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Resiliency: Women in Business

Introduction

Resiliency is one of the most sought after characteristics of our time. Over the past few months, the world was forced to adapt. The effects of the pandemic created individuals with thicker skin than ever before. We had the privilege of interviewing some of these people. In our group of five business majors, two of us identify as women. This contributed to the dynamic of our group and why we specifically chose to focus on women in business. While trying to differentiate ourselves within our class, we felt this would be a unique opportunity to explore this underrepresented group. Through this piece, we will share excerpts and lessons learned from twenty-five accomplished women in business who have exemplified grit, tenacity, adaptability and most importantly, resiliency. By sifting through our data, analysis, and research, we identified 5 themes specific to women; gender, hardship, pioneering, judgement, and promoting self-resilience. These themes support our theory of resiliency which states that there is a correlation between building resilience as a woman and having female role models to look up to.

Theme #1: Gender

In her novel *Highly Successful Women Administrators*, Sandra Gupton defines resiliency, “as an adaptive and coping trait that forms and hones positive character skills and has been attributed to a person’s ability to overcome adversity” (Gupton, 1996). Gender plays a large role in our interviewees understanding of resiliency and how it has shaped their careers and values. The women we interviewed shared stories of misogyny, unequal opportunity, and stereotypes. One of our interviewees and former FBI Executive, Lauren C. Anderson ‘79, shared the complexities of, but the ability to, balance toughness with compassion. This can be a difficult

feat, as women can often be labeled as a “bitch” when asserting power. Molly Plotkin ‘19, a consultant at Trinity, attended an event where author Jodi R. R. Smith spoke about business etiquette, and authored two separate novels on the topic for men and women. The men’s book being titled, *The Etiquette Book: A Complete Guide to Modern Manners*, and the women’s book, *From Clueless to Class Act: Manners for the Modern Woman*. One of the questions we grappled with is why leadership and resiliency is different amongst men and women, and how inequality has shaped most of our interviewees experiences.

Many of our interviewees struggled with the idea of not being liked and respected by male coworkers. In researching the distinction of sex and gender in resilient leadership, Dana E. Christman and Rhonda L. McClellan found that, “it is possible to fall into a binary trap of viewing leadership through past and present social constructions of gender” (Christman & McClellan, 2012). While many of the women we spoke with traced back their first experience in building resiliency to work environments, Lauren C. Anderson first was exposed to resiliency at home. Her father instilled in her at a young age that she can be whatever she would like to be. Years later, Ms. Anderson visited the FBI exhibit in Washington D.C., in which a male tour guide told her that women cannot be FBI executives. She eventually became the first woman to lead the FBI’s office at the American Embassy in Paris, France. Ms. Anderson now works to empower women through her International Consulting firm, and as a global ambassador and pro bono coach for women entrepreneurs through the nonprofit organization, Vital Voices Global Partnership. We acknowledged through our research that often women have learned resiliency through negative experiences having to do with gender and overcoming barriers placed by men.

Theme #2: Mentorship inspired by hardship

We recognized a common thread amongst our interviewees, in that many of them gravitated to other women for support and inspiration. Within our pool of women, 56% of them are affiliated with Muhlenberg College. They come from various backgrounds and industries such as consulting, fashion, media, finance, customer service, and manufacturing. We asked our focus group to share a story about someone in their life that inspired them to be more resilient in the workplace. Out of the 25 interviewees, 20 of them revealed that they have looked up to other women in higher positions as role models or mentors, whether that be a CEO or direct manager. Former assistant Treasurer of National Cooperative Bank, Jodi Arsht stated, “I aspire to be just like my boss. She enters the building every morning highly motivated and stands her own ground with all of the successful finance men. The boss maintains a healthy family life while achieving personal goals. Simply, she has a husband and kids and is still extremely successful.” As a group we came to the consensus that since there are few women in business, specifically in higher positions, women tend to look up to other women, not men. When analyzing this idea, we realized that this could be due to women in power having resilient qualities. These qualities include, self-awareness, adaptability, and remaining levelheaded.

In a Harvard Business Review article, *What Really Makes us Resilient*, author Marcus Buckingham states, “Resilience is a reactive state of mind created by exposure to suffering” (Buckingham, 2020). The exposure to suffering, or hardship, in the case of women is the inequality and lower expectations found in the business world. In our data, we found commonality in how women cultivated resiliency after having gone through an event that caused adversity. Specifically, Mindy, founder and CEO of Runway of Dreams Foundation, was rejected multiple times by the fashion industry when proposing her venture because she held the

idea too near and dear to her heart. Having initially launched the business to fulfil her son with disabilities clothing needs, the underlying motivation was more personal rather than business oriented. That being said, her example allowed us to come to the conclusion that resilience becomes apparent when struggle occurs.

Theme #3 Women Pioneers in Male Dominated Fields

“I grew up as a tomboy,” Kelly told us. “I have one older brother...and I always tried to hang with him and the boys. I rode dirt bikes, climbed trees (my favorite) and dredged in the ponds for frogs...and I still like to pick up the tools and work with my husband on big home construction projects.” Kelly Unger is the Engineering Finance and Special Projects Manager for Victaulic, a world leader in the manufacturing of mechanical couplings and piping solutions. She has been with the company for 21 years and currently manages a department consisting of all men. She credits these “tomboy” characteristics, along with being “tough” and “strong” as qualities that have led her to a successful career in the male-dominated manufacturing industry. Kelly’s words indicate a special type of resilience that she says that she has needed to thrive in the field. “I feel that I have had to work harder to prove myself and to gain respect than if I was a man,” she adds. She expanded this with a story of a “high-stature, all-male executive meeting” in which she was attempting to secure more support for her department to make changes she believed would increase profits for the company. Her presentation was initially interrupted by technical difficulties. She had brought her laptop as a backup and after a brief delay was able to connect and continue with the presentation, but the executives had already become irritated and dismissive of her. At one point, the VP of Sales (her boss) openly questioned her in front of the entire group asking her why her group existed in the first place. Rattled at this point, with a meeting she was initially excited to attend and present at (thinking it would expand and

strengthen her department) had regressed to the point of her wondering if she just killed it instead. However, Kelly remained resilient and tough. She gained her composure, and openly invited the VP to come spend time in her department. He had little choice but to agree in front of his male colleagues. Once in her office alone, his tone changed considerably. Kelly and her team were well prepared, and the VP later determined that her team was indeed a valuable and “necessary” component of the Sales Department. She received the additional support she requested. Kelly discussed how this could have happened to any manager, male or female, but openly wondered how she would have been treated in that all-male meeting if she was, “one of the boys.” She added that during this situation, along with countless similar others, she had to, “move on and not let it affect the rest of the day.” She continued that she has repeatedly relied heavily on her “confidence in [her] own competency” over the years. And her biggest piece of advice was to, “stay positive” and create a supportive team atmosphere around you.

Kelly is one of the longest tenured women interviewed for this project. She noted that since she started working at her company, they have made great strides in diversifying the workforce when it comes to women hires, even though it has been most exclusively in supporting departments like customer service, sale and marketing, and finance. She admitted that she spends very little time near the manufacturing floor or in the construction field and conceded that this remains a highly male dominated area. It is one that even she, as a “tomboy,” is uncomfortable to work in and finds women an awkward fit (at one point poking fun at a female coworker who wears her “pink hardhat” in the field). The other 4 interviewees in the manufacturing industry (a Managing Director, an HR Business Partner, a Managing Director and a Marketing Brand Manager) shared stories very similar to Kelly’s. The only differences were the length of their careers and that they all listed other women as their main sources of guidance

and resilience within their male dominated industries. When looking back 30 years, Kelly's first manager/manufacturing business mentor was male. The trend of professional businesswomen looking to other women for guidance and examples of resilience is one that we have noticed repeatedly during our interviews.

Kelly is an outlier as an upper-level manager in the world of manufacturing. When our group decided to focus on resilience in women in business, Rob, one member of our group who has spent over a decade in the manufacturing industry, began scrolling through his professional contacts to find some women interviewees. Even with nearly a decade and a half in manufacturing of contacts, this list was nearly non-existent. He was surprised by this but should not have been. He realized that he had never thought much about it, even though he actively worked on hiring women to be on his production team. In fact, within the entire multi-billion-dollar company, which employed thousands, he could only recall one woman who was in a supervisory level. Even amongst the hundreds of contractors and salespeople he interacted with over the years, there were only two women (a brilliant process control specialist and a tough as nails pump expert) whom he worked with on a regular basis.

The lack of women in manufacturing should not be surprising. In 2017 women constituted "47% of the U.S. workforce and 52% of all professionals and managers, but only 29% of the manufacturing workforce and 5% of manufacturing CEOs" according to Kathleen Buse, the director of Leadership Lab for Women at Case Western Reserve University. Buse continues by stating that, "studies conclude that the under-representation of women in manufacturing is a complex matter which extends to societal and cultural expectations and so precludes finding a simple solution" (Buse, 2017). But salary discrepancies cannot be overlooked as a potential cause. The US Census Bureau reports that in 2016, median earnings for women

working in the manufacturing industry was higher (\$35,158) than that of females in all industries (\$30,348) yet over (\$13,000!!) lower than that for males working in manufacturing (\$48,849) (Christnacht et al., 2018). Despite this discrepancy, another study found that women who were resilient and, “who achieved in manufacturing were likely to be more confident in themselves than women who left the male-dominated workplace.” Buse added that anyone working in manufacturing knows that “women role models and positive affirmations” in this industry are “scarce” (Buse, 2017). Fortunately, willing leaders, both male and female, can help turn this around. They can support mentors and sponsors of women and empower employee resource groups that promote women’s advancement in male dominated fields. Women who want to succeed in these industries, such as manufacturing for example, can actively seek out mentors or resource groups within their organizations. Individuals can also join and pursue active roles in one of the professional women’s organizations found within their fields and can pay it forward as mentors and become role models of resiliency and success in business.

Theme #4: Judgement towards women in business

One commonality seen throughout our interviews was the idea that there is prevalent judgement towards women in business. This perception was very interesting to us because one would think in this day and age that people would have the ability to respect the qualifications of a person, regardless of their gender. Chelsey Beattie, one of our interviewees from Boston Scientific, noticed this sense of judgement when she first entered the workforce and has only seen a shift in respect occur over the past few years. She stated that in her first ever interview, she was asked questions such as “are you married”, or “do you have kids” which has nothing to do with the job requirements. She questioned whether males would be asked the same type of questions or have had a similar interview experience. Megan Patruno, Muhlenberg College

Associate Athletic Director, told a shocking story about her experience at a football game. Her and three other female employees went to sit in the press box and when they arrived an older gentleman asked them, “who are you, the coaches’ wives”? Stories like this were common, along with constant small jabs to belittle women in the work environment.

Although Chelsey Beattie and other interviewees have been subject to this type of behavior throughout their careers, many of them stated that they see light at the end of the tunnel in terms of women gaining the respect they deserve in the business world. Specifically, Amy Venuto, who works at Salesforce, mentioned how she has been seeing more women in leadership roles in the past few years compared to when she started her career. Our interviewees believe that organizations are consciously looking to diversify and promote women into leadership roles.

According to the University of Michigan, “research by behavioral scientists over the past decades has unearthed valuable insights about how human cognition subconsciously produces biases in our judgments of performance” (Turmunkh, 2018). One way to reduce this gender inequality is to develop a performance review system that eliminates subconscious bias. This can provide a significant step towards equal pay and promotion, along with eliminating any suspicion of gender-based discrimination. “Women represent about half of the adult population and over half of college graduates in the U.S. Yet of the 500 largest U.S. corporations, only 25 have women CEOs” (Turmunkh, 2018). Turmunkh suggested a reason for the lack of women in positions of power pointing towards the perception that women are held to higher standards than men, “with women twice as likely to hold this belief as men” (Turmunkh, 2018).

Theme #5: Displaying resiliency professionally

The workplace is ever-changing and can be a stressful environment, as challenges are presented daily that truly test a person's tenacity. So, how do individuals manage to make the most out of a bad situation? The quality of resilience is exactly what is needed. In a recent study carried out by CV-Library, one of the largest UK online job sites, it was found that, "57% of employers see resilience as a key skill for candidates. Meanwhile, 71% viewed the ability to adapt as a key skill, which is a core aspect of resilience. These results reveal that businesses place high value on employees who demonstrate resilience" (Gentle, 2020).

Recent studies have shown that employers are seeking resilient individuals to represent and be a part of their company, but how can one portray themselves as the right candidate through an interview, resume, or cover letter? As five upperclassmen, we took it upon ourselves to highlight this opportunity and ask our interviewees for advice as we navigate the workforce, especially during these unprecedented times. Natalie Wizel '13, a New York Giants Associate Producer, recommended that we "be the idiot that always says yes." This mantra has attributed to her success as she has gained experience by getting her hands on anything she could within her field. Throughout these experiences, she has both failed and been successful which has made her the resilient individual she is today. Brandi Vallely '18, a Under Armour Associate Merchant, shared that she has seen success as a woman in her industry by constantly being prepared. Having knowledge and knowing her facts is what has made her stand out at Under Armour, she claims that "there is no limit to how much you can be prepared."

One of the main characteristics of a resilient individual is the ability to adapt. Donna Hilton, National Customer Care Manager for Berry Global, recommended that we share

examples of our adaptability during these unique times. As we enter month ten of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are many lessons of adaptability that we have learned specifically as college students. Donna suggested that we list activities that we have been successful at, for example, highlighting the processes of remote learning and navigating how to lead successful and engaging online presentations. She claims these experiences are now thought to be the “new standards” and are “approaches that never would have been considered before the state of the world right now.” Just as challenging remote learning has been for us all, the work environment is as challenging if not more. Properly displaying the ability to adapt, or “bounce-back,” is what will stand out to future employers.

Conclusion

Through our research and interviews we developed a theory on resilience that pertains to women in various roles within the business sector. Our analysis uncovered different themes that proved that there is a correlation between building resilience as a woman and having female role models to look up to. As a result of our interviews with 25 successful women, we found overarching themes that focus on gender, hardship, pioneering, judgement, and promoting self-resilience. These themes shaped our theory which led us to realize that having access to or having female role models in the workplace heavily contributes to future success and agility. During this process, we learned that women have to work harder in the business world and have a unique type of resiliency due to gender related hardships and biases.

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