

The Passage to Leadership: When AHA! Moments Build Confidence

by Holly English

When Mary B. Cranston became a law firm partner at age 35, she was “euphoric—and then depressed.” Looming ahead was the “what next” question. To motivate herself, “I had to create a picture in my head.” She created a vision of herself as a litigator with \$10 million in business, met that goal, and eventually became chair of what is now Pillsbury Winthrop LLC.

Other women now at the pinnacle of their professions also had crystallizing Aha! moments that transformed them from observers to leaders. After Angela M. Bradstreet, a partner with Carroll, Burdick & McDonough in San Francisco, was advised by a jury that her personal style didn’t seem authentic; she resolved to act less like “a lawyer” and more like herself. When debating whether to take the helm of her firm, Kathleen J. Wu of Andrews & Kurth in Dallas broke down her concerns and resolved each one. Claudia Kennedy—not a lawyer, but a superachiever who was the highest-ranking woman in the Army before retiring—got a push from a mentor that kept her from resigning. These women in turn now are encouraging another generation of nascent leaders to step up to the plate.

Many leaders have pushed ahead without doing a lot of soul searching about their capacity for leadership. Martha W. Barnett, a former ABA president, is puzzled when asked whether she consciously debated becoming a leader. “I always had in my mind that if I worked hard, I could be in charge,” she says. For people like Barnett, currently chair of Holland & Knight, being in charge may come as naturally as breathing.

Even topflight women, however, describe events or insights that helped them take on new challenges. Some adjusted their internal compasses. Claudia Kennedy observed that military men didn’t wait to be offered opportunities—they just jumped in. “Women always think they have to qualify,” Kennedy asserts. The men’s attitude, she says, was “Go for it! I’m going to throw myself out there; I don’t have to wait until anybody invites me to the table, there’s going to be a place there for me.” If women do the same, she notes now, “You’re more likely to get more interesting things, be viewed as a team player.” As a result Kennedy put herself forward for advancement rather than waiting for an invitation.

Others like Bradstreet recall getting advice that just hit home. Early in her career, she was second chair on a jury trial with a male partner. “I was trying to cross-examine witnesses in an ultra-aggressive style, which may not have been appropriate for the particular witness,” she recalls. After the trial she asked the jury to rate her performance. “They said, ‘We thought you were great, but we thought you were trying to be like your supervisor. And we thought you should be yourself, because you’ve got a neat

personality.’” This was Bradstreet’s critical turning point. “I thought, from now on, I’m just going to be myself, and see what follows.” It’s paid off. She now enjoys a hefty client base, is a former managing partner of her firm, and is a past president of both the Bar Association of San Francisco and California Women Lawyers.