

Women in Leadership Case Study

Michelle Miller, SCRA Board Chair

I grew up in a family where conventional conservatism collided head-on with bohemian liberalism. It made for colourful (for which read: passionate and uncompromising) conversations at the dinner table, but it also created an environment in which there was never any question about the equal position girls and women should hold in the world, and in which the concept of fairness, justice and equality was hardwired. No fear or favour based on gender, which never played any part in the question of education, work or expectation. Of course, interaction with the wider world quickly and inevitably shattered the assumption that this was everyone's experience, and I think this was the main determining factor in my choosing social work as a career. I qualified in 1981 and having started as a generic worker, spent most of my working life in the sector in local authorities across England and Scotland, retiring in 2018 from the role of Executive Director for Health and Social Care.

“Having grown up in a household where gender played no role in ambition or potential, it was an eye-opener to realise this wasn't the case in the wider world. This early life experience is what has driven me throughout my career, as I believe fundamentally that opportunity should not be limited by anything, including gender.”

If someone had asked me in 1981 where saw myself in 2018, the reality would not have occurred to me. I never devised a career path with a distant, ambitious end goal in sight, but rather I focused on what I believed I could do at the time and tried to convince recruiters of that – at times with more success than others!

I had a brief foray into the world of the civil service when I worked as Depute Chief Inspector of Social Work for what was then the Scottish Executive. This role gave me valuable insight into the world of national government and a great opportunity to see the wider landscape of local services across the whole of Scotland. Whilst there, I authored an inspection report, which highlighted significant problems in the delivery of services by a specific local authority and its health partners. Reflecting on my time there and this piece of work specifically, made me realise that external scrutiny, although critically important, is not the primary route to improving services. The single most effective way to ensure high quality provision and continuous improvement is to lead in service delivery. It's also a lot more challenging to live with the reality of mounting volumes of demand, crippling resource constraints and justifiably high expectations in terms of standards than it is to judge the end result from the outside. This realisation, and the belief that change is most effective if generated from within, took me back into local authority leadership after two years, where I believed I could make more difference.

“Having been responsible for both delivering services and for inspecting them, I am clear that primary responsibility for quality and continuous improvement lies with providers, supported by objective external scrutiny, and not the other way around. This responsibility is what has driven my career choices and kept me motivated.”

I have been incredibly fortunate throughout most of my working life to find myself in the right job for me at the right time for me, with the next opportunity presenting itself

as a natural progression. That isn't to say I've always been successful at everything I've aspired to, far from it. There have been many disappointments along the way when I didn't succeed in whatever I was trying to do, but looking back, there is little that I would change in terms of the chances that came up. Whenever I was contemplating my next role, it was always something beyond my comfort zone, but also always something I genuinely believed I could do. I tended to shy away from roles that I thought at the time were beyond my skills and experience. I think this may be an area where gender plays a part in a differentiation of approach, where women may measure themselves more harshly against the requirements of a role, rather than allow self-belief to give them the confidence to take on the challenge. There have been a few occasions when I have held back from something and then realised that I should have been more confident in my own potential.

“My career has been quite organic. I had no firm plans or specific job I wanted by the time I was ready to retire. I just did what I thought would enable me to drive change each time the right opportunity presented itself. With hindsight, I think I could have pushed myself more and had more faith in my abilities. Confidence in your own experience, skill and potential is incredibly important, irrespective of what you want to achieve.”

Having retired from local government, I was sure that I had more to offer. I had worked closely with the Children's Hearings System for most of my career and I was incredibly fortunate to be appointed to the role of Chair of SCRA's board of governance in 2018. SCRA's values and its commitment to children and young people are clear, unambiguous and rightly ambitious. I am delighted to be able to help shape these ambitions and to play my part in seeing them achieved.

Never give up, never give in, never back down. I can't say that this attitude is always the right one, or that it will win any diplomacy awards, or that it is a universal recipe for success, but it is probably the one that best characterises my approach to tackling wicked issues (and one that those who know me best would recognise the most). Inevitably, the wisdom that comes with experience – and advancing years – means that I use the approach more sparingly than I might once have done, but there are times and issues where the only attitude to have is: never give up, never give in and never back down. Speaking truth to power and being prepared to challenge inappropriate language and assumptions consistently and without compromise have earned me a reputation over time. Whether good or bad depends mostly on the attitude of others, but for me what is important is that it is consistent, predictable and based on the principles I learned at my childhood dinner table. Would I have had Rosa Parks' courage to refuse to give up my seat on the bus for no reason? I will never know, but I really, really hope the answer is 'yes'.

