

True Grit

What Every Woman
Needs to Succeed



Michele Coleman Mayes speaks with FTI Consulting Managing Director Dawn Hall and Senior Director Dana Hayes about confidence, self-doubt, mentoring, career trajectories and the challenges women face when reaching for the corporate brass ring.

Michele Coleman Mayes, Vice President and General Counsel at The New York Public Library, acknowledges the hurdles women need to surmount but argues that societal barriers certainly need to be torn down and that the achievement of individual success requires personal resilience, or grit. This, she believes, probably is the most important quality for women in business to possess.

Before joining the library, Mayes served as General Counsel at Pitney Bowes and as Executive Vice President and General Counsel at Allstate. She also has held leadership positions at Colgate-Palmolive and Unisys and served as Assistant U.S.

Attorney in Brooklyn and Detroit, where she headed the Civil Division. She has been on the *National Law Journal's* list of Most Influential General Counsel. In 2012, the *American Lawyer* honored her with a Lifetime Achievement award. In 2011, Mayes co-authored with Kara Sophia Baysinger *Courageous Counsel: Conversations with Women General Counsel in the Fortune 500*.

Only [14.6 percent of Fortune 500 executive officer positions currently are held by women](#), and Mayes' career and achievements testify to her own version of the grit that has allowed her to become one of the few in the c-suite. Candid, plainspoken and funny, Mayes

readily admits that being a woman and member of a minority group helped open doors but says it was grit that helped her persevere after the inevitable setbacks that accompany any high-level career.

Last February, FTI Consulting invited Mayes to speak with employees and clients as part of the firm's Women's Initiative Network, which aspires to recruit, develop and promote talented women at FTI. She also sat down with FTI Consulting Managing Director Dawn Hall and Senior Director Dana Hayes to share what she has learned on her way to the top. Here are some excerpts from that conversation.

On Grit and the Gift of Failure

A lot of theories explore what makes women successful. They'll say it's luck or it's how you present yourself or whether you ask for success. But recently, in New York, I heard Sarah Lewis, an author, essayist and member of President Obama's Arts Policy Committee, talk with author and actress Anna Deavere Smith about the "gift of failure." That seems

like an oxymoron, but what she really was talking about was grit. You can have brains, privilege and money, but if you don't have grit, you might not get where you want to go.

Without grit, failure can drag you down. For example, I could have seen it as failure when a former boss did not select me for the deputy general counsel position at one of my former companies. I was disappointed, but I refused to relent just because he rejected me. I focused

not on failure but on what counted: persistence, grit, perseverance, resilience.

That's tough for anyone to do, and I see many women (and men, for that matter) struggle with it. I've been mentoring a young woman, and she recently didn't land a job she wanted. She sent an email that said, "I hate rejection!" And I wrote back, "It's part of the journey."

Why Self-Awareness and Self-Doubt Are Good

Women sometimes are afraid to go after a job they want unless they feel they can check off every box on the list of qualifications. I think this is because women tend to focus on what they don't have rather than on what they do have. They *should* be saying, "Well, my next step wouldn't be a challenge if I met all the qualifications." The corporate world makes it worse because it expects women to prove themselves over and over. Too frequently, women are given credit for their experience rather than for their potential. But it's okay for a woman to push back and say, "Yes, you want to know that I have some level of experience, but do I need to go the entire distance twice? Or is two-thirds once good enough for you to take a chance on me?"

It obviously takes more courage to go after something you've never done than something you already know how to do. This is where self-awareness comes in, which is a good thing, but it shouldn't get in your way. It shouldn't become a crutch. Intestinal fortitude will get you a lot further.

When I joined Allstate, I knew little about insurance, but I recognized what gaps in my knowledge base had to be overcome to make sure I could deliver. Allstate was not going to pay me to be a token. At the end of the day, I was confident enough that I could learn what I needed to know. (By the way, my administrative assistant was indispensable; she helped educate me about the culture at Allstate. I encouraged her to be candid with me and saw her as a partner.)

I tell women not to be afraid of doubt. Sure, they need to be confident but not so confident that they never stop to ask, "Do I really know what I need to know?" When you think you know everything, you stop listening, and that's when you invite trouble. This may seem to contradict what I said earlier, but I truly believe that self-awareness and self-



doubt complement one another. The tension between them is healthy.

How Comfort Can Be an Enemy

If you're comfortable, you're not growing. You should do what you are good at but still stretch for the next horizon. This inevitably involves some risk. Growing does not mean you necessarily are going to take a linear path. Lateral moves can be just as rewarding. You can remain at the same company and still continue to stretch. Ask yourself, "Am I learning new stuff? Am I doing things that matter?"

Taking the Measure of the Company

One thing I've learned: Don't think you're going to learn everything about a company's culture from a job interview. Anyone can behave well for a few hours. One CEO interviewed me for seven hours; I thought we were dating by the time we finished! You can learn much more by doing your homework online and, more important, by talking with people who have left the company. For example, when interviewing for a general counsel position, I met a driver who told me he once had worked for the company. He

had been laid off, but he had only great things to say about the organization. Of course, you've got to be judicious about your sources. If you talk with someone who was fired, for instance, you might get a slightly different opinion.

When scoping out a company, you also should rely on your intuition and your common sense. Many times, we know when something is off — or we get a good feeling about the company or its people. This should not be ignored. For example, when I was interviewing at one company, the CEO agreed to meet me on a Saturday. Most executives would insist on meeting during business hours; figuring out what to tell your current employer would be *your* issue. But this CEO accommodated my schedule. Along with making it very comfortable for me to interview discreetly, he seemed very decent. That made a positive impression on me.

Another time when a CEO came to New York to interview me over breakfast, I assumed he would be returning to his hotel in a chauffeured car. After chatting, I learned he was taking a cab and that his hotel was just a few blocks from where I lived. I said, "Well, you're right near my apartment, and I'm taking the subway. Want to come along?" Frankly, I was testing him. He ended up riding

“Am I learning new stuff? Am I doing things that matter?”

the subway with me, and he was very comfortable. I said to myself, “Okay, this says something good about him.”

Drive-by Mentors

I learn the most from people who are unlike me. I think creative problem solving occurs when you have people looking at issues through unfamiliar or unconventional lenses. You need a real “gumbo” of ideas. Advice from varying perspectives can help you decide where you stand on an issue.

By design, I want a mentor whose experiences and approach to problem solving — whose view of the world — are radically different from mine. One of my early mentors demonstrates this point. She was white, about the same age as my mother, from the West Coast and relatively conservative. She had come to the company after an acquisition. One day after a meeting, she came over to me, unsolicited, and asked the question: “What are you doing next?” Clueless and puzzled, I answered, “Well, I’m headed home.” It was comical. She quipped that she was asking about my career and goals, not my physical destination. I imagined reading her thought balloon, thinking something like, “Oh, she *seemed* so bright.” This exchange evolved into a mentoring relationship. She since has become a lifelong friend.

One general counsel ultimately became a mentor and a sponsor. That doesn’t mean he was easy on me. He gave me a hard road to travel and truly held me accountable. His attitude was, “You want to play in this sandbox? Then you must deliver.”

In *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer at Facebook, cautions women against mentoring people they don’t know. While I respect her opinion, this goes against my grain because sometimes mentoring can be a drive-by. It can be as simple as having a few conversations as opposed to a long-standing mentoring relationship. It can be intense and ongoing or a quick moment — or something in between. It can be carried on virtually. It can be a formally structured program at a company or it can be a system that individuals cobble together for themselves. Studies have shown that either way can work, depending on how well each is done.

Frankly, some people don’t know how to mentor. They think all it takes is a brain, a mouth and a little time. Some get better at mentoring once they’ve done it and made a few mistakes. For example, they learn to hold people accountable, keep confidences and handle other challenges of the mentoring relationship. Mentoring is *not* meant to make you feel warm and

fuzzy. To borrow from a politician, “Get a dog if that’s what’s important to you.”

The Evolution of a Book

My book, *Courageous Counsel*, was Lloyd Johnson’s idea, not mine. I met Lloyd almost 20 years ago, when he was starting the Minority Corporate Counsel Association [MCCA] and I was at Colgate, which was an early supporter of the MCCA. In 2009, Lloyd pitched the idea of the book to me as a virtual mentoring tool. Writing a book was not on my list of things I had planned to do, and our conversation was pretty comical at times. But before he was finished, he appealed to one of my core values: to pay it forward. The book would be a way for me to mentor women I would never know by helping them learn from those who have made it.

The women I met through researching the book inspired me. They taught me that there is no one way to get to the top. No single pill or recipe can guarantee success. These women all had taken different paths. They confronted failures, surprises and challenges. Even women who appeared to have the total package had made a few big mistakes along the way. They relived painful memories, and many held nothing back. Some had uprooted families or given up safe jobs. These were not feel-good stories. In the end, however, I think any of them would tell working women, “It’s okay ... you can do what’s important to you, but do it your way.”

How to Survive the Setbacks

You don’t have to enjoy your career 365 days a year, just most days. You will have setbacks and unpleasant experiences, and you’ll have to deal with difficult

people. And since when have people ever been predictable? I love this comment from a playwright: “Normal is someone you don’t know well.”

Remember that grit will help you survive the inevitable bad days. Any job that challenges you at times is going to cause fear and anxiety. If you haven’t

done it before, you won’t have ready-made solutions. That’s fine. It helps to keep things in perspective. So don’t take yourself too seriously even on less than ideal days. Hold on to your grit. Remember to laugh. Take good care of yourself. Find joy in your own life because no one can do that for you. ■