

## Against the Odds

**INDIVIDUALLY, THEY'VE DEFIED THE ODDS** throughout their careers. Last year, Barbara Lautzenheiser, Mary Frances Miller, and Margaret Tiller Sherwood defied the odds together: They became presidents of three of the five national organizations that represent the male-majority U.S. actuarial profession.

Lautzenheiser headed the American Academy of Actuaries at the same time that Miller led the Casualty Actuarial Society (CAS) and Sherwood led the Conference of Consulting Actuaries. And as they worked with each other during their 2003–2004 presidential term, the three women—all of whom have their own small consulting firms—found much common ground.

In a recent roundtable discussion with *Contingencies*, the three women reflected on their journeys to the profession's highest leadership positions, and they were asked what qualities had been important to their success. Here, then, are a few of the nontechnical lessons that Lautzenheiser, Miller, and Sherwood learned as they climbed up the ladder.

### Implement

"There are a lot of people who have good ideas and can take direction, but they really can't implement," says Lautzenheiser. "The skill we three have is the ability not only to figure out what to do, but to actually get it done."

That trait was something Miller mentioned when the CAS asked her why she thought she'd be an effective president. Among her answers: "I'll get things done."

But an actuarial attention to detail, especially when it verges on perfectionism, can be an obstacle. Miller recalled that, years ago, she revised most of the work her subordinates submitted for approval. Finally, one of them came to her and told her how discouraged they all were. So she stopped.

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"When you've got somebody working for you and they don't do it exactly the way you would have done it, that doesn't necessarily mean it's not OK," she said.

"I learned that it's OK to trust other people to make a judgment."

For presidents of the professional organizations, Lautzenheiser said, it's also essential to be able to persuade others, to lead without commanding. Since the presidents



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can't just dictate what the Academy, the Conference, and CAS will do, she said, traditionally female communication skills that aren't confrontational can come in handy.

### Take the Initiative

If you want something, go for it. And don't be afraid to blow your own horn.

Sherwood became president-elect of the Conference after she asked to be considered for the job. Her husband, Rob, a marketing specialist, persuaded her to give her résumé to the chairperson of the Conference's nominating committee, who wouldn't otherwise have known about her accomplishments. Reluctantly, she took her résumé to the chairperson and told him what position she wanted. "I had to market myself, and it actually worked," she

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said. "They called me and asked me to be president-elect. I was flabbergasted."

If you want to serve on a committee or work on a volunteer project for one of the actuarial organizations, the presidents said, it can't hurt to contact the chairperson or a friend who's already involved. Even if there's no immediate need for more volunteers, the chairperson will have your name as a potential resource for the future or for a related project.

It's generally a bad idea to wait for a "more convenient" time to start doing something you want to do. As the three presidents have learned by experience, a more convenient time rarely arrives.

### **Have a Life**

When people suffer a major personal loss, they often reconsider their priorities. Sherwood became a single mother at a young age when her first husband, Mike Tiller, died unexpectedly. And in 2004, in the middle of their presidential terms, Lautzenheiser was widowed, and Miller lost her older sister.

After her husband died, Sherwood decided to spend more time on activities with her children, including acting with them in local theater productions. "No one ever says at a funeral, 'I wish they'd spent more time at the office,'" she noted. She and one of her sons now have an unconventional acting job at a St. Louis medical school, where they play the roles of patients during exams in which medical students diagnose their symptoms.

"You have to have some life outside of work," said Miller, a judge for lure course field trials for sight hounds. (That means she gives the scores at field trials where greyhounds and similar dogs chase artificial lures as if tracking game.) "I've been coursing my hounds since before my daughter was born, well over 20 years," she said. "In fact, one of the ways I got through the actuarial exams was that I went almost every weekend in the fall and spring to a field trial. I would pack

the dogs in the car and go off with my books and study."

Lautzenheiser has a long list of future projects, including writing several non-fiction books for women. She has just started work on one of them, *A Life Alone*. She has been intending for a long time to write it, "because every woman is going to be alone at some time in her life," she said. "I just didn't think mine was going to be this soon."

### **Find Ways to Gain Visibility**

Professional visibility can be a big help if you want to broaden your career options, as Lautzenheiser discovered in the 1970s. She became known as an expert on the "unisex issue," defending the concept of risk classification against efforts to create a single pension annuity rate for men and women. (She argued that it was fair to pay lower rates to women because women generally live longer than men and so get annuity payments for a longer time.)

"I took a stand on an issue that was important and that I thought it took a female to do," she recalled. "It took a woman to say to a woman, 'No, we are not discriminating.'" Lautzenheiser's visibility on the issue led to a new job and to positions on the Academy and the Society of Actuaries Boards of Directors. She later became the first woman president of the SOA.

### **Have a Good Support System**

A successful leader needs a support system that makes the workload more manageable, the presidents said. They practice what they preach.

Lautzenheiser employs a full-time assistant to take care of her house, and Miller and Sherwood have stay-at-home spouses. "I don't think I could ever have had the job that I have today without an extremely supportive and understanding spouse who is quite willing, at least most of the time, to be at home," said Miller. "When you make a decision to be highly visible and in a job

that requires you to travel a lot, and then on top of that all the travel with the professional responsibilities, I think it almost goes without saying that there's someone else at home with the kids."

### **Persevere**

Miller learned how to be more diplomatic. Sherwood overcame her terror of being on stage. Lautzenheiser worked through her fear of speaking out in public. The three presidents have developed a variety of leadership skills they needed, and those have changed with time and circumstance.

Sherwood said that "it just never occurred to me that I couldn't do anything." In ninth grade, she recalled, she came home and told her mother she wanted to be a nurse. "You're too bossy to be a nurse," her mother replied. "If you want to be in the medical profession, you need to be a doctor."

Lautzenheiser started out in an "Ozzie and Harriet" culture that encouraged women to keep a low profile and often punished them if they deviated from traditional roles. Miller, a generation younger, said it has been far different for her: "Either I'm completely blind and obtuse, or I've never seriously experienced the gender discrimination issue in my entire career as an actuary."

But all three have learned how to use setbacks as opportunities.

Miller started her own firm after her employer decided to close the office where she had spent five years and where she headed a department that was bringing in \$2 million a year. "I knew we could make money at this," she recalled. Within three weeks, she and several of her co-workers had embarked on their new business. Similarly, when Sherwood learned that she was going to lose her job, she decided "the best revenge was to be successful." In three days she landed a new position—and doubled her salary. ●