

Women in Leadership Seminar Highlights

March 22, 2013



Topic: *"From CNN to Public Broadcasting: Lessons Learned about Leadership, Innovation & Power"*

Teya Ryan, CEO and Executive Director of Georgia Public Broadcasting joined us this morning at Women in Leadership to share her career and leadership journey. Known as a creative person and "storyteller", Teya shared key lessons from her life journey in a series of short stories - primarily gleaned from her time at CNN. "These and other lessons learned," she said, "have had a lasting impact on how I view leadership and success - and not always in a good way."

Teya's first story began with one of the first projects she worked on in Atlanta - an environmental project that before she arrived was failing. Because she had demonstrated some expertise in this area, she was brought in - but without any introduction - to a CNN boardroom full of men, including the CNN founder / CEO & Chairman, Ted Turner. No one seemed to notice her, and after taking some time to calm her nerves, she began to listen to the discussion about this project.

"I realized pretty quickly," Teya said, "these guys really had no idea what they were talking about. At that point, I decided to just stand up and address the room. I told them in essence that they didn't know what they were talking about and that they would fail. Interestingly, no one spoke to me after that comment so I exited the room and headed home to L.A. shortly thereafter. But three weeks later, I received a call asking me to come work for CNN and to run the project."

Learning point 1: Teya's message from this experience was that there are very few times in your life where you have nothing to lose because you hold all the cards. It is vital to take advantage of such opportunities to grow yourself and your career.

A second experience that tweaked Teya's career occurred on an elevator ride. One morning, she stepped into the elevator at CNN only to be joined by none other than Ted Turner! Stunned that Ted was in the elevator alone with her, Teya tried to think of something to say. What she said was, "What are you doing today, Ted?" After a moment's pause, Ted Turner turned to her and answered, "I'm going up to think."

Learning point 2: This brief experience made Teya realize the importance of carving out that time in your day to think and reflect. It is imperative for leaders to take time to think.

On another occasion, Teya was called into the office of a senior-level woman at CNN who she did not know very well. The woman told Teya, "People are talking about you. It's not a good talk." As it turned out, Teya's coworkers had noticed that she was wearing white shoes - after Labor Day - something no self-respecting woman in the South would ever do. The executive went on to tell Teya, "You don't want them talking about your shoes, but about you and your talent so that you can build your career."

Learning point 3: Teya learned from this experience that you do need to sweat the small stuff, as the small stuff leads to the bigger things. "This executive knew how to mentor other women and did so even though it was not her responsibility. Mentoring takes caring, sensitivity

and reaching out," Teya added. "This is exactly what all of us as women managers and leaders and professionals need to do for other women. Mentoring in the form of feedback and support for each other is needed to help move our careers along. It doesn't have to be a formal mentoring program, just a few minutes here and there."

Learning point 4: Teya also talked about advice she received from one of her bosses about saying what she wanted out loud. In other words, asking for what she wanted. "When I began to do that," she said, "things I wanted started to happen."

At one pivotal point in her career, Teya was promoted to run the CNN Financial network in New York. When she got there, she was told by a Turner executive, "You are now playing a blood sport." He was right – it was a tough game!

Learning point 5: Teya explained, "I learned from this experience that you have to be aware of how the game of business is played, and in the case of CNN Financial and other businesses as well, it was highly competitive, rough and tough. You may not like the rules, but you have to understand them, and that in itself is difficult in a very aggressive culture. But one thing is for certain - if you don't know the rules, you lose!"

Learning point 6: "Women have a tendency to make the mistake of denying who we are as women. We are different than men due - among other things - to *real* biological differences in our brains. Men and women are literally 'wired' differently. It explains how/why men tend to make decisions more quickly than women because there are less interconnections between the right and left half of male brains. Women have many more connections in their brains, there's more going on at any one time, and therefore there's more to consider when making decisions."

A final story shared by Teya began as she came home one night from a long day at CNN. This was two years after 9/11, when everyday was a blur of new stories – a time that Teya says was both frightening and exhilarating in the news world. Teya's daughter was two years old at the time. When Teya arrived home that night, she received a call from a producer at the Larry King show who was screaming into the phone, "Where are my dots?" As Teya listened on the other end and frantically worked to find "the dots" (part of the traveling backdrop for Larry King's shows), her young daughter jumped off of her lap, ran into the kitchen, took off her diaper, and – well you can surmise what happened then.

Learning point 7: This particular experience impacted Teya as a mother, and clearly redirected her life. Four months later, she decided to leave CNN and her career behind. "Even though I knew this was the right decision for me, at the time, I was upset," Teya explained. "I had become the statistic I never wanted to be! But the good news is that I was able to spend four wonderful years at home with my daughter. Though I found it hard and embarrassing at times to have left the workforce, I'm thankful for the mommy time I spent with my daughter. And as it turned out, it actually prepared me for the next step in my career at GPB. I literally could not have made the transition directly from CNN to GPB. I needed that time to learn about life and children....and my view of leadership changed dramatically as well."

"I think it is these experiences and 'twists of the moment' that build your life and shape the person and leader that you are," Teya concluded. "For me these stories are the way that I make sense of my life."

Q&A

Q: What do you mean by 'rules'?

"In my case, this meant when everyone in the room wanted my head. Women tend to be the worst at this! Women are the best and worst managers, and men fall somewhere in the middle. I can see this in my own daughter. If women do not grow out of this stage, they can bring it into the workplace."

Q: Can you talk more about your transition back into the corporate world?

"I was so happy to take time to spend with my daughter. I also did some media consulting work on the side. During this time, I started to work on the concept of the Baby's Network. Shortly after I started getting the itch to go back to work, I got a call from GPB. I felt as though GPB had previously been a wasted resource, so I was excited to go back into the workforce and help rebuild a company!"

Q: What trends are you seeing in Public Broadcasting?

"Public Broadcasting started as a success, but then cable came along, and could do more by selling advertisements. Now everything is turning around, because cable can't get the ratings it used to. This is a heyday for public media. We need to be sure to be true to who we are and what we are."

Q: What is your thinking on long-term strategy for Public Broadcasting?

"This is what keeps me up at night! We recently just took a 5% cut for sequestration. I am not sure what the model is. Part of it is turning this into a business. We have already started by using our educational resources. We have to focus on a local level and manage people's perceptions so that they are willing to give. Public Broadcasting needs to figure out what is our core expertise and how do we monetize that. The first step in this process is getting into the psychology that it is our responsibility to sustain ourselves."

Q: How have you and your spouse juggled your careers?

"My husband does *all* the cooking! He has really taken the ride with me. We went through difficult times in my career together, yet he never questioned my career ambitions! He also does the laundry and is great with our daughter."

Q: Please compare and contrast the leader you are now (GPB) and that you were then (CNN).

"I am really different now! Everything seemed so big and important then. I was previously an erratic leader with a temper. Even though I was promoted, I knew nothing about managing people; I was very tough and disconnected from my direct reports. I decided to speak with HR about how I could soften up. My immediate reaction was to bake pumpkin loaves for everyone!"

"Over time, however, I've learned to be inclusive and not be so frightened by challenges. I hire people that are smarter than me and let them lift the company. At some point, you get to the point where you don't need the credit. I have been called 'bossy' since I was five, but that is no reason to hold back! Women must support one another. If you fail, others should support you more than ever, as that is when you learn!"

Q: How are you effective in an organization where people are looking out for themselves?

“You have to pick and choose the times when you will take the credit. It is especially important to take the credit when something goes wrong. Make it clear who you need to align with in order to get to where you want to be. Understand the organizational structure and how it works – how you can move through the bloodstream to be successful. Determine how you can take people with you as you move.”

Q: Where does the responsibility to create change lie?

“Lifting other women up with you! You have to extrapolate and bring others along by mentoring and protecting others. One of the best ways to do this is investing in micro loans to women around the globe.”

For more information about Teya Ryan and Georgia Public Broadcasting, [click here](#).