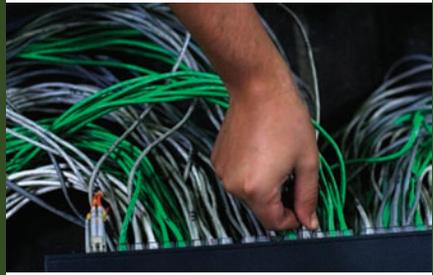


Law Firm
Management
and Economics:

Women on Top— The Woman's Guide to Leadership and Power in Law Firms

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Chapter 15

Resilience

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§ 15:1 Leaders need to be resilient

If you have made mistakes, even serious ones, there is always another chance for you. What we call failure is not the falling down but the staying down.

— Mary Pickford

To be a law firm leader requires resilience: the ability to deal with stress, tolerate conflict, and cope with the intensity of the job. Resilience enables you to endure extreme hardships and challenges and, most importantly, bounce back. Resilient people tend to be optimistic about the future and confident about themselves; they have the courage to take smart risks and the inner strength and thick skin to cope with tough situations. Because the pressures of leadership can easily wear you down, resilience also requires maintaining your emotional and physical well-being.

Leading any organization is a serious undertaking with a great deal at stake. Your job is to protect the interests and maximize the success of your firm and all of its partners and employees. Some of the leaders I interviewed spoke of an unrelenting sense of responsibility because “*so much depends on what I do.*” One of

the leaders I interviewed is a full-time co-managing partner of a large, multi-office firm. She said of her role: *“I have direct responsibility for thousands of people and the welfare of an organization.”* Another leader who is the professional development director for a national firm described how she feels about her responsibilities: *“I carry the weight of the world on my shoulders. I worry about the people here. Who’s busy, who’s not? Who’s performing well, who isn’t? Can he be salvaged or not? What can be done? My responsibilities for the people here are more significant than my caseload during my whole career at the firm. I know so much, so many things. The burden is harder.”*

The job of law firm leadership is hard, the stress is constant, the people can be impossible, and you have little real power to make people do what needs to be done. You will inevitably make mistakes and missteps, and you will be criticized and worse. You will have many sleepless nights, yet you will forge ahead with confidence and optimism because leaders want to build a better firm and know that they can do it. Churchill said, “Success is the ability to move from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm.” He was speaking of resilience.

§ 15:2 Optimism

Optimism makes you more resilient to adversity and able to function more effectively as a leader. Research clearly shows that optimistic people have a lot going for them: they are happier, healthier, more productive, have better personal relationships, succeed more, are better problem solvers, and are less likely to become depressed than pessimistic people.¹ Their confidence inspires teams to action and their mindset is better for making business decisions. Their positive attitude is a virtue for leadership since people must believe that following the leader will lead to a better future. McKinsey researchers have found that positive emotions are a major factor in driving and sustaining successful women leaders.²

Optimism and pessimism are ways of thinking about experience. They affect the way you feel and what you do when faced with a situation, especially when something goes wrong.

[Section 15:2]

¹Sagerstrom, S.C., & Sephton, S.E. (Feb. 2010), Optimistic expectancies and cell-mediated immunity, *Psychological Science*; Reivich, K. (June 2008), The seven ingredients of resilience, CNBC, <http://www.cnbc.com/id/25464528/>.

²Barsh, J., Cranston, S., & Lewis, G. (2009), *How remarkable women lead* (New York: Crown Business).

The classic illustration of the difference between optimism and pessimism is that while looking at the same glass of water, the pessimist sees the glass as half empty while the optimist sees it as half full. The glass and its contents are exactly the same; it is the interpretation that differs.

Optimists are effective leaders because they are able to build commitment and enthusiasm in others. Optimists' positive outlook creates the sense that they can manage challenges and make good things happen for other people. This is especially important when times are tough because you can give hard messages in a positive way. By taking the long view toward a better future, you make people believe that you will lead them to a better place than they are in now. When you believe that you can make a positive difference, you can spread that belief to others. You can give people cause for hope.

Optimistic leaders are not naïve or foolish. They are realistic, and reality is often grim. Having an optimistic outlook does not mean denying reality or always thinking good thoughts. Rather, it means that you can understand and appreciate both the positive and negative aspects of a situation that you or the firm may be in, even—especially—when it is difficult or perilous. In those situations, resilient leaders do not despair or concentrate only on deficiencies and dangers. They look for opportunities and focus on solutions. Optimism allows them to accept the facts of adversity and counter them with constructive action.³

It is hard to find optimists in law firms because optimism is not a common trait of lawyers. In a study of personality attributes of people in 104 careers, the research found only one consistent correlation between a particular attribute and career success: the attribute of pessimism was highly and consistently correlated with success among lawyers.⁴ Pessimism is evidently a positive personality trait for practicing law. However, pessimism takes a profound toll on lawyers in other aspects of life. Pessimism depletes your energy, can make you feel helpless and stuck in downward spirals, and reduces your resilience.⁵

Tests of personality characteristics bear this out. Lawyers tend to rate extremely low on resilience: 90% of them score below the

³Barsh, Cranston, & Lewis (2009), *How remarkable women lead*.

⁴Seligman, M.P. (2002), *Authentic happiness: using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment* (New York: Free Press).

⁵Seligman (2002), *Authentic happiness*.

50th percentile, with the average score at 30%.⁶ According to these tests, people who are low on resilience tend to be defensive, resist taking in feedback, and can be hypersensitive to criticism. In most organizations, these traits would take them out of contention as candidates for leadership. No one wants to follow someone who gives off negative energy and brings people down. With such a high concentration of pessimists in law firms, the pool of resilient leaders is relatively small—and the opportunities for optimists are considerable.

Fortunately, optimism can be learned.⁷ If you tend to be pessimistic, you can teach yourself how to think differently about events and what they mean. The same things may happen to you, but instead of assuming the worst, you will see positive implications. Instead of giving up, you will be able to act in a constructive way. According to psychologist Barbara Frederickson, having more positive emotions than negative emotions, in a ratio of at least 3:1, broadens your outlook, increases your satisfaction, and enables you to function at a higher level in work and life.⁸ She found that just aspiring to have a more positive outlook can increase your ratio and help you to flourish.

§ 15:3 Self-confidence

Self-confidence is the first requisite to great undertakings.

— Samuel Johnson

To be a resilient leader, you must believe that you are capable of succeeding at what leaders do. You must have self-confidence, which one study has defined as an “internal presumption of competence.”¹ It is a belief in yourself and your ability to improve the future for others. It is understanding your strengths and weaknesses and relying on your strengths to guide your thoughts and actions. It is believing that you can effectuate change in the world and can succeed at what you do. An interesting observation during my interviews for this book was the number of women leaders who expressed self-confidence without hesitation. Here are a few of their comments:

⁶Richard, L.R. (July 1998), *Herding cats: the lawyer personality revealed*, ABA Journal.

⁷See, e.g., Seligman, M.P. (2006), *Learned optimism: how to change your mind and your life* (New York: Vintage Books).

⁸Fredrickson, B. (2009), *Positivity* (New York: Crown).

[Section 15:3]

¹Ibarra, H., & Obodaru, O. (Jan. 2009), Women and the vision thing, *Harvard Business Review*.

- *I knew I would be good at this, and I am.*
- *I knew I could lead teams and committees, but wasn't sure I could lead the firm. It didn't take long for me to see that I have what it takes to do this job.*
- *I always assumed I was empowered, never thought I needed to ask. I solve problems on my own initiative.*
- *I always wanted to be a player. I held leadership positions in high school; I like being in charge; I get energized by it. It feels natural to me.*

Being confident that you can perform does not require that you be fully competent in every area the job calls for. Confidence comes from experiencing your strengths in action.² Much of what you have to know and do as a leader you learn on the job; the better you do that job, the more confident you become. In this sense, confidence is a product of leadership experience, not a prerequisite for it. If you wait until you believe that you are ready for a position, by the time that it happens, someone else will have the job.

Given the nature of the law firm as an organization, leaders must be confident and direct in order to get things done. However, because you have to lead others who are strong and confident, too, you must also demonstrate humility in order to be considered trustworthy. Finding a way to demonstrate your confidence without coming across as either too modest or too confident can be a challenge for women leaders. As discussed previously (Chapter 2), stereotyping and gender bias make it hard for women to find a way to demonstrate their confidence. If you are too humble, your humility can come across as indecisive and weak. People may interpret it as a lack of capability, temperament, or willingness to do what it takes as a leader. On the other hand, if people believe you are too confident, you may be negatively perceived as pushy or arrogant. Either way, your confidence may be attacked.

Because of the many decisions and actions the job requires, leaders sometimes make missteps or errors. Many women replay events in their minds over and over again, preoccupied with their failures or shortcomings and blaming themselves when anything goes wrong. If you demand perfection in yourself, i.e., if you must feel completely prepared and safe before you step up, you may never become an effective leader. You cannot allow the fear of a

²Kanter, R.M. (2006), *Confidence: how winning streaks and losing streaks begin and end* (New York: Three Rivers Press).

mistake to stop you from acting or the fact of a mistake to destroy your confidence. Keep some perspective. Leadership involves risks; little is certain, definite, or safe. If you are doing your job as a leader, you will inevitably make some missteps. Learn from them without constantly second-guessing yourself. Learn to accept imperfection, and instead of dwelling on your faults, focus instead on how to rebound from your errors. Choose to be positive and forward-looking. Most mistakes will not be fatal and most setbacks will be temporary. A.G. Lafley, former CEO and Chair of Procter & Gamble, once told an interviewer that you learn more from failure than from success, so “the key is to fail early, fail cheaply, and don’t make the same mistake twice.”³

Effective women leaders do not let self-doubt erode their confidence. They do not give in to the gender bias that others may harbor about women leaders. They keep their goals in mind and keep moving toward them. They focus on doing the job at hand and doing it well. They overcome any self-doubts they may have by producing top results. They are good at what they do, they know it, and it shows. This is not to say that you must eliminate self-doubt entirely but that you confront the doubt and not let it stop you from acting. Similarly, too much certainty can limit your effectiveness. If you believe that your way is the only way because you know better than others, that can also stymie you—and justify the label of arrogance.

As a leader, you must appear confident even when you are not. People need to believe that their leaders are competent and have things under control. One leader I interviewed explained, “*People have to feel confident in you. You need to create a self-image of who you are so you can project that confidence to others.*” There may be times, however, when you do not have the experience, skills, or answers that you need to feel completely confident. Admitting uncertainty is fine; admitting helplessness is not. It is hard for people to feel confident in you if you look unsure, frightened, or on the brink of a meltdown, so even when you feel you are on shaky ground, you have to gather enough willpower and strength to make yourself appear self-confident.

This may be challenging when you are a new leader. One of the women I interviewed did not feel fully prepared for the job when she started in her role as practice group leader. She felt like she was in over her head and unsure whether she could do it, but she also felt that she had to appear to be in control. “*How can I let*

³How Procter & Gamble plans to clean up, *Business Week* (Apr. 2009).

people know how I feel? They need to trust me and have confidence that I know what I'm doing." Rather than give in to self-doubt, she publicly presented herself as confident while she methodically went about learning the things that she needed to know and do.

Similarly, when you are in the center of a storm, it is critical to maintain your composure so that people believe you are in control. It helps to keep your vision and purpose clear in your mind, especially when you face discouragement, rejection, or an uproar in the ranks. Maintaining others' confidence in you is essential if you want to prevent panic, loss of productivity, and partners heading for the exits. By staying centered and focusing on achieving positive outcomes, you will appear calm and reassuring to others—and be able to think more clearly about how to handle the situation.

§ 15:4 Smart risk-taking

Behold the turtle. It makes progress only when it sticks its neck out.

— James Bryant Conan

How much risk can you tolerate? Leadership is about change, and change is always risky, so understanding how you react to risk will help you prepare to deal with the risks you will inevitably face as a leader. Leaders do not always have time to study issues in detail before they have to act. Moreover, some problems are so complicated, murky, or emotional that there are no clear solutions, and any decision could have serious consequences. In these situations, you will have to tolerate ambiguity and move ahead bravely without all the facts. You will need to be confident in your abilities and judgment and rely on that confidence to accept the risk of failure. If the outcome is unsuccessful, you need to be able to recover and move on to face the next decision.

Some women find risk exciting, but most people avoid it. They prefer to continue doing what is familiar and makes them comfortable. They avoid change because they are not sure what it will bring. This is especially true for lawyers, whose training and professional work is directed at avoiding or minimizing risks. On psychological tests, lawyers score much higher on risk aversion than the general population. Lawyers work hard to reduce risk by analyzing situations carefully and making rational, data-driven decisions. In the process, they focus on everything that can go wrong. Thus, when faced with proposals involving change or innovation, they are reluctant to "go first" because untested moves have a heightened risk of failure or adverse outcomes.

Consequently, they prefer to maintain the status quo rather than make any sort of move or change. Leaders, on the other hand, know that “skeptics of change overestimate the safety of the status quo,” especially in times of turmoil and uncertainty. After all, leadership is all about change.

Being a leader involves persuading others to trust you to take risks on their behalf, but lawyers’ risk aversion also makes it hard for them to trust people, including their leaders. In the practice of law, lawyers frequently witness the effects of betrayal and the worst of human behavior, which reinforces their wariness. Though they authorize you to act on their behalf, they may worry that your actions and decisions might put their financial interests and careers in jeopardy. You can reduce their skepticism by pointing out your past performance, experience, and results. However, you may not be able to put them fully at ease because risk cannot be completely eliminated; it is part of all human relationships, and those relationships cannot succeed without accepting some risk. As one author notes, we must risk being wrong in order to know whether we are right in giving our trust.¹ This creates a tension that you have to learn to live with as a leader.

Risk accompanies every leadership position because as a leader you are out front and all eyes are upon you. You must act, decide, and manage while others watch you and judge. Leaders challenge old, settled ways and experiment with new ideas. They have to be willing to stick their necks out when they believe change is necessary even if it opens them up to the possibility of rejection, embarrassment, or failure. What they do or say may be unpopular or unsuccessful but they cannot treat possible failure as a reason for inaction.

Being unafraid of failure is a tall order for women leaders in law firms. Leadership takes considerable courage. All leaders operate in the spotlight and their partners are unforgiving and have long memories. However, leadership carries a greater degree of risk for women than for men. Because women leaders are still in the minority, they are subjected to closer scrutiny and harsher judgment. Some researchers submit that women in leadership are on “glass cliffs” and in more precarious positions than their

[Section 15:4]

¹Shaw, R.B. (1997), *Trust in the balance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass).

male counterparts.² They find that women are more likely to be given leadership roles in firms that are in crisis, which increases their chances of failure and opens them to greater criticism. At the same time, these firms often deny women leaders needed support, resources, and information, making leadership particularly stressful for them. Many women partners avoid such risks by avoiding leadership altogether or taking on management roles that are mostly administrative.

Accepting the need to take chances does not mean that you have to be comfortable with risk or become a gambler. However, since you cannot avoid risk if you are a leader, learn how to manage it wisely. By taking smart risks, you will learn more, achieve more, and enjoy life more. Through experience and with the guidance of trusted advisors, you can learn how to assess risk accurately and develop the wisdom to distinguish reasonable from unreasonable risks. When you take a risk and the outcome is successful, use it to give your skeptical partners evidence that justifies their faith in you. Even if you err, you can learn from the failure and try to use it to strengthen your standing as a leader. Show partners your humility, ability to laugh at yourself, and capacity to accept a loss and move on. Try to turn the failure around, reframe it, and emphasize any positive lessons and outcomes. Sometimes, circumstances vindicate your risk-taking, turning what looks like a loss into a clear win. This is how that happened to one leader I interviewed:

In a meeting to decide new partners, I spoke out against someone. People were surprised. It was risky, especially because the senior partner supported the person. The person was elevated, but something happened soon after, and he had to leave. Then I was seen as courageous and correct, having stood up for the firm's standards. This reinforced partners' view of me as not just outspoken, but a person with good judgment.

§ 15:5 Inner strength

I was always looking outside myself for strength and confidence, but it comes from within. It is there all the time.

— Anna Freud

Given the challenges that come with leading lawyers, resilient leaders must have the inner strength to confront their own and others' legitimate fears and anxieties and move forward in spite of them. For many leaders, the hardest part of the job is dealing

²Ashby, J., Ryan, M.K., & Haslam, S.A. (2007), Legal work and the glass cliff: evidence that women are preferentially selected to lead problematic cases, *William and Mary Journal of Women and the Law* 13(3).

with the emotional and interpersonal issues that confront them. By temperament and training, lawyers try to be rational and dispassionate, to keep their distance, but as a leader, you cannot escape these emotionally draining issues. You have to deal with partners with performance problems, distraught partners going through traumatic events in their personal lives, personnel with drug or alcohol abuse, or other discomfoting problems. You learn things about people you work with that are dark and depressing.

Much of what you learn and do as a leader happens behind the scenes where no one sees it, and a lot of it cannot be shared with anyone else. You might negotiate with an angry former client to prevent a malpractice suit against a wayward partner or arrange rehab and counseling for an alcoholic administrator. In doing these things, you protect the reputation of the firm and you save the partnership thousands of dollars, but for reasons of privacy, these issues must be handled without disclosure. In many cases, your achievements may never be known to your partners, so you will not receive credit for your good work. One former managing partner said, *“Much of my work was confidential. You cannot brag that you just saved the firm from a malpractice suit.”* If you are the kind of person who needs to talk about your accomplishments or if you need constant approval from others, this is not a job for you. You must have the inner strength to do your work and follow your mandate even when people take you for granted or fail to appreciate what you are doing for them.

§ 15:6 Thick skin

Do what you feel in your heart to be right—for you’ll be criticized anyway. You’ll be damned if you do, and damned if you don’t.

— Eleanor Roosevelt

Law firms can be pretty rough and tumble in the best of circumstances, and the stress of law practice can bring out the worst in partners. When they do not agree with the firm’s decisions or actions, they may behave badly. As noted earlier, partners may blame or ridicule leaders without reason or justification or make them scapegoats for decisions that the firm has made even if the leader lobbied against the decision. When you are the face of the firm or committee, you are identified with the actions it takes; even your friends sometimes fail to separate you as a person from you as a member of management. You also learn very quickly as a leader that there are no secrets among partners, especially if they involve you. People may promise to keep things confidential, but somehow word gets out. In these and any number of other situations, you may feel under siege. To remain resilient, you must develop a thick skin.

One of the difficult things that many women have to cope with is how relationships with partners change when they become leaders. You might work together and talk with each other casually as partners, but as one leader noted, after you become a leader, especially at a senior level: *“When partners want to talk with you, each one has an agenda.”* Another leader found that she had a hard time getting people to give her honest information: *“Everyone tells me what they want me to hear or what they think I want to hear.”*

Even more difficult for some of the leaders I interviewed was the realization that the actions they took as leaders sometimes caused fractures in personal relationships with other partners. Sometimes leaders make decisions that are unpopular or controversial; sometimes they speak up for unpopular causes or speak out against favored ones. Partners who disagree or whose interests are harmed may become angry, upset, or defiant. While leaders should be concerned about acting wisely, they cannot worry about their popularity; they have to do what they think is right. One leader explained the tension this way: *“You have to stay aligned with the department or firm’s strategy and interests even when many of the people in the department are your friends and what you decide will be problems for them. It’s hard to juggle personal relations and business interests.”* In extreme cases, you may lose friends because of your obligations to the firm as a leader. Indeed, a few of the leaders I interviewed spoke of friendships ending because of difficult decisions they had to make as leaders. They regretted the lost friendships but accepted them because their decisions were correct for the greater good of the firm. One young leader said, *“There’s a lot you need to block out in order to succeed. I know, for example, that not all people will like me. You need to set your mind to accept that.”*

Sometimes women leaders take workplace comments and disagreements too personally. When partners’ anger flares up over firm policies or decisions, it is important to distinguish between comments made in the heat of the moment over the business dispute and offensive comments that are directed toward you personally. When you take those comments to heart as personal insults, they can undermine your confidence and your ability to do your job. Regardless of the issue, some women start to wonder if the constant bickering and criticism is their fault, not the other person’s problem. One of the interviewed leaders said that she struggled with this issue and noted that other women had similar difficulties: *“The guys will disagree strongly and then go out for a beer, but women seem to internalize the issues and the disagreement, which limits their effectiveness.”* An-

other leader, who sits on the capital committee of a global consulting firm, routinely confronts rude comments and attitudes from male committee members. She explained, *“I hold a very important position worthy of great respect. It is fast-paced and high-stress. When another partner says to me, ‘That’s a stupid idea,’ or ‘Don’t be stupid,’ women take it personally. We wonder, is it stupid? The problem, of course, is the partner’s lack of civility, but our reaction is personal.”*

Resilient leaders deal with blame and criticism by maintaining a clear perspective and learning not to take everything personally. When they start to entertain self-doubts because of comments made over a business issue, they recognize their emotional reactions and try to separate the business dispute from the personal relationship. They do not let the emotional turmoil they feel prevent them from coping with the situation and moving forward. One of the keys is maintaining a clear sense of purpose. They think to themselves: *“This problem is not about me; I won’t make it personal; I am acting for the collective good of the firm even if certain individuals do not see that.”*

Leaders who are women of color develop special coping mechanisms to help them stay resilient. One Latina leader said she finds that some younger women of color automatically presume insensitive comments or rude behaviors toward them are due to racial hostility. She found it helpful not to have such a “quick trigger” because many people are just thoughtless, not racist. The advice she gives to young women of color is, *“Conduct yourself as the best, most confident lawyer. Don’t make race the agenda. Don’t hide it, be proud of it, just don’t wear it on your sleeve. Don’t think people are waiting for you to fail. It adds pressure to your psyche that you don’t need.”*

It is not just other people who are hard on women leaders. Women leaders put a lot of pressure on themselves to be perfect, fully prepared, and error-free. Even when they are asked to be leaders because they are the most qualified and capable individuals, many women doubt their readiness and worry that they are not up to the task. Many women think that they have to have all the facts and answers at their fingertips. As lawyers, this is how they do a good job for their clients, and as leaders of lawyers they strive to do the same in order to establish credibility and earn the respect of their partners. As a leader, it is healthy and wise to prepare thoroughly, but some women overanalyze and overprepare; they have difficulty with spontaneity and often miss new ideas that come up because they are so focused on the details they know. Effective leaders know how to improvise when necessary. There are times when you do not have all the facts

you need or know all that you should. At those times, it is fine to admit that you are not sure of a point, but you do not have to avoid addressing a subject because you do not know every detail. You should appear confident, use what you do know, rely on your experience and intuition, and do the best you can.

§ 15:7 Emotional support

A critical mechanism for helping leaders stay resilient is emotional support. Law firm leadership can be emotionally draining, and women leaders tend to experience more emotional ups and downs more often and more intensely than most men do.¹ Many of the things partners say and do have the potential to exhaust you and erode your self-confidence and self-esteem. They also can make you feel isolated. Combined with job pressure and intense scrutiny, feelings of isolation and exclusion can have profound mental health consequences for women leaders.² The level of isolation can be akin to physical pain.³ The higher the leadership position the greater the likelihood of stress and isolation.

Emotional support from others can promote your emotional healing and increase your resilience. Numerous studies have shown that social ties are a source of strength and have significant benefits for mental and physical health. A UCLA study found that when women are under stress, they seek social contact. Stress triggers an innate “tend and befriend” response in women, unlike the “fight or flight” response in men exposed to stressful situations. Stress releases the hormone oxytocin, which is enhanced by estrogen. The combination “buffers the fight or flight response and encourages [women] to tend children and gather with other women instead.” This behavior counters stress and produces a calming effect.

The leaders I interviewed placed great importance on maintaining strong social connections with family and friends, colleagues in the firm, and people outside the firm. They seek trusted individuals with whom they can share their joys and successes as

[Section 15:7]

¹Barsh, J., Cranston, S., & Craske, R.A. (Sept. 2008), Centered leadership: how talented women thrive, *McKinsey Quarterly*.

²Howard, A., & Wellins, R.S. (2009), Holding women back: troubling discoveries and best practices for helping female leaders succeed, Development Dimensions International, Inc.

³Rock, D. (Aug. 2009), Managing with the brain in mind, *strategy + business*, no. 56.

leaders as well as the difficulties and frustrations they face. They need people who will listen to them when they are angry or upset, cheer them on, and give their egos an occasional boost. They also seek people who remind them that being a leader is only one part of who they are; there are other important aspects of their identity. In most cases, these people are husbands, life partners, close friends, and family members. They remind the leaders of what is important in life and help them maintain a sense of perspective. Women leaders also find solace in community, charitable, religious, and other activities that address important personal values, allow them to separate from work for a while, and round out their lives.

Many women leaders rely on networks of friends. One leader described the value of her networks this way: *“I have tough days when I wonder, why am I doing this? I try to keep the bigger picture in mind. My colleagues and I support each other. I have networks in and out of the firm where I hear the same stories happening in all firms and practices. I take some comfort in that.”* Having networks of women friends in other firms or other professions is common among women leaders. These groups get together to discuss common problems and how to deal with them, to offer encouragement and good cheer, or just to play and have fun.

Making time for fun and relaxation and maintaining a sense of humor are critically important for staying resilient. The beneficial effects of humor are well established. Fabio Sala, who studied the use of humor by executives, discovered that an ability to use humor is a marker for high emotional intelligence. He also found that skillfully used humor “reduces hostility, deflects criticism, relieves tension, improves morale, and helps communicate difficult messages.”⁴ In addition to keeping your constituents happy and making your work go smoothly, one managing partner emphasized that for a leader to maintain a healthy state of mind, it is important to be able to laugh, especially at yourself.

Some of the leaders I interviewed had confidantes in their firm, while others had mentors or coaches outside the firm who took on the role of trusted confidante. Having someone you can confide in is especially helpful if that person is or has been in a similar leadership position. Another leader who understands the challenges and frustrations that you face and the emotional ups and downs that accompany them can give you comfort and support your self-confidence. They can offer practical insights and advice about how to deal with problems because they went through similar experiences themselves.

⁴Sala, F. (Sept. 2003), Laughing all the way to the bank, *Harvard Business Review*.

Emotional support is essential for women of color who face the special challenges and stresses of being minority women in mainstream leadership. The importance of having a confidante has heightened significance for them. Women of color need to be able to confide in someone who has been through the experience of being an outsider in a leadership role and knows what it feels like. Because there are so few of them in most law firms, many women of color form networks across firm lines. Several of the leaders I interviewed built networks with other minority women to help find affirmation and emotional support. These networks help them alleviate the pressures of the workplace and maintain a positive sense of self. One leader, the only African American woman in her office, has *“a tight circle of friends who are all going through the same things. We are women of color at high levels in different law firms, companies, and government agencies. We get together to let off steam.”*

§ 15:8 Physical stamina

Physical stamina is a critical aspect of resilience that is often overlooked by busy leaders. Leadership is physically hard work. In addition to long hours, exhausting travel, and social demands, leadership involves dealing with constant problems, unexpected crises, and making hard decisions involving the business of the firm and the lives of its people. The emotional stress combined with the physical demands can deplete your energy. If you are not physically strong it is hard to carry out your leadership responsibilities.

Women who are both leaders and mothers bear a double burden that leaves them drained in especially challenging ways. Many women come home from work only to have a “second shift” at home. Of women executives, 92% still manage all household tasks such as meal preparation and child care. Having significant responsibilities on both fronts can leave them constantly exhausted.¹

Resilient leaders understand that they are in a marathon, not a sprint, and that they must take care of their health in order to make it to the finish line. One leader said, *“I conserve my energy. I don’t have enough energy to fight every battle.”* Especially when you are under a lot of stress, it is important to “balance your energy flow” in order to stay focused and prevent burnout or

[Section 15:8]

¹Barash, Cranston, & Lewis (2009), *How remarkable women lead*.

defeat.² This means giving priority to activities that energize you, at work and at home, avoiding those that sap your strength, and maintaining your health and fitness. Looking fit and healthy can give you greater self-confidence and public credibility. Regular medical check-ups and attention to fitness are very important. Unfortunately, many women ignore their own health while taking care of everyone else at work and at home.

Many of the leaders I interviewed made exercise a priority and had a regular routine. They try to maintain good nutrition. They recognize the importance of sleep, although many of them seem to operate with remarkably little sleep. Those who need quiet time to replenish their energy use a wide variety of techniques: sitting alone in a quiet room, going to a spa, or taking a hike in the mountains. Others prefer to take part in sports and social pursuits or talk things through with other people as a way to clear their heads and recharge their batteries.

²Barash, Cranston, & Lewis (2009), *How remarkable women lead*.