

## OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Over the past few days I have given much thought to the theme of your meeting this weekend.

How do we overcome obstacles?

Is there any such thing as an obstacle?

I have searched "obstacle" in the thesaurus in Microsoft Word and discovered the following synonyms:

Obstruction  
Impediment  
Barrier  
Blockage  
Problem  
Difficulty  
Hindrance  
Complication  
Hurdle

Think about these words today and tomorrow as you are challenged to undertake some activities that will take you outside of your comfort zone.

In considering your theme and the context of my speech to you today I have also come to the shocking realisation that I have been in the workforce, bar a short break when the children were small, for 44 years! Unbelievable! Where have those years gone? And more importantly what have I learned during that time?

I started my working life in 1960s during a time when girls left school to become (if you were educated) teachers, nurses or clerks in an office. In the accountants' office where I worked the mature men were qualified accountants and partners in the firm with the exception of one dear old spinster. Younger men worked as clerks and many of them attended night school to gain their accounting qualification. The women, all young as married women mostly didn't work in those days, worked in a large office writing up ledgers and adding columns of figures on plus adders, the predecessor of electronic adding machines. Others were typists. Women didn't study. Because I showed promise I was sent to Auckland to train to use the first computer, a huge big monstrosity that filled one whole room.

Like many of my contemporaries I became a statistic of the promiscuous sixties and at the age of 19 I was married with a daughter.

In the mid 70s I went back to work part-time in the same office. During the eight years that I had been out of the workforce things had changed

tremendously. Most of the younger staff, male and female, were now studying accountancy and I realised that if I wanted to advance and improve myself I would have to do likewise. At the grand old age of 30 I commenced my studies, doing a mix of correspondence and part-time study at Community College.

It took me ten years to achieve my goal of becoming a qualified accountant. It was a long hard slog, raising children, working part-time and studying. Plus throw a marriage break up into the mix!

Women in the 70s got ahead by working twice as hard as most of the men and by making sure that we did the job twice as well. It was never enough to achieve the same level of performance. We had to be significantly better to earn a similar level of respect but not the same level of pay.

The 80s were the era of power dressing and huge shoulder pads. The era where as women we felt that in order to compete successfully we had to act like the men. To do anything other than this was viewed, by men, as a sign of weakness and we played the game. We didn't have much choice.

Thank goodness we have moved on from that era.

The 1990s brought other interesting challenges as women pushed for equal representation in the boardroom, in parliament and in local government. Women like Marilyn Waring pushed for legislation to ensure that 50% of those elected to parliament were women. I always felt that this was an insult. I knew that we had the ability to play our part on an equal footing with the men and we didn't need legislation to help us get there. Formidable women like Margaret Thatcher, Ruth Richardson, Jenny Shipley and Helen Clarke have now paved the way for all of us and provide brilliant role models to show that there is no glass ceiling.

Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century women have come of age in the sense that we are in position that we can participate in business, politics and life in our own way. We have learned, and it is accepted by most, that we can approach issues from a more female perspective. We don't have to tackle things in the traditional male blunder in and sort it out way. We take a more thoughtful considered approach and often get a better more inclusive outcome. To put it simply we can be ourselves and that is a pretty good space to be in.

So on the back of all of this experience in my view the main obstacles for women are internal – we create barriers in our mind and unless we exercise courage we limit our personal growth. There are no obstacles, apart perhaps from serious illness or physical disability, that cannot be overcome. It's all about state of mind and how one approaches life.

I am sure we all have the same doubts – I know I do.

My standard approach to challenges is:

1. I can't do that!
2. Well perhaps I could do it but what might go wrong?
3. Hang on a minute, others can do it. If they can do it I must be able to.
4. What do I need to do to make sure I succeed?
5. I'll give it a try

Of course this thought pattern doesn't guarantee success and it certainly doesn't take away the fear of the unknown. But you will always come away with the satisfaction of having given it a go.

I confront my various roles by adopting some standard principles and get a great level of self fulfilment by:

Working hard and doing my best. This is the most people can ask of you.

Doing my best means:

Making sure that I do my research and get the best understanding of issues that I can.

It means treating people fairly and with respect.

It means having the courage to listen to people, assimilate information and come up with a firm position on issues. The worst thing is to not have a view or exercise a vote.

Sometimes it means sticking up for people who are less able to help themselves and sometimes it means making unpopular decisions.

It means keeping myself reasonably fit and physically active because if you don't have a fit body you often don't have a fit mind.

Through all of this it is essential to have self confidence (or at the very least act in a self confident manner), a sense of humour and a strong belief that you are doing the right things for the right reasons.

These principles are applicable to the challenges that many of you will face from time to time.

Coming back to the synonyms that I mentioned earlier – this is how I think they should be treated:

Obstruction – there to be removed  
Impediment – something that temporarily gets in the way  
Barrier – something to get around  
Blockage – there to be unblocked  
Problem – there to be solved  
Difficulty – there to provide a challenge  
Hindrance – a nuisance but it can be dealt with  
Complication – there to make us think  
Hurdle – there to be jumped

Ladies, enjoy your day and don't ever forget " Girls CAN do anything".