

# Book excerpt: The Collective Wisdom of High-Performing Women

So compelling was the late Judy Elder's articulation of a collective female ambition that a leadership program was named after her. In this book edited by Colleen Moorehead, women who have experienced the Judy Project share their stories.

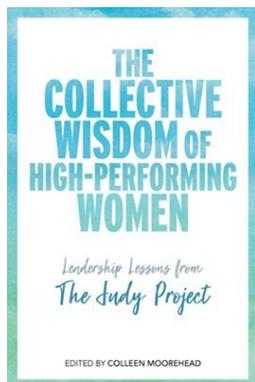
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*Excerpt from The Collective Wisdom of High-Performing Women: Leadership Lessons From the Judy Project. Edited by Colleen Moorehead. Published by Barlow Books*

The Judy Project was named after a phenomenal business leader and friend of mine, Judy Elder, who died suddenly at age 47 of a blood disorder. She inspired many male and female colleagues; she was that rare sort of person who could create energy rather than suck it out of a room. And she has inspired countless other people since, thanks to a powerful 2002 speech she gave about women and ambition. It went viral, and you'll see why when you read it.



I was there. That day, in that speech, Judy defined an inclusive ambition that instead of representing greed and self-promotion, reflected a broader, more noble definition: ambition for her company, her leaders, her team and, yes, as an outcome, for herself. So compelling was her articulation of a generous and collective description of a female ambition that when she died three weeks after giving that speech, a number of us were compelled to create a leadership program named after her, lest this new definition of collective ambition be forgotten.

Why was this vision of leadership so compelling? Because it contrasted so vividly with the heroic model of leadership: command and control. When I joined the investment industry in 1983, I was handed a book titled *Dress for Success*, and was directed to Harry Rosen's for Women to buy three grey, black or navy tailored suits. Like so many other women, I strapped on my combat uniform and joined a corporate culture that demanded women adopt male characteristics, mannerisms, behaviours and leadership styles if we wanted to succeed. We were told we were "too soft." Our feedback in performance reviews was consistent. "Be aggressive! Be more assertive! Be tough!"

But this culture collided with women's personal realities and socialization. We were arriving at the office after a total of three hours of sleep, baby spit-up on our left shoulder and a to-do list that included dentist appointments, grocery shopping and our children's science projects. Although we women had no choice but to bring our whole self to the workplace, the only part of us that was accepted in the corporate leadership world was a traditional male business façade. Attempting to compartmentalize our divergent lives created such personal discord that many talented women were forced to walk away. They could not be honest or authentic leaders.

"Command and control" policies had been in place in many companies since the 1950s, when the men who ran those companies and created the policies had returned from WW2. This leadership style changed very little after women entered the workforce in the '70s: You were forced to make work the priority, and figure out how to accommodate the rest of your life around that. I was once offered a promotion that would involve moving to Alberta and I said "Yes!" immediately, because I had to seem keen for the opportunity. Then I realized I hadn't even asked my life partner what he thought. That's how visceral the desire to succeed was whenever we had the sniff of an opportunity. It was like we were being baited with meat like dogs.

Fortunately, an awakening was beginning. Company women's committees became more prevalent. I vividly recall our small group of 16 or so senior women at CIBC in the early 1990s huddling together for warmth and survival as an HR consultant provided sensitivity training to all of us. She referenced the behaviour of our male colleagues as having originated from hunting meat as cavemen. This wasn't exactly comforting, and it's a concept we understand today as unconscious bias — something that has had a profound impact on the corporate world.

Over the next few years, the photo we had taken of our women's committee came to tell the story of our working-life reality as, one by one, a black X was marked over each of us as we left the frame: extinction through attrition. I myself became an X, leaving the bank in my eighth month of pregnancy, a casualty of another corporate reorganization.

My silver lining was my corporate rebirth thanks to a mid-1990s financial technology company called ETRADE Canada, where the business culture was less prescribed. Like Judy's experience, we were allowed to define a culture where celebrating our collective ambition allowed leadership traits such as empathy, generosity and courage to surface.

The stories shared by 60 or so women who have experienced the Judy Project are grouped in chapters about 10 traits of leadership. These crucial traits are not textbook leadership qualities, but reflect a more holistic concept of leadership: Honesty; Courage; Power of Connection; Compassion; Creating Energy; Always Learning; Tenacity; Reinvention; Generosity; and Authenticity. These are widely recognized today as leadership characteristics that make our modern organizations stronger. Sixteen years ago these were "female flaws" identified as weaknesses. The predominantly male corporate unconscious bias dismissed these emotion-based leadership skills, instead valuing the male-based skills of toughness. It wasn't really their fault; it

was how they were socialized. “Boys don’t cry.” “Keep a stiff upper lip.” They simply transferred their unconscious biases to the workplace. But corporate culture has since evolved to embrace leadership attributes that match what millennials desire if they’re going to maintain themselves in the workforce.

Each year, the new cohort of some 30 Judy Project attendees introduce themselves to the women who will become part of the balance of their successful business career. They are asked to talk about one of their role models. Although role models vary widely, from Margaret Thatcher and Golda Meir to recognizable corporate leaders, a solid 30 per cent consistently identify their mother as the leader they most admire.

They describe the collective attributes of motherhood as courage, generosity, selflessness, and unrelenting support and ambition for their children. Those traits are our unconscious biases. And that idea takes me full circle to what’s at the heart of this book. My mother had aspirations for me. And yours always wanted the best for you. But she didn’t necessarily have the opportunities you do. So she made selfless choices.

The stories in this book reflect what your mother would have advised if the framework were in place for her to succeed. This is the collective wisdom of 16 years of Judy Project alumnae, captured by 10 leadership characteristics. It’s storytelling learned from our mothers — and paid forward.

Through this book, we want women with aspirations of leadership to see that many successful women have had the same feelings you may be having — perhaps some sense of inadequacy, or a lack of confidence to talk about things that are gender oriented, like, “Is it OK to say I’m planning to have a baby in two years?”

Those who follow the old autocratic leadership style don’t collect wisdom. They don’t stop to listen. So they don’t benefit from what others think. But in new kinds of organizations — the ones in which leaders collect wisdom from others like a rain barrel gathers drops of water — everyone benefits.

***The Collective Wisdom of High-Performing Women: Leadership Lessons From the Judy Project*** is on sale at Indigo, Amazon and other retailers.

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