to inspire the intellects and personalities around the table to discuss those who have impacted our lives, relationships and potentially why we were where we were at that point in time. Who knew at the time the discussions would be so cathartic, so revealing or so memorable, but so they proved to be.

So, evening 1, we discuss “Mothers”, lots of good stuff, lots of “you think you had it rough,” lots of admissions of friendship out the other side, a little continuing dissatisfaction, the usual stuff, netting out that we have all pretty much resolved and reached resolution with our mothers over the past 30 odd years.

Evening 2 – “Fathers”. All in all less meat on that bone, with a couple of notable exceptions and concluding ultimately that they did have influence, were role models and applied pressure on our lives. Go figure.

Evening 3 – “Men”. Need I say more, lots to say and share....and all of it volunteered with enthusiasm and much of it recognized as not unique!

And then we came to our final topic - “Ambition”.

Now by this point you might have thought that we had this down pat—a terrific menu, a cooking team working like a well oiled machine, and a highly satisfactory way of enjoying interesting, controversial conversation, opinion, insight and just a healthy amount of self absorption. Well, when I, I think it was me, reminded us of the topic, we have the dinner table equivalent of staring at your shoes. No spontaneous examples, no freely volunteered opinion, just nervous giggling – nervous giggling *for chrissake*, from six professional, successful, accomplished women!

So I take the plunge and confess to a lifetime of being ambitious, of never being satisfied with where I was today, of always wanting the next job up, of wanting to be in charge and being convinced I could do a fine job of it. I bare my soul, and they stare at me open-mouthed. Admiring my courage as I’m later told.

But, Chianti Classico being a superb lubricant, others gradually share this most personal of confessions, some admitting that this is the first occasion they have ever knowingly acknowledged what was readily apparent --- that we are all

ambitious, our success to that point impossible without the driving force of ambition pushing us to compete, to contribute, to sustain a healthy and ongoing dissatisfaction with the status quo as far as our own lives are concerned.

Evening 4 ultimately proves to be the most revealing, the most confessional and, in my view, the most inspiring of all the evening discussions we had. Certainly, there was no new topic for evening 5.

This story does have a twist at the ending which I will share with you later on but I think it is a superb and personal example of the issue behind my theme today. "Ambition", unlike other subjects like "Leadership", "Mentoring", "breaking through", is a pretty loaded word. I'd like to explore the importance and nature of ambition a little bit, and share my perspective on this absolutely essential ingredient to success.

At the time of this Italian adventure, I was 43, President of OgilvyOne, a large and successful Direct Marketing agency. I had 2 sons, a divorce, a new partner, a beautiful home, a 70-person plus payroll to meet, parents, siblings, nieces and nephews, happy clients and clearly fabulous friends. Since, I've left the agency business, spent two years with IBM in a senior North American job, left that company to tackle another challenge at Microsoft (a company where some days I feel as old as Methuselah), and spent the last two years building a team and a huge growth machine within the consumer group at Microsoft. Something that has me working harder and longer than I've worked in years.

As an aside, as those of you will know who have joined companies in a senior capacity, the irony of it is that you are recruited for your track record elsewhere, and the moment you're inside the company all credit for past success vanishes and you are only as good as what you've done for the new team, which of course is nothing on day one. Now back to "ambition."

Why did I leave a secure and comfortable post at the virtual top of an industry I'd been climbing for 18 years? And by the way, it wasn't the money. It was two things: boredom and thwarted ambition. Two sides of the same coin. After all isn't "ambition" just a more focused word for "motivation"?

I badly wanted and was ready for the next steep bit of the learning curve - and I wasn't going to get it where I was. So I took the plunge into a new industry, a new company and a whole new set of evaluation criteria. Maybe a crazy trade off in terms of balance, competency, even top job potential, but completely satisfying and stimulating from a lifelong journey perspective. And, when that experience failed to meet all the expectations my ambition put on it, I switched again - back to a line job - and began the learning curve all over again.

The thing about ambition for me anyway, is that it's not about the destination, it's about the journey. And as long as I'm always doing more, stretching harder, not being bored (a key component for me), then I'm realizing today's ambition.

As I've thought more about women and their ambition, I've come to the conclusion that, in our society's eyes, there are two sorts of ambition. First, and most applauded, is the desire for personal best --- in Sports, the Arts, Science, the Professions. From this kind of "Ambition", we get our Olympians, our Margaret Atwoods, our Beverly McLachlins. Women do extremely well in areas of individual achievement.

But when it comes to organizational ambition, the passionate desire to lead complex organizations in business, government, and the public sector, we do far worse. The representation of women in officer roles in corporate Canada is a pathetic 6.4% of line jobs. We hold only 3% of clout titles – Chief Executive something titles.

When MP Dr. Caroline Bennett challenged the shocking gender imbalance of cabinet not only did our Prime Minister virtually ignore her comment, her colleagues subsequently voted her out of her caucus position.

In the Maclean's magazine recent list of the 50 most influential Canadians, only nine women appear at all. And of those only four, Anne McLellan, the justice minister, Nellie Cournoyea, the Chairwomen of the Inuvialuit Regional corporation, Martha Piper, president of UBC, and Louise Comeau, head of the Federation of Regional Municipalities, can be said to hold organizational influence rather than influence as a result of personal achievement. Not much of a list, despite these admirable women.

Why is this so? Why are we celebrated for personal best but, dare I say it, blocked from organizational top dog positions? Maybe because while women may be personally trusted, they are *less trusted to lead us*. We don't have *alpha* people, we have *alpha males*. When it comes down to picking someone who is going to win for us, we are inclined to pick the big strong competitive, undistracted, yes, ruthless guy. Personally, I think it's unlikely that the Packard family would be putting up such a fuss if Carly Fiorina was a Carl!

And this brings me to one of the best pieces of advice I was ever given. An early boss and long time mentor told me once that "people never get anywhere unless someone wants them to." Translation: organizational ambition requires that others be ambitious for you.

In my case I've been extremely lucky in my parents, my partner, even my kids, All are ambitious for me, in fact my husband frequently embarrasses me by sending any and all newspaper mentions of me to an extensive mailing list of friends and relatives. I'm not sure you have to have an actively supportive and helpful spouse, but for sure, if there's a daily guilt trip going on about your divided attention, no inner drive can sustain you and the marriage alike.

Equally important are the people you work with and for, and those who work for you. Organizations are political, people quite naturally operate on the “what’s in it for me” factor, enlightened self-interest. If they are ambitious for you it will be because they believe in your ability to help them achieve their goals. When people are prepared to go on dangerous missions with you, you know they’re ambitious for you, because they see you as helping them win. Think of all the jerks who get ahead organizationally (the Enron leadership comes to mind). The reason they do so is because they bring others along with them.

I happen to believe that if you win for others along with yourself you will be rewarded with ongoing support and loyalty and that loyalty will transfer from organization to organization, whether by reputation or, the truly to be cherished, people willing to follow you to other places. And by the way, I don’t believe you need to be a jerk to get ahead, in my experience, most jerks eventually get their come-uppance.

My first personal heroine was Queen Elizabeth the First. I still voraciously consume everything written about her. Talk about the “Mothers, Fathers, Men, Ambition” quadrangle, boy did she have them all.

Born to her dad’s second and first beheaded wife, not only does she survive and thrive in the political intrigue of 16th century England, once she finally gets the corner office she’s got religious upheaval and the *freakin’* Spanish Armada to deal with. Not to mention a whole slew of ambitious men who want to bed her or marry her for their own ends.

I think what I admire most about her is that she recognized early on that it wasn’t about getting somewhere for herself alone. It was about using her superior skills, understanding and vision to take the whole country forward, and doing so meant a lifelong balancing act. The result was she gave her name to an age, an age in which the accomplishments of others really defined the achievements.

It’s no accident that I stuck on Elizabeth as a heroine early on. I clearly wasn’t going to be an athlete, or an artist, and I’ve always envied those who knew from an early age that they were born to be an astronaut, or a doctor. I’m still waiting to hear from on high what I want to be when I grow up. So, Elizabeth, a smart, educated generalist with an innate sense of how to manage complex organizations had natural appeal. And my admiration is undiminished. I believe she’s a woman we can all learn a lot from, even today.

I want to spend a moment on “recognition”.

One of the oblique criticisms of women’s ambition is that its selfish, self-aggrandizing, putting yourself forward in an unseemly way. At my all girls’ high school, for example, if you wanted elected office the surest path to defeat was to say so. Well, I think recognition is vital to organizational success, particularly for

women, and I urge you not to shy away from it. And I mean recognition on as broad a basis as possible.

When I was little and first grasped the concept of mortality, my perhaps, peculiar response was that fame was the only appropriate goal. Something along the lines of “the only point of living is if some one, preferably many some ones’, will remember you once you’re dead”.

Luckily I’ve modified that view, but a kernel of it still remains—the need to have an impact, make a difference, make stuff happen. The recognition part - the fame - has kind of receded into the role of what Micheline Bouchard, President of Motorola Canada, described as “being visibly competent”, *all the time* - And this is why it’s important. The ongoing reinforcement of *being seen to be successful* helps people get over the hurdle of placing their personal eggs in a woman’s basket.

Many of us have a problem seeking the limelight, particularly when it comes as a result of a group rather than personal effort. We’ve been socialized to not see ourselves as the centre of the universe, and we’re not. But that doesn’t mean we can’t take a bullet for the team, does it? After all, someone has to represent them? If you accept that women are at a deficit when it comes to organizational confidence, then I think Micheline was spot on when she advised us that it’s not enough to be competent, *one has to be seen to be competent*, in order to get ahead. And ink, lots of ink, is a proven route to credit for competence, perhaps even more credit than one deserves!

A very good friend of mine, yes one of the Italian adventurers, once confided in me that she couldn’t see herself running an organization. She claimed she saw herself much more in the role of a #2 – power behind the throne, good woman behind the man - you know the line, pretty classic limit to a woman’s ambition. This woman happens to be extremely smart, enormously hard working, capable of inspiring huge degrees of confidence in colleagues, customers and employees and yet, at the time, she didn’t see herself in the #1 position

Many men of my acquaintance, with half the natural gifts and way less experience, would absolutely envision themselves in the corner office. The difference – self-confidence. Not commitment, not balance issues, not disgust for the politics of advancement - just plain self-image. I think many women’s’ ambitions are at odds with their self-confidence, and because we fail to celebrate ambition in women, the self-confidence problem can overwhelm.

The good news of course, you can work these things out. One of the ways I’ve always managed the conflict between my aspirations and my self-image has been, not to build the 5 year on the 10 year plan, I always found that a bit overwhelming, but to focus on the next role, my boss’s job, or even my boss’s boss’s job. That way, I could use my natural ability to learn, to get it, to master the current challenge to quite quickly see myself in the next role.

Self confidence, or lack of it, didn't come into it, because I wasn't really reaching for something very far off. Well, apply that model, and pretty soon you are looking at the top job in the organization. And my friend? Happily she's since changed her tune and is now perfectly at ease with the idea of running the show, which one day soon she undoubtedly will.

I chose to speak this morning on the subject of ambition because I know it exists in all of us. Having worked with many smart, competent women and men, I am convinced that, by and large, women in organizations use their innate ambition to less advantage than their male counterparts. Whether its because it's inherently in conflict with our feminine socialization, or because we rationalize the suppression of corporate ambition against competing interests, the fact remains that both men and women are more comfortable with ambitious *men*.

I want you to ignore this fact and:

- Acknowledge and be proud your ambition. Celebrate the fact that you want to go far! And while you're at it, celebrate it in others, especially other women.

I want you to

- Consciously reject all the baggage and barriers that have built up along the way on why things have not worked out...the biases, blame, equality, leadership issues, self-doubt, guilt, and the list goes on and on...*they block ambitions*.

I want you

- At times to be prepared to "kick start" your ambition, whether you find yourself undecided on what to pursue after your first child, asking for your boss's job, whatever, but kick starting your inner ambition will need to be done at times

I want you to

- Set achievable, practical but not threatening goals, but do have the vision to see doing your boss's boss's job. I suspect that ambition is a lifelong gift and so lifelong goals seem appropriate don't you think?

I want you to

- Recognize how important it is for others to be ambitious for you. If it's you against the world, back the world! But work to imbue others with confidence for you and for themselves through you.

If you acknowledge the importance and power of your ambition, recognize that it is there to drive you to greater achievements and sustain you through the challenges, and if you couple it with competence, hard work and the morality you learned at your mother's knee, you can defeat the insidious erosion of feeling

inadequate, the fear of being in charge, the doubts that we all have about our capacity to lead.

You will be blessed with the ongoing luxury of feeling challenged but not overwhelmed, of feeling effective, competent and like you are in fact making a difference to people. You will be gifted with the satisfaction which comes from being recognized by those whose opinion you value, as being in exactly the right place.

To end the tale of the Villa Mimosa and our unprecedented confessions on personal ambition - within a year of that night, every single one of us had taken on a bigger, better, or at least in my case, a very different job.

Coincidence. I don't think so.

Thank you. And enjoy the software!