BACKGROUND

Although women are increasingly represented among the faculty in academic health centers, progress has been slow and variable across specialties. Women are largely concentrated in junior ranks and non-tenured positions. In many disciplines, there are few women who enter, remain in, and advance through the ranks to positions of senior leadership. For example:

• Of all women full time faculty, 13% are full professors
• Women full professors make up only 5% of all full time faculty at U.S. medical schools
• Women represent 14% of department chairs
• Women represent 12% of deans

However, many women do successfully navigate academic, ascend the ladder, and become successful institutional leaders. Although previous research has been conducted on differing career paths between men and women, the experiences of women who successfully rise to positions of senior leadership are rarely examined. In this study, we sought to fill this gap and glean lessons about leadership through conducting interviews with women who hold influential leadership positions.

STUDY GOALS

By interviewing women about their personal and professional milestones and analyzing these narratives, our goals were to generate tangible leadership lessons and demystify the path to leadership for current and future generations of women.

METHODS

• As part of our annual women in medicine and science programming, semi-structured public interviews with women leaders were conducted about pivotal moments in their personal and professional career journeys.

• With IRB approval and participant consent, we interviewed 16 women leaders:
  • 12 MDs
  • 3 PhDs
  • 1 MBA
  • 3 African American women
  • 12 White women

• Interviews were taped, transcribed and analyzed for patterns and themes. Separate elements were placed into larger categories. The researchers developed descriptors to represent the sentiment of each section or cluster, analyzed relationships among the clusters, developed higher level themes and selected representative quotes.

RESULTS

1. Hold fast to your values
   “It is important to find what you love and do it. Forcing yourself into a position or being forced into a position that you don’t love or that doesn’t fit you [will not work].”

2. Be open to unexpected opportunities
   “I am amazed sometimes how I was able to make a curvy line into a straight one. I learned to develop the life philosophy that you should shoot for the stars. You might end up on the moon, but that’s ok.”

3. Surround yourself with people who believe in you and people you believe in
   “I have a great cohort of women friends who I consider my mentors as well. They are people I can turn to that know all the words and are people I can talk to professionally. We talk about strategies for different things and challenging situations.”

4. Be assertive in your communication and actions
   “I have become much more thoughtful in my decision-making. My earlier mindset was that I had to say yes because opportunities were coming to me, instead of a mindset that I could make a plan and then look for opportunities that fit that plan. It’s a whole different mindset.”

5. Continually refine your leadership skills
   “It’s not like I set out and said I want to be an administrator that deals with budgets and personnel. At the same time, I was looking for ways to improve my skill set so I looked for professional development opportunities in different areas. I spent all my life in education, as you would imagine, but also in leadership, just trying to develop skills for things that we didn’t learn in school. I tried to be very deliberate in looking for opportunities to participate in that would help develop my skill set.”

6. Don’t take things personally
   “You put one foot in front of the other and do as much as you can and then turn off the light, close the door, go home and come back the next day. Sometimes I’m on email late at night or something but for the most part, I try not to take it home. I have outside interests...that seem to help my disposition a great deal....So you find other outlets and venues, things that you are interested in doing in your life, exploring relationships. Live your life.”

7. Stay organized
   “I can’t be at three places at once....So I’m a good delegator and have developed my administrative skills so I can actually have enough people around me that are doing the work. I meet with them regularly and kind of move things along that way. I have to do that.”

8. Build positive relationships and welcoming environments
   “I have the optimism gene. My attitude is I’m going to do what I can to pull my weight and I’ll help you and you help me and we do that no matter what any of our external appearances are. I think that having that kind of attitude has made it possible for me to get along with people.”

9. When and if necessary, prove them wrong
   “My 6th grade teacher one day was talking about career opportunities, and said to me that I might want to become a doctor. But the script from my Grandmother was “marry, have kids, make toast in the morning.” One Christmas I asked for a microscope. Grandma was mad at my parents for buying one for me. I overheard their argument while looking for specimens. But I didn’t buy her script.”

CONCLUSION

Women’s experiences provide an important lens through which to view gender within organizations. Discussing the life lessons of successful women is important to empower others to create and embrace their own career paths. By developing a deeper understanding of the authentic career paths of women in leadership positions in academic medicine, we hope to encourage and empower more women to climb the leadership ladder.