Navigating Adversity, Barriers, and Obstacles for Women Leaders

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Overview

- Research
- Examples of adversity
- Strategies to overcome adversity
- Surviving and thriving through adversity
Women are now earn more bachelor’s, master’s and doctorates than men. Despite this, there is a large leadership gender gap across all sectors of the United States economy. On average women hold only 18% of top leadership postions. As you can see from this slide, women have gained some ground over the past four decades in the field of higher education leadership. Their share of university presidential positions has slowly increased from 5 percent in 1975 to 26 percent in 2011. However, a large gender gap persists.

Similar gender gaps exist for other senior executive positions in higher education. For example, only about 21 percent of Chief Information Officers in higher education institutions are women.
This gender gap may be the result of the gendered nature of institutions. Because men have historically developed and dominated institutions related to law, politics, religion, education, the state and the economy, the subordination and exclusion of women has been built into ordinary institutional functioning. Therefore, women have faced many barriers as they strive to advance and succeed as leaders.

I wanted to find out to what extent women in higher education leadership have made meaning of their past and present adversities, which may include barriers they have navigated through in their professional lives, and how they responded to such events.
I conducted face to face interviews with 26 women presidents, vice presidents and provosts located at colleges and universities in the Mid-Atlantic region.
My participants dealt with wide-ranging types of adversity. They shared a total of 22 distinct types. Some examples are listed on the slide. There were 14 distinct types of professional adversity, 7 distinct types of personal adversity, and 1 type of adversity which fell into both domains (work-family conflict).

On the surface, some of these adversities may seem less traumatic or less serious than others. Dealing with work-family conflict may seem minor in comparison to serious health issues. However, these were all critical events to the women who experienced them. In qualitative research individual perceptions are not compared to each other, but are valued as equally real and meaningful.
As you can see, my participants used MANY strategies, which are grouped into two broad categories – those which individuals can do to empower themselves and those which involve reaching out to others for help or support. In total there are 18 distinct strategies. These strategies can also be thought of as tools in a toolkit which individuals can make use of to overcome adverse or challenging situations.

Given the challenging, uncontrollable nature of adversity, in most cases a single strategy was not sufficient to get through or overcome it. What I found in my research is that to successfully navigate adversity, participants did not just use a single strategy. Instead, they used a combination of multiple strategies to get around a single occurrence of adversity.

In addition to using multiple strategies, my participants also noted the importance of being willing to try new strategies they had never tried before.
Women in this study were able to navigate adversity even when it had negatively impacted their self-esteem and power. How did they do this?

1) Participants actively worked to **reframe** and recast their experiences with adversity into positive or neutral meanings in their lives. For example, participants reframed their experiences with discrimination by depersonalizing it. They focused on the thought of “this is not about me” to protect their egos.

2) Participants developed **resilience** in navigating through adversity. They dealt with, learned from and were transformed by adversity. To get through adversity, participants chose to keep moving and remain patient. They set goals, such as finding a new job or learning a new skill, and attained them. When circumstances or people stood in their way, they sought out alternatives to work around or leave adverse situations. Even when the
process to get through adversity took years, they did not stop until they were successful.

3) **Self-efficacy** is ability to achieve desired results or outcomes. The strength of one’s perception of her own self-efficacy determines whether she will attempt a particular course of action. Perceived self-efficacy influences both choice of activities and how long an individual will persist in the face of obstacles. Participants in this study built self-efficacy in the course of navigating adversity. They learned to believe in themselves to achieve their goals. This was true for participants who had made meaning or sense of their experiences as well as those who had not.

A provost in my study was forced from her position after standing up for a female faculty member who was being bullied by a well-established male vice president. This provost left her job and suffered negative impacts to her self-esteem and sense of power. She spent 15 months searching for a new job, applying to 132 positions!! She successfully landed a new provost position by reframing her situation, cultivating resilience and increasing her self-efficacy.

In summary, reframing, resilience, and self-efficacy enabled participants to successfully navigate adversity, barriers and obstacles even when their power and self-esteem were negatively impacted.
There are four primary takeaways:

1) Adversity happens to almost everyone, even successful women leaders.

2) To successfully get through adversity, it is crucial to take an approach that involves multiple strategies including new ones you’ve never tried before.

3) Based on this research, I recommend that building a personal network of supporters including family, friends, colleagues, supervisors, professional organizations, board members and household help. This will help you with both personally and professionally. Reach out to your partner, friends and family when you need encouragement or assistance. Don’t feel that you have to go it alone. Ask for help when you need it.
4) Empower yourself. The participants in this study were successful primarily because of personal choices. They chose to not let barriers stop them. They chose to plow through. They chose to look for alternatives. They chose to persevere even when the future was unknown and when their options seemed limited. Of course, others aided these women along the way, but it was primarily their own choices which made them successful. When you hit a wall, don’t let it stop you. Consider your alternatives. Choose a new path or direction. Most importantly, make the choice to persist and to keep going.
This information is published as a book chapter in Women and Leadership in Higher Education. This is a great resource for anyone who is interested in the topic of the current status of women in higher ed and leadership development strategies.
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Reference