

(Dis)comfort at the Edge: Leaping, and Helping others Leap, to Success

Keynote Address - Patricia Goforth, Executive Vice President, Booz Allen Hamilton
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Thank you, Rachel - and thank you all for this warm Charleston greeting.

This Leadership Summit is an impressive undertaking with the important mission of "empowering women and the community." Maura and Rachel, I want to congratulate you and your team and tell you how proud I am to be part of it.

I'm also proud that Heather Walker, the principal who leads Booz Allen's Charleston defense business, played a key role in creating the inaugural Women in Defense Leadership Summit last year.

This morning I had the opportunity to hear Admiral Barrett's opening keynote address, and was struck by 1) Her amazing sense of humor and ability to share those "sea stories" and 2) her insightful leadership advice:

- As leaders, we must stand up and do what's right - call people to task when needed
- Be "master of your business"
- Don't put off what's important - whether caring for your health, attending key events of your children, taking advantage of unique experiences.

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The title of my speech, *(Dis)Comfort at the Edge*, and the photo behind me may seem a bit daunting -- but my message is about opportunity and camaraderie, and I hope that is the feeling you will come away with.

I'm going to start, however, in not-so-happy place.

A colleague recently asked me to tell her about my "worst day at work."

It was October 2005. I was at the Lansdowne conference center in Leesburg, Virginia attending Booz Allen's 2005 Partners Meeting. I had just been elected a partner and was riding the high of that promotion. It was heady just being there.

On the second day, we gathered in smaller groups for a series of “break-out” discussions on topics that top management wanted input on. My breakout group was assigned to discuss internal investment – that is, funding for developing new projects or business areas at the firm.

As I’m sure is the case at all companies and agencies, Booz Allen had less money to go around than the amount of requests. As the newbie in the group, I was assigned to take notes and brief them out to the full partnership.

The members of our breakout group were not decision-makers about investment funding, nor did most of us understand the criteria by which funding was granted or denied. This was a valid point to summarize and brief out.

A few partners in our breakout group, including a senior female partner, had issues with past investment decisions. They drove the breakout discussion around this dissatisfaction and pushed me to use strong language in my brief-out – words like ‘no transparency’ and ‘pet projects’.

I was uncomfortable with the content I was briefing – and nervous about my first time on stage as a partner.

It went horribly. Those listening were dumbstruck and offended. One said, “Trish, do you realize you just insulted every partner in this room?” You could hear a pin drop.

Not a single member of my breakout group spoke up to support me or provide context around our discussion. I was particularly disappointed that the senior female partner did not speak up to support me. I sat down and tried to be invisible during the other breakout de-briefs -- and then went back to my room, wanting never to emerge.

Somehow, I forced myself to go down to the evening reception. To my surprise, more than a dozen people came up to me over the course of the evening – and gave an encouraging word, or put their arm around my shoulder, or asked if they could “buy me a drink.”

My debrief at the 2005 partner meeting was the edge of a cliff, and I had to leap.

It wasn't a good leap – because I let myself be bullied and didn't follow my gut about the best way to present the key points from our breakout discussion. There are more effective and graceful ways to influence change than use of inflammatory language.

That was 13 years ago, and I still quake when I think about it.

But I survived the leap, I learned from it, and earned respect from many of my fellow partners in the process.

Some other lessons I learned are what I want to share with you today: First -- Why we need to take risks, and leap into the unknown; Second --Some of my *better* leaps and lessons; and Third -- How we can help each other.

It's a well-known adage that we have to move out of our comfort zone to succeed and grow. Whether we're taking on a new job, negotiating a complex situation, raising a child, or competing at sports – we need to take leaps that are hard and daunting.

I've found through experiences – bad ones like the Lansdowne partner meeting and many more good ones – that there are ways we can increase our comfort when we find ourselves at the edge of a precipice... ways to enhance our ability to seize opportunities on the other side...

And, just as important, there are ways we can help others leap to success.

Business books, psychology journals, and Linked-In postings abound with articles about taking risks and pushing ourselves harder. Unfortunately, according to studies published by researchers and career counselors, women are less likely than men to take a leap until they feel fully qualified.

My personal view is that – even after we've made the leap -- we women are the harshest critics of ourselves. We question whether we've earned our place and whether we're making a difference.

In their compelling book, "The Confidence Code," authors Katty Kay and Claire Shipman explain why women are statistically less likely to take leaps than men. Confidence, they argue – and I quote -- "requires a choice: less people pleasing and perfectionism and more action, risk taking, and fast failure." Action in the form of preparation and practice, melded with a sense of purpose – daring us to compete.

Tennis Great Billie Jean King famously said, "Pressure is a privilege." She wrote a book with that title.

I believe, if we are fortunate enough, and have worked hard enough, to be in a position in our profession to be facing a high-stakes opportunity, it is indeed a privilege. And, we should strive to think about our "edge situations" as a privilege to seize, not as a problem to shy away from.

We have exceptional role models for success in the defense industry, including our morning keynote speaker, Admiral Barrett. As we enter 2019, women lead Lockheed Martin, General Dynamics, Northrop Grumman, and Boeing's Defense, Space, and Security business.

I'm proud that my partner, Karen Dahut leads Booz Allen's Global Defense Group - our firm's largest business unit - and that 54% of our firm's Leadership Team are women. Like most organizations, we still have a way to go in meeting our diversity goals (especially at the mid-career level), but I've seen a real change in the past decade...not just in numbers of women at the top, but in the support of women for each other, which is a positive contrast to my unhappy story from 2005.

Role models sit beside us at all levels. Knowledge knows no rank and we can find inspirational examples of women and men who have made leaps - in turning down promotions or putting their career on hold to take care of their family - all of which are courageous choices.

Sometimes we choose change, and sometimes circumstances force us to change. But it's important to recognize that complacency - standing still -- is a risk too.

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OK, enough said about the big picture of risk taking. Maura asked that I share "*Anecdotes from my journey to become a Senior Executive within the National Security industry.*" So, here are a few of my own leaps and lessons learned.

My career journey started at the University of Virginia as a math major. My hall mate and future best friend was in engineering. Working through calculus problems together, I found that her engineering calculus class seemed much more interesting and practical than the theoretical math I was studying in the College of Arts and Science.

With my friend's support and encouragement, I took the leap to change my major to engineering. I didn't know enough about engineering to land on the right discipline right away, but some great courses in operations research and helpful advisors steered me to systems engineering. And, that turned out to be a very good academic foundation for my career in technology consulting.

My first job was working as a subcontractor to Lockheed on the Milstar satellite communications system. I was fortunate that my first boss, a retired Air Force colonel, was a wonderful mentor who took me under his wing and taught me about the Armed Forces and the importance of satellite communications to their mission. This was in the days before the internet and cell phones, creating a great reliance on SATCOM for deployed communications. He taught me to work hard, communicate clearly, and take pride and enjoyment in my work – life lessons that I try to pass on to my own mentees.

Back in the 1980s, Booz Allen was also supporting the Milstar program as its ground systems engineers. I became friends with several of the Booz Allen consultants and was impressed with their professionalism, teamwork, and camaraderie – both at work and socializing after hours. When they offered me a job, it didn't seem like a big risk, but a wonderful opportunity to work with friends on a project for which we had shared passion.

This past summer, I celebrated my 30th anniversary with the firm.

Some of you in the audience weren't born when I started working at Booz Allen. And, no matter what stage you are in your career, you might conclude that spending 30 years at one company doesn't sound like risk-taking.

To that, I'd reply, it depends. If you're working for an organization where you're learning and growing, where you feel valued and share the organization's values – you can take leaps and change jobs internally. Those of you who've built careers in the military get new assignments every few years. You may spend decades in uniform, but you've grown and taken risks as you've moved to new commands and different countries and moved up the ranks.

Consulting firms are all about change. I've lost count of the different jobs I've had at Booz Allen – so will focus on the last three. In 2010, I was tapped to lead Booz Allen's

Cyber Operations business. An interesting and important function for sure, but it took me from my comfort zone in the world of development to the new world of operations.

Just as I began to feel grounded and effective there, I was asked to take on responsibility for our Engineering & Science services. The good news was that I was back to my roots and I had responsibility to work across the firm. The bad news was that I had no staff or revenue because Booz Allen aligns people and revenue to client markets (such as the Navy). So, it was harder to drive outcomes or measure impact. Making a positive difference required a higher degree of collaboration for influence.

This past April, I was asked to become the lead for all of the firm's functional capabilities. In addition to engineering and science, I now have responsibility for analytics, consulting, cyber, and digital. It's exciting to play a key role in developing integrated solutions for our clients that bring together all of these disciplines.

But, it can be hard to get your hands and mind around. With more than 25,000 employees supporting different client organizations, I strive to ensure we share knowledge and best practices...and I'm trying to give our people a connection to, and way to grow in, their field of expertise, not just with their current client.

So, where to begin and how to make a difference? My approach has been to identify "pain points" - and look for ways to relieve them.

In my new role, for example, I've found that recruiting is a pain point. A job candidate - whether she's a digital wizard, cyber expert, or strategic planner - might be interviewed for different jobs by our Navy business, our Army business, and commercial business. That's confusing for the prospective employee - and doesn't best serve our firm. The resulting internal competition for talent doesn't provide best results for our clients. So, one of the first things I'm focusing on is improving the way we recruit and interview.

I'm convinced there's tangible benefit in finding and fixing - or at least improving -- "pain points." If you find yourself facing so many challenges you don't know where to start, look for those pain points.

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Switching to pleasure points for a minute -- My mentors, bosses, colleagues, and my husband George have continually provided the support I needed to take on new risks

and responsibilities throughout my career, while taking on the rewarding challenge of raising children.

My son David graduated from Clemson 3 years ago (GO TIGERS!!), and my daughter Lauren graduated from ECU last year.

I've tried to teach David and Lauren to take responsible risks, and I cherish that they still enjoy spending time with us as adults. We take a family ski trip to the Rockies every year - where they leap off edges of cliffs, and I do not.

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I've talked about the broader context and importance of risk-taking and shared some personal stories. Now, I'd like to focus on how we can help others, especially other women, make successful leaps.

There was an excellent article in the Harvard Business Review in September entitled, "*Don't Underestimate the Power of Women Supporting Each Other at Work.*" It has compelling stories and practical suggestions for women in the workplace, and I encourage you to read it.

For example, some senior level women distance themselves from junior women, perhaps to be more accepted by their male peers. Trying to separate oneself from a marginalized group has sadly been a strategy frequently employed (and may have been at the core of my Lansdowne experience).

Here is *my* advice on helping each other:

1. Be kind.
2. Ask for help... and give help.
3. Find stepping stones
4. Believe and enable.

1.Be kind. Yes, contrary to some career counselors' warnings that women can be "too nice," I believe civility is more important than ever. This past week's tributes to President Bush show how grace and civility when applied to leadership can have impactful results. Being kind costs nothing and can take you far.

Small acts of kindness can transform our workplace and communities and create a comfortable environment that makes risk taking easier.

Smile and say hi in the food line. Hold the elevator door. Let the other car go ahead of you in the parking garage.

A short story on that. My husband and I were stuck in a slow crawl trying to exit the stadium lot in Baltimore. Ahead of us a car was hopelessly attempting to back out of its parking space into the exit line. My husband stopped to let him in. I was braced for angry honks from the line of traffic behind us, but none came. When we got up to the booth, the attendant said the car in front of us had paid our parking fee. A small thing – but a great reward for a small act of kindness.

Look for ways to lift others. Celebrate group successes and take a few minutes each day to send a sincere compliment or good wish to at least one person.

2. Ask for help... And give help. This lesson from a mentor early in my career was the best single piece of advice I've ever received. Offer your talents to the challenge at hand, and ask for help from others. Make your ask specific. Base it on a colleague's demonstrated expertise that you've seen or heard about.

Being asked to help will lift them and you – and you'll both be able to leap higher together.

As recommended in "The Confidence Code," when help is in the form of feedback and the feedback is negative or "constructive" – accept the feedback with gratitude – learn from it and move on. Don't dwell on insecurities or bask in self doubt. If you aren't prepared to be criticized, you're likely to shy away from suggesting bold ideas or asking for help.

I've found female peer sponsors to be especially powerful – those who will be supportive in meetings and provide timely, honest feedback. Even though there may be fewer spots available for promotion as we progress up the ranks, it's far better to lift each other up than ruthlessly compete against each other.

3. Find stepping stones. Taking a big leap is easier and more likely to be successful if you can take incremental steps. That's why internships are so valuable... Or learning new skills supporting a professional association like WID or a charity you care about.

Booz Allen has a program called "The Accelerator" that helps employees find a new project when their contract is coming to an end... or if they want to make an internal job

move. Sometimes people feel they need to go to another organization when it's time for a change. By supporting career mobility and helping match employees to good opportunities, we're trying to keep talented people "in the fold" by providing them their own stepping stone in the firm.

4. Believe and enable. A big part of helping others make leaps is to assure them you believe in their ability, and then help them succeed. Each of us is responsible for deciding what risks to take and when to leap, but trusted advisors can help us make better decisions, bolster our self-confidence, and help us succeed after we've leapt.

A few years ago, when I was leading Booz Allen's Cyber business, we were bidding on a very large \$100-million-plus contract for U.S. Cyber Command. Carol, the proposal manager, had never led an effort of this magnitude but she did a superb job - coordinating the technical approach, cost proposal, and staffing plan. She was incredibly organized, and her interpersonal skills were unusually good. In such a big undertaking and intense competitive situation, tempers usually flare from time to time. But, not on this proposal.

We won. I asked Carol to take an even bigger leap and be the program manager for the new contract. It was way out of her comfort zone, but I reminded her how much she had learned on the proposal effort and promised to be there each step of the way. There were rough spots at the beginning, but we worked through them. Before long, the program was running smoothly under Carol's leadership. Our clients were happy, and our employees were happy. I was beyond happy - I was truly overwhelmed with pride and joy in seeing Carol's success.

I've found more and more that helping someone else - a staff member, a mentee, my child - to take a big leap and succeed -- is even more rewarding than my own achievements. And, when I see them - in turn - help others excel, it is a virtuous circle where discomfort at the edge turns into something extraordinary: the bliss of shared success.

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Thank you.