



SECRETS FOR *Woman* LEADERS

The following speech was given by Dede Henley, CEO, The Dede Henley Group to The Minerva Foundation in Vancouver, BC., June 2006.

Several years ago, I met a woman named Barbara. Barbara had the most infectious laugh! Just hearing her made me smile. Then she told me a story. She told me that years ago when she first began her career as an accountant, her boss called her into his office and said, “Barbara, lose the laugh. It’s unprofessional.”

Barbara’s story made me sad and angry. One thing I know from my many years of working with women leaders is this: too many women give up the most authentic parts of who they are just to fit in. Have you ever experienced this?

Wouldn’t you say that it’s time for each of us to lead from the truest parts of who we are? Women don’t lead naturally with bravado and thunder. We don’t care so much about rank, title or hierarchy. We do care about leading collaboratively. We care about leading creatively. And we care about leading inclusively. We desire to create communities. And we want to create workplaces and social groups where we all can thrive.

My purpose is to encourage each of you to think about leadership in a whole new way. And my hope is that you will take something not only this but that what you take will help you to provide extraordinary leadership throughout your entire life.

So, the first question I would like to ask you is this: Why do we as a society need more women leaders?

Let’s look at two interesting statistics as we make the case for women leaders. Catalyst research firm conducted a study in 2004 and found that quote, “Corporations with large percentages of women on their executive leadership teams gain returns that are 35% higher than those with fewer women in positions of leadership.” What this implies is that having greater numbers of women in leadership positions has a direct impact on a corporations’ bottom line.

A second interesting data point, comes from a study done by the World Bank. This one says that “empowering women and girls has the greatest overall effect on a society. This is measured by decreased population growth; faster economic growth; less corruption in governance; increased agricultural production; more children being educated and lower childhood malnutrition and mortality rates.”

So why is this important for us here tonight? We could say that the health and well-being of an entire society improves when there are increased numbers of women in positions of leadership. And that includes our communities, our education systems, our governance, and our corporations. Nellie McClung, a turn of the century feminist and political activist, said, “I am a firm believer in women-in their ability to do things & in their influence & power. Women set the standards for the world, and it is for us, women of Canada, to set the standards high.”

And so how do we bring our best to the leadership challenges we face today? Well let me share with you three secrets that I’ve learned in my 24 years of working with leaders.

The first secret is to follow your passion.

You must do what you love. Often as women we don’t know what we love. I know that my daughter loves the color hot pink. I know that my mother loves flowers, in particular, rhododendrons, which she calls affectionately “rhodies.” But the question is do I know what I love? When I first began my own leadership development, I have to admit I didn’t know what I loved. I had to learn to pay attention to what brought me joy and satisfaction. I learned that I love working with women. I love tending my flower garden. I love to write and spend time alone. And I’m going to tell you a little secret about myself, which not many people know. And that is this, I love listening to rap music as loud as I can. In fact, my kids tell me to turn it down!

Great leaders choose what will become a part of them, based on what they love. Great leaders know their interests, their passions and what they love well. Great leaders know what to say “yes” to and what to say “no” to.

The second secret of great leaders is to be your number one priority.

Most women give out their energy out like a dam with the floodgates open wide. Women work 50 or more hours per week, raise their families, cook, clean, run errands and stay connected to friends and their community. All of their energy is going out to manage all of these activities. Let me tell you a story about a group of women we worked with recently. We were doing a two-day workshop on women and leadership. One woman, let's call her Kate, shared her story. Kate is a mid-thirties, senior level manager. She's married and has a two year old daughter. Kate goes to work at 6:30 every day and she returns home at 8:00 at night. She rarely sees her daughter. In fact, she told us tearfully that at night, she sits by her daughter's bed and just holds her sleeping hand.

I work with countless numbers of women like Kate, who believe they must put in unbelievably long hours, which they call "face time," to maintain credibility at work, and to be viewed as a strong team player. But what is Kate giving up? Her health, her peace of mind and the privilege of contributing to her young daughter's life.

So, making yourself your number one priority means that you attend to your well-being first, not last. Only then are you certain to have enough energy and clarity to make choices that work best for you and those you love.

The third secret to bringing your best to your leadership is to Keep Good Company.

We've all heard the saying, "You can tell a lot about a person by the company they keep." And that's really true.

In our workshops, we invite women to make a list of everyone in their life that they interact with at least once per week. Then, we ask them to identify what that person adds to their life. Sometimes a person adds joy, challenge, inspiration. Sometimes a person adds irritation, frustration, overwhelm or boredom.

Being aware of the company you keep is essential. Taking stock of who adds positively to your life and who burdens you, gives you a chance to make some important changes. Perhaps now is the time for you to clean house?

Let me tell you a little about me. I am in the midst of renovating an old house. My husband and I have six children ages 12 to 26. I run a successful company and I work full time. So as you can see, there are thousands of ways in every day that my personal time is consumed. I am fierce about protecting my personal time and I rely on the company I keep, my friends, colleagues, and family to support me in keeping my personal time and creativity in balance.

I invite you to keep good company because it's the one thing I know that extraordinary leaders do best.

In closing, remember that women are natural at collaboration, creativity and inclusion and that the world needs what we have to offer. Remember the three secrets to leadership success: Do what you love, Make yourself your number one priority and Keep good company.

Each of you is a leader in your own world. And your leadership is really necessary for our society to thrive and prosper. It is YOUR leadership that will make a difference.

Dede Henley, CEO

The Dede Henley Group

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