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Women in leadership

By Lynsey Whitmarsh, Managing Director – UK

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Lynsey Whitmarsh, Managing Director of Hemsley Fraser UK, spoke recently about what it's like being a female leader, who has inspired her and whether she's encountered any barriers along the way.

Read on for the full interview:



As a female leader, what experiences or pivotal moments can you share with us from your journey?

Sometimes we can put up barriers or fear that our role as a leader will not be accepted or respected. I believe in the power of positive thinking and that you should never underestimate what you can do. You've got to be your own best ally, friend and, ultimately, cheerleader, encouraging yourself along. You have to be self-aware and brave enough to explore development points in a way that builds you up and doesn't damage positive self-talk.

There have been times in my career, when I have doubted whether I could do what was asked of me, such as facilitating my first class, completing my master's degree or designing programmes for large conferences. I just needed to push myself and believe that I was strong enough to carry it out. I've carried this belief throughout my career "If we dream it, we can do it". You need to visualise

what you want to do and then just get on with it. If it's wrong or not gaining the results you wanted, change it - doing nothing or fearing the 'what if' hinders building confidence and moving forward.

As a female advancing in a leadership role I have asked myself, "How am I going to balance everything? How do I balance my career ambitions with my personal life? What if I want to have a family but I'm in a leadership role that requires lots of travel?"

Looking back, I realise that I shouldn't have doubted myself - gender should not hold you back. As Managing Director at Hemsley Fraser and mum of an eight-month-old, I do have lots of demands on my time and conflicting priorities, but that doesn't mean my work or my home life is compromised. It's all about striking the right balance.

Have you encountered any barriers along the way to being a female leader?

I've been incredibly lucky to work for an organisation where the conversation has centred on "how can we push you forward?" Hemsley Fraser has always made it very clear that I could have a family and work in a leadership role – it wasn't the case of one or the other. It was just about finding ways in which to make them both work.

When I think about barriers, most of the time, it was actually me holding myself back. When I was asked to join the board as a director of the company five years ago, my first response was, "how am I going to manage this? You do know that I want to have a family". There was a lot to think about – I spoke to my partner about how we could make it work and discussed the practicalities and logistics.

I've just taken the next step in my career – moving into the Managing Director role with an eight-month-old baby. Again, initially, I asked myself whether or not it was the right time to move into this type of role. However, this time I also asked myself the question, "why shouldn't I?" I believed that I could do it and that it came back to finding a healthy balance.

As more females move in to leadership roles I hope that others will see that equality is possible in business, and that you don't have to choose between starting a family and progressing in your career.





Has the arrival of your daughter changed your leadership approach in any way?

The arrival of my daughter was, and continues to be, a wonderful change in my life. In terms of changing my approach, if anything, my mindset is more determined than ever before. I am a role model to my daughter now, and she will be looking up to me. I want her to believe that she can achieve anything if she sets her mind to it.

Plus, I feel it is important for her to see both her mum and dad achieving career goals. It gives a very clear message around gender equality. We equally care for her and share the childcare responsibilities between us.

Who have been your biggest inspirations in your career?

Before joining Hemsley Fraser, I worked with several people that challenged and encouraged me to take a step further. This enabled me to do something that I didn't think was possible - instead of co-ordinating an event behind the scenes, I was challenged to present and facilitate the training courses. This sparked my passion for facilitating and designing training events. As time went on, a conversation with the CEO of the company inspired me to take my career to the next level and complete my Master's Degree.

During my Master's Degree, the professors taught me a lot about human behaviour and what it means to be a female in leadership - this has always been invaluable.

At Hemsley Fraser, I've been very fortunate to work very closely with several people who have pushed me forward and challenged me. They have invested a lot of time and effort in to my development and, at times, have been tough on me, but for all the right reasons. Todd Turner, our CEO, has always been a massive inspiration, with his creativity and ability to think differently. Likewise, a previous HF director, who is a successful female leader, has taught me a great deal in my career.



What challenges do you face as a woman in a leadership position?

I think that there is still a lot of labelling, for example, if a woman is passionate, this can be labelled as being emotional or over the top, or if she is assertive, too pushy or aggressive.

This language and gender labelling needs to change because these different behaviours can and need to live in anybody, whether you are

male or female. Being assertive, driven, passionate and decisive are essential to anyone who wants to be successful. Women can be direct without being aggressive, and they can be passionate without being a bulldozer. The labelling that can be given to women can be really harmful personally and professionally.

What's the biggest risk you've taken?

It was when we set up the digital business at Hemsley Fraser in 2016. We had a shoestring budget which, in reality, wasn't even a budget - I had persuaded a client to try some new approaches, and we innovated together. Through this, we were able to self-fund a new part of the business. If I had known where this was going to lead, I think I would have felt quite overwhelmed. We started by building ten Fluidbooks, our version of e-learning, which felt achievable at the time. Moving five years on, we now have over 5000 assets in multiple modalities, translated into ten languages. It was definitely a risk that I'm very proud of!

What advice do you have for others wanting to be in a leadership role?

When you are a leader, you've got to accept that not everybody will think that what you're doing is right all of the time. There will be a lot of different opinions. Sometimes, the right thing for one person isn't going to be right for another. We have witnessed this a lot recently in politics relating to the pandemic.

As a leader, you need to have conviction. You need to have a vision and a strategy, and most importantly, you need to believe in it and have confidence when you communicate. If you start to waver, others will see this, and then you will lose support. Finally, remember that it is important to have a focus and vision that can be delivered in a collaborative and inclusive way.

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