

Making choices

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At the start of your career, you encountered a lot of sexism, including a man who told you that you were the only banker who could also be a Playboy bunny. His people immediately shuffled him out of the room and chastised him vociferously for saying that, and I just burst out laughing. I thought it was hilarious, because this was an older man who had never seen women in banking in his life. He was from New York, I am from the South, and it was just about the strangest thing he had ever come across. I thought it was funny.

T. Boone Pickens once described you as a wolverine that pisses on anything it can't eat. I was shocked by it at first, but if you know this particular corporate raider, you know he has got a huge personality. That kind of comment is very much of him, so I burst out laughing – I couldn't help it. It is not that I have a thick skin, I have a realistic skin.

What is the difference? It is not personal. He would have made that comment about any female, maybe not any male, but any female that had bugged him. So I never took it personally, because it could have been anybody else who had done that, or been perceived to have done that. And he was right; I did it.

Do you give a different speech when talking to an audience of women than to mixed groups? Not really. Some of the core messages are universal, like the one about not taking things personally. Guys take things personally too. They have a different reaction, they won't start boo-hooing, but they have a reaction.

So what is your opinion of this women in business/gender issue? It is problematic. It disturbs me

when I see woman who are highly – and very specifically – educated to go into the business world enter it in droves at an early age and then drop out like flies with the passing of time. There was a time when that would have been very structural; today I do not believe it is. I think it has to do with this superwoman thing – that women, now that they have so many options, think, "Oh my god, I can do this, I can do that, so now I am going to do everything, then I am going to fail at everything, so now I have got to recalibrate".

So now that women have these choices they have to prioritise, as they can't do it all? I think that is where we are.

How long do you think that message will take to get through to people? Another generation.

Will this require men to make different choices? Absolutely. Because if these women are going to take the advice about having equal partners, that guy is going to have to shift around something too.

If you were giving a young woman advice, what would it be? Whatever you do, be sure you achieve and maintain some independence. In other words, always have your own money, whatever that takes.

You said people describe you as difficult to work for. Would they have said that about you if you were a man? Probably, yes.

What is it that makes you difficult to work for? I was demanding. It had nothing to do with me being female, it had to do with micro-managing, being demanding and lacking in confidence. But that was when I was so young. Today,

"Always have your own money, whatever that takes"

I select people who share the same values, and share the same vision that I have, so nobody is working for anybody. We are all partners. It makes a difference.

How do you find the balance between getting off the dead horse, which you recommended, and not quitting? I wouldn't say that I've quit. I have changed direction. You can do that and you must do that, but quitting is something where you have that feeling of, "I just can't do this any more, I am going to settle for something less challenging." That is the mentality of quitting. But thinking, "I have got to go in another direction" is different. That is not quitting. Quitting has a debilitating feel to it.

Do you think women are getting better at asking for things? I think they have got a long way to go. But they are better. And once you do it once, once you say, "I think I am worth this to you, or..." you get over it. I did that several times in my career; sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't and you better be able to back up the times that it doesn't work.

As an employer, do you notice general differences between the way men and women work, or do we make too much of it? They are different. Sometimes we do make too much of it. And sometimes you just have to say, as I have to an amazingly talented and capable young woman, "You know what? I can't fight all of your fights. You have got to take this on yourself." You want to help but you can't take them under your wings so far that they can't step out on their own. ■

Darla Moore was talking with Carly Chynoweth