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CORNER OFFICE | CAROL SMITH

No Doubts: Women Are Better Managers

This interview with Carol Smith, senior vice president and chief brand officer for the Elle Group, the media company, was conducted and condensed by Adam Bryant.

Q. What is the most important lesson you've learned about leadership?

A. The importance of winning over employees as opposed to bossing employees. I learned that lesson very, very early — in sixth grade.

Q. Tell me about that.

A. In sixth grade, I was head of the project to create a mural for the graduating class to hang in the auditorium. That's a big deal. And I got a clipboard, I remember, and then I had all this power and I started bossing everyone around. And within days it was apparent that I was going to have a mutiny on my hands, and I was fired from the mural. They took my clipboard away. It was a lesson I learned very early in life about the difference between being the boss and being bossy. I often tell people, "Ah, that's a sixth-grade clipboard problem here."

I feel I'm a leader without ever really thinking I'm a leader, which is to say that I know when I walk into a room of employees, I command a presence, but I'm always feeling like I'm part of the gang. I don't instantly sit at the head of the table. I sit in the middle of the table, always. I don't want to sit at the head of the table. I want to be part of the process and part of the decision.

In the end I think that if you win people over, they'll follow you. And of course you need other qualities, like honesty, decisiveness and the ability to confront. I'm a really good confronter.

Q. What do you mean by "confronter?"

A. I have been in this career for many years and I have seen, and this is a generalization, that women are better list-makers. They will do their to-do list. They will prioritize their to-do list. They will get through their to-do list. Maybe it's because we do shopping lists. And if we have a problem — again, as a generalization — we will confront the problem and deal with it head-on.

I think that has really made me good at managing people, because I think they always know that

they're going to get a real answer.

Q. Can you elaborate?

A. When you're about to give someone a bad review, they pretty much know it. They might not know they know it, but they know it. Do I always start out with a positive? Yeah. But if there isn't any positive, I'm not going to try to find it if there isn't anything. I will always give them my point of view and my side, and I will always keep the door open to hear their side, and I will always end with, "Here's what you have to do to correct it."

Confrontation — meaning, "You didn't do a good job. That presentation was bad. It didn't work, and here's why it didn't work" — is so much better than walking away from a sales call saying, "Great. Got to get back to the office, O.K.?" It's better for everyone and I've never understood why people won't do it.

Q. It sounds as if you've thought a lot about men versus women as managers.

A. I have, I have.

Q. Please share.

A. Hands down women are better. There's no contest.

Q. Why?

A. In my experience, female bosses tend to be better managers, better advisers, mentors, rational thinkers. Men love to hear themselves talk. I'm so generalizing. I know I am. But in a couple of places I've worked, I would often say, "Call me 15 minutes after the meeting starts and then I'll come," because I will have missed all the football. I will have missed all the "what I did on the golf course." I will miss the four jokes, and I can get into the meeting when it's starting.

Men also, they're definitely better on the "whatever" side. Things tend to roll off their back. We women take things very personally. We're constantly playing things over in our head — "What did that mean when they said that?" — when they mean nothing. And I'm certainly not immune to this. So there's a downside to women.

Q. Any others?

A. No. Although I will say that working for all women is just as bad as working for all men. I hate an office where there aren't men and women together. I hate it, hate it, hate it. Men and women together is the best.

Q. If women are better managers, how come there aren't more women in the corner offices of

corporate America?

A. I ask you that. I think we'd be better presidents. I mean, we've got a really good one right now, but I find it so puzzling. I swear I don't know.

Q. What have you tried to do less of over time?

A. Less of the, "I want to know who did that. Who decided to give that rate to that person?" I want less of that self-righteousness. I have a little bit of that and I think I'd like to have less of that — the, "You see? I told you so." That's definitely something I should work on.

I would love to do more — it's corny, but it's true — management by walking around. It really makes a difference. I know it does. And we all get caught up with being with our own little group. We all have our comfort zone.

Q. Any other comfort zones you've worked to get out of?

A. I'm most proud of the fact that I got out of being afraid of giving speeches. You have to be out there and you have to be up there, and you have to be the leader. It was something I needed to overcome. I did everything. I was the oldest person at Dale Carnegie. I could have had private lessons in my office. But I wanted to go there.

Q. Looking back, do you feel there was a moment or experience that set your career on a different trajectory?

A. I started working at 16. I worked all through college. Work brought me success and money and freedom, and then more success and more money and more freedom.

I failed a few times. I failed to get into the college of my choice. I failed to get into law school. And they were big failures for me, but I found the more I worked, the better I did, without ever having a goal. I didn't have a goal. I wanted to be a lawyer and I didn't get to be a lawyer, but all of a sudden I woke up one day and I was in publishing, and I knew what I was doing.

As I look back, I think that sometimes you can't have the five-year plan for yourself. If you're doing something well, you tend to keep doing it. That's how you fall into careers.

Q. Do you have tricks for managing your time?

A. I come to work almost every Sunday for at least four hours to go through my e-mail. I did it when it was a real in-box, and I would go through it and write notes to everyone and then hand them out on Monday, and now I do it with e-mail. I'm glad I come in on Sunday. It's the quiet time. I get things out of the way. I'm reacting, but I'm thinking as I do it, constantly going

through things. So when I come in on Monday, it's like my vacation day. I've gotten my e-mail down to under 30.

Q. Any other time management techniques?

A. I don't waste time. If you want to chat, if you want to gossip, I'll gossip with anyone, I'll hang out. But when I'm working, I'm working. When you sit here in my office, we work. Men don't do that as well as women do, either. All of sudden they're on football. All of a sudden they're showing videos of their son's soccer game. Then they're telling a couple of jokes. I'm not good at jokes during meetings. I'm very focused. I'm very singularly directed.

Q. Let's talk about hiring.

A. I am living by something I read in Cathie Black's book ["Basic Black: The Essential Guide for Getting Ahead at Work (and in Life)"] which I sort of instinctively knew — that you've got to meet someone three times, and one of them better be over a meal.

You learn so much in a meal. It's like a little microcosm of life. How they order, what they order. How are they going to give instructions to a waiter? Are they sending back the meal eight times? Can they keep the conversation going, especially if you're hiring someone who is in sales? Are they asking smart questions?

Throughout a meal, the personality comes out, I think. Are you going to connect with us? Are you going to be part of the team, or are you going to be one of these independent players who wants to take all the credit? Are you good with assistants? Those are things you can find out in some subtle ways when you eat with someone.

Q. Any other tips on hiring?

A. Don't hire somebody you don't like. There is always a strong internal pressure to give a job to a person who has all the right credentials and says all the right things, even if something about her sends up little signals of alarm. They may be slight, but in my experience it is a great mistake to ignore them. Every time I went against my instincts and gave a job to someone who, though clearly capable, made me feel uneasy during the interview, it has ended badly.

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