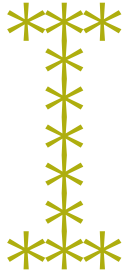


improving opportunities for women

by HELEN FRAME PETERS



One solution is to encourage young women to take on leadership roles in all areas of endeavor, so they can learn to fail, pick themselves up, dust off their egos, and try again

IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS is easy. We can look around us and simply observe the fact that far fewer than half of our business and public leaders are women. Identifying potential solutions is much more challenging—especially when the problem is one as broad in scope as what is preventing women from becoming leaders. And coming up with innovative solutions is even more difficult still.

In the spirit of progress, I offer what I hope are five new suggestions for ways to make concrete improvements in opportunities for women.

Publish the data. A recent study by the Boston Club and Bentley College showed that women own almost 50 percent of the assets in Massachusetts, but they only serve on 9 percent of the boards. Another study at MIT by women science faculty found that women faculty at MIT received less grant money, research assistance, and even smaller offices than their male counterparts. Publishing data like these will get people to look at why this is happening and what they can do within their organizations to fix it.

Manage the money. Women may have 50 percent of the assets, but we certainly don't act like it. Women often shy away from finance and money matters, leaving this important activity to husbands or experts. Every woman needs to take charge of her personal balance sheet, planning for future life stages and investing soundly and wisely. Women who sit on corporate or nonprofit boards need to be experts in reading the balance sheet, income statement, and statement of cash flows. Your advice isn't worth as much if you can't translate it into the currency of the organization.

Focus on your university. There are a number of things women can do with their alma maters to improve women's opportunities. At my alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania, women were not donating at the same rates as men. At the request of the trustees, we organized a council of women alumnae and started to tackle the issues that are important to women. We reviewed promotion and tenure statistics, safety issues, and women's athletics. To celebrate 125 years of women on campus, we commissioned the first oil portraits of women leaders, created a women's history archive, and built a women's walk and sculp-

ture garden. Finally, we made sure that women were on the important nominating committees so that more women served as trustees and members of the board of overseers.

Sure enough, as we got more women involved, we increased women's donation rates, eventually raising more than \$100 million that will be used for programs that are important to both women and men at the university.

Teach young women how to fail. We need to encourage young women to take on leadership roles in all areas of endeavor, so they can learn to fail, pick themselves up, dust off their egos, and try again. I know of a young woman who was a high school valedictorian and a very talented athlete. She went on to a very select university, where she played a sport her first semester. At the end of the semester, she received all A's except for one B+, and she dropped her sport because she was worried about her academic career. She's smart, and she has the potential to do great things, but how will she learn how to fail? Without that opportunity, women become perfectionists, withdrawing from taking risks, and ultimately are less successful in whatever they do.

Do your part, but accept those who can't or won't. Once you've arrived, you need to do more, even if you think you have already done your part. Find ways to make opportunities for women in every area of your life. Take a stand where you can, and applaud others who follow suit. But remember that there are many women in positions of influence who, for whatever reason, don't feel comfortable doing this. We need to celebrate their successes even if those women don't take the same path. It may not always feel good when someone like this ends up on top. But we need to remember that we all win when we celebrate accomplished women.

Taking these steps will help move us from a society in which women have the opportunity to succeed to one in which women do succeed, in equal measure with men. ✱

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