**You can be what you can’t see; tips for women in male-dominated workplaces**

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***“You must do the thing you think you cannot do” (Eleanor Roosevelt)***

In October last year, I was featured in an article about my life in the Navy in the Sydney Morning Herald and its subsidiary newspapers around Australia. The online version displayed the correct title – [**You can be what you can’t see; a life of firsts**](https://www.canberratimes.com.au/national/act/you-can-be-what-you-can-t-see-jennifer-wittwer-on-a-life-of-firsts-20181023-p50bfo.html)**.**The paper version said **You Can’t be what you can’t see,**an error caused, perhaps, by an assumption that the original title was a mistake – because of course, it was about women, and women can’t be what they can’t see in a male-dominated industry with few role models and (then) restricted opportunities.

My final words in that article were this: “*People often say to young people, ‘You can’t be what you can’t see’, and we argue that we need to have role models, for young girls to see that there are women pilots, engineers, and all these other opportunities that exist,” “On the other hand, I would also say you can be what you can’t see, because as the world evolves, and as workplaces evolve, there’s always going to be firsts*.”  But it’s not just about being the first.  It’s also about who you are, who you can be, and closing that gap through your strengths, attributes, qualities, skills and passion.

I know you’re going to say to yourself – what’s in it (this story) for me? True?

Have you ever wondered why certain things have happened in your life? Have you ever faced significant challenges in life but not known why? Or why you? I don’t necessarily believe that everything happens for a reason. Overall, I feel blessed to have had the career I did, but it came with much struggle, heartache and sacrifice.   Looking back now I see there were specific events, particularly in the first twenty years, that helped define my character, my identity, who I was and who I was to become.

I found there are lessons to be learned in every challenge. We can ask ourselves, what is the gift or the lesson of this experience?  What is the opportunity for growth? How can I choose to perceive it differently so that I may benefit from the learning?  I survived and thrived in a male-dominated workplace by turning challenges and obstacles into opportunities through change, innovation, and hard work. Most importantly, I discovered and fulfilled my passion in ways that even surprised myself.

Kabul, Afghanistan, 2013
Photo by: SGT W. Guthrie.

My mantra is this – **women are not free when any woman is unfree**.  What I have always sought to do is to empower women to express that freedom. Whether in uniform, in a conflict zone, in the boardroom. I do this because of what I have been through.  I do this because I want to see other women succeed.  Through all of this I learned what it took for me to succeed in a male-dominated industry and I’m going to share these with you now.

**Tips for Success**

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**Firstly, self-promotion**. I think women experience difficulty with this more than men. They don’t know how to promote their skills, knowledge, or expertise without feeling others are judging them, or that they are being seen to be bragging.  Many of us work in teams where the culture leans more towards team rather than personal recognition. There’s nothing wrong with this of course, but there are times, in my humble opinion, that you need to own and be acknowledged for your achievements.

There shouldn’t be discomfort around marketing yourselves as a valuable commodity outside of the team. I know some of you don’t want to draw attention to the fact you are women. For some, it’s a confidence issue.  As disappointing as the Prime Minister’s words were on International Women’s Day this year – *we want women to rise but not at the expense of others*– meaning men – it’s clear that women still need to remain confident and assertive in the face of these challenges, attitudes and perceptions.

I say, you need to reflect on your value, including identifying your strengths and talents, you should catalogue your accomplishments and life experiences, you should identify your passions, and you should articulate who you are and what you stand for, and share this through every opportunity.

**Secondly, maintaining balance**. This should not be a gender specific issue but does seem to affect more women than men.  The two main issues seem to be letting go of the guilt – the guilt of spending too much time at work and not enough at home with kids/family/ etc., and learning to say no.

But my view is you don’t ‘find’ balance, you ‘create’ it, and then you decide whether to hold on or let go, depending on context and circumstances.  Creating that balance requires you to define your priorities and values and set some short and long-term goals around all life areas.  It requires you to think about expectations, perceptions and attitudes – the ‘shoulds’ that conflict with needs and desires. It requires you to focus on what is important to you, set boundaries around that, and don’t compromise.

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**Thirdly, effective networking**. What do you really think networking is all about? It’s about building trustworthy and reliable relationships, communicating passions and **connecting with people**–**not collecting people.**

My tips for successful networking include:

* making genuine and authentic connections / building relationships;
* having a strategy, setting goals;
* asking open questions and telling personal stories;
* being known as powerful resource for others;
* knowing what you do and why; and
* respecting and honouring connections and following through.

Photo: Bradley Cummings

**And lastly, personal branding**. It seems that many women (and probably men) are not sure they need personal branding if they are working for someone else, or in a large industry, like the military for example.

But if you have gone to all the trouble of identifying your strengths and attributes, finding your passion, applying it in your work and leadership, you would want to stand for something and be seen as that. You’ve built your skills, knowledge and expertise, it’s important that you understand how people see and perceive you in all your interactions – with colleagues, superiors, competitors, clients, family.

My tips for successful branding include:

* having clarity around your attributes, values, beliefs, passions, vision, mission, skills, expertise, knowledge, accomplishments ……and the list goes on;
* communicating all of these into every communications product, including your conversations, engagements, interactions, behaviour; and
* capitalising or leveraging these to be able to do what you want in a way that is known, respected, valued and appreciated.

**Key Takeaways**

So, from what seems a lifetime of building my character, my strengths, my resilience, and acting on my passions in a modern military, these are my seven key takeaways to help you **be what you can’t see**:

* Never apologise for who you are and who you want to be. Embrace every part of yourself, including strengths and shortcomings and don’t look for approval. And don’t apologise for being a woman. And no, you don’t need to be the same as the blokes.
* Know what you want, ask for it, even if you don’t know how. Work it out later. Have goals, a vision, drive, focus, be determined.
* Step out of your comfort zone, have the difficult conversations, don’t shy away from difficult or different situations. Use these opportunities to develop your resilience, your mental toughness, your skills, and learn and grow.
* Making mistakes is not failure. Failing to learn from mistakes is failure. Don’t waste time with regret, the power to change your own future lies within you.
* Don’t waste your time with guilt or self-pity or feeling shame if something hasn’t worked out right. Find another away but just keep moving forward.
* Don’t compromise on your values and standards.Maturity is having the wisdom to walk away from people and situations that threaten your peace of mind, self-respect, values, morals or self-worth. Don’t limit yourself to achieving what your predecessors did, reach new heights, do what you can’t see.
* Don’t be afraid to say no