Stepping Stones: Nine Lessons from Women Leaders in Academic Medicine

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Abstract

Women now make up half of all medical school matriculates; yet few women hold leadership positions in academic health centers. The reasons for this gender gap are complex and have been the subject of much discussion. However, the experiences of women who successfully ascend to positions of senior leadership are rarely examined. It is critical to develop a greater understanding of women’s paths to leadership positions in order to inspire and enable more women to seek such opportunities. Using a semi-structured protocol, we interviewed 16 women leaders who were willing to share their career journeys in a public forum. These leaders were asked to share pivotal moments or milestones, referred to as “stepping stones,” in their careers. The interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed for significant patterns and consistent themes. Nine themes were identified and included: hold fast to your values; be open to unexpected opportunities; surround yourself with people who believe in you and people you believe in; be assertive in your communication and actions; continually refine your leadership skills; don’t take things personally; stay organized; build positive relationships and welcoming environments; and when and if necessary, prove them wrong. The women leaders had strikingly similar lessons to share. This study develops a deeper understanding of the career paths of women in leadership positions, setting the stage for future study as well as encouraging and empowering more women to climb the leadership ladder.

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Leadership can take many forms. Women are leaders at work and at home — in communities and families, in organizations, private companies and governments. Of
course, women aren’t the only leaders in these spaces. But International Women’s Day is an opportunity to focus on women’s contributions and celebrate them. And there’s a lot to celebrate in health: women lead government policy making; they work as medical professionals; they’re advocates for health and gender equality; they manage organizations and teams; they analyse information and evidence; they stand up for marginalized communities. The term “glass ceiling” refers to women’s lack of advancement into leadership positions despite no visible barriers. The term has been applied to academic medicine for over a decade but has not previously been applied to the advancement of women's health. This paper discusses (1) the historical linking of the advances in women’s health with women's leadership in academic medicine, (2) the slow progress of women into leadership in academic medicine, and (3) indicators that the advancement of women's health has stalled.