

A RENAISSANCE STATE OF MIND: LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM MODERN RENAISSANCE WOMEN

by Dale Griffiths Stamos

It is an interesting fact that the expression “Jack of all trades, master of none” has an equivalent in almost every language. This expression is so ubiquitous as to be universally accepted. Although it is now a negative statement, denoting someone who has only a superficial knowledge in a multitude of areas, the expression’s origin was largely positive. Its earliest versions did not, in fact, contain the second clause. The single phrase “Jack of all trades” was around in England, for example, during the 16th and 17th centuries, but was generally used as a form of praise. (*Jack* was just another term for *man*.) And of course, earlier, during the Renaissance, being multiskilled or a *polymath* was highly valued. However, as society became more and more specialized, the “master of none” was added to the equation, giving the expression its more pejorative connotation.

I would argue that in our modern world, a Renaissance approach to life has become not only a positive, but, in many cases, an essential ingredient for success and for innovation. It will serve leaders to understand how.

To begin with, the old paradigm—learning one skill well and having only one or two jobs in a single area of expertise for one’s entire work life—is breaking down. Our rapidly evolving times and

the volatility of the job market make it far more likely that an individual will hold numerous jobs in a lifetime, and those jobs often span more than one occupation and demand different sets of skills. Even within a single job, an employee is often asked to demonstrate skills in multiple areas, needing mastery, for example, in multiple software programs. So a person who can flexibly move from one skillset to another or from one discipline to another, and who has a broader rather than narrower base of abilities, may be better adapted to our modern times. In this world in flux, it seems the old adage “adapt or perish” couldn’t be more true.

In the 21st century, information is the reigning currency, and technology is its vehicle of dissemination. We are bombarded from all directions with media, messages, and endless choices. The World Wide Web was born only in 1989, yet today it is an integral part of almost everyone’s life and provides so much so quickly at our fingertips that it feels sometimes like we’re moving at the speed of light. Individuals who can navigate this landscape, who can shift fluidly from one source of information to another, who can pull ideas from multiple areas, synthesizing them into groundbreaking innovations and discoveries, are better suited for the times we live in.

So how can leaders, given these new realities, develop important Renaissance skills and encourage that development in their employees?

One way is to look at successful modern Renaissance people. How is it that they have succeeded in gaining mastery in so many areas? How have they been able to operate so efficiently in multidimensional ways, seeing the interconnectivity between disparate fields? What are, in short, the key features of a Renaissance state of mind?

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In preparation for my recent book *RenWomen: What Modern Renaissance Women Have to Teach Us About Living Rich, Fulfilling Lives*, I conducted in-depth interviews with a number of extraordinary modern Renaissance women. Each of them demonstrated, in their own individual ways, certain consistent traits—traits that have clearly contributed to their levels of multifaceted success as well as their sense of meaning and worth. I would like to highlight five of these traits, and demonstrate how some of the Renaissance women I interviewed have expressed them in their lives.

The Urge to Grow and Expand

In her bestselling book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Stanford University professor Carol S. Dweck defines the difference between what she calls a “growth mindset” and a “fixed mindset.” A fixed mind-set is the belief that your qualities are carved in stone, that you were born with only a certain amount of intelligence and talents, and those are all you have to work with during your lifetime. A growth mind-set, however, is based on the belief that your qualities are things you can cultivate and expand through study, effort, and experience. In other words, it is a belief that we are capable of growth and change. A growth mind-set is something Renaissance individuals embrace.

Kathy Eldon, journalist, author, speaker, film producer, and founder of Creative Visions Foundation, has always felt driven, as she puts it, to “do more, be more, experience more, create more.” Even after the tragic loss of her photojournalist son, Dan, in Somalia in 1993, she did not let grief destroy her. Instead, she turned his death into a life of advocacy for creative activists, forming and running a foundation that supports socially committed artists in their work. Along with that, she has poured her creative energies into authoring more than 18 books, producing a film about her son, and presenting inspirational speeches at venues such as TEDxWomen. This is a woman, in other words, who does not choose the comfort of familiarity, who does not remain in one spot. For her,

like the other Renaissance women I interviewed, life is malleable and expandable.

Lita Rawdin Singer, Wall Street broker, psychologist, author, and fine art photographer, never thought, even as a young girl, that she could not do everything she wanted. “It was never a question of should I or shouldn’t I?” she says. “It was exciting. It was a challenge.” If something interested her, she went after it, not letting anything discourage her. She has gone through her life this way, constantly growing and expanding, feeling confident in her ability to learn whatever she has needed to as she has embarked on each new and exciting career.

Marinela Gombosov, MBA, electrical engineer, market developer, and patent holder, came as a teenager with her family from Bosnia-Herzegovina to the United States to start a new life. She has fully embraced that life, pursuing expertise in multiple fields, and learning to accept within herself the personal drive and ambition that push her ever forward. New and challenging experiences don’t scare her, they energize her.

The Ability to Employ Flexibility, Adaptability, and Creative Solutions

This is an essential Renaissance trait. Renaissance individuals do not limit themselves to one or two solutions to a problem. If something doesn’t work, they don’t quit; instead, they seek out other options, untried avenues, surprise maneuvers.

Lorie Karnath is an explorer, author, education advocate, and international symposia organizer. When working with the Chinese government to help advance education in China, she worked directly through governmental structures. But she knew the same approach would not work for Burma, where, as she explained “a lot of schooling ... for many centuries has been through the monastery.” And so, on each trip to Burma, Lorie sponsored different monks through their initiation process.

Lydia Kennard, who holds degrees in both urban planning and law, served as executive director of Los

Angeles World Airports during 9/11, expertly guiding her 3,000 personnel (along with an anxious public) through the crisis. When, as a young woman of color, she was handling her first development deal in the largely male-dominated construction industry, she knew she was capable, but she also knew perceptions might work against her. So she came up with an inventive solution. As she describes it, “No one was going to give me seven million dollars to build this building. I was African American, 26 years old, and a woman!” So she hired a prominent mortgage banking company who packaged the deal without revealing who she was. She got the funding.

Eva Haller is a mentor, activist, nonprofit business leader, and philanthropist. As a young Jewish teenager in Nazi-occupied Hungary, she went into hiding in a Scottish mission school. But when that school was invaded, 14-year-old Eva demonstrated perhaps the most creative solution of all. She told a Hungarian soldier she was much too young and beautiful to die. It was lucky for her that he was Hungarian and not German, and a very young man himself, but still, he was expected to follow orders. Instead, her statement jarred him, and he chose not to follow those orders. He let her go.

Abundant Curiosity and a Rage to Learn

Renaissance people are driven by avid curiosity and an intense desire to learn. They look around, they ask questions, they wonder. They seldom accept things at face value. For them, learning is not a chore; it is a delight. It is a way to expand, to celebrate the vast capacities of the mind.

Hélène Cardona is an actress, poet, linguist, translator, and dream analyst. During her school years, hungry for knowledge and creative expression and adept in many areas, she studied music, dance, foreign languages, literature, math, and science. “I loved all of it!” she said. “I could do it all. It was a time I felt I could do anything I wanted in life.”

Lorie Karnath enjoyed college so much, she said, she felt like a “kid in a candy shop.” As she explained, “It

was like a huge door had opened ... I wanted to try everything. Anything I could learn, I wanted.” Later in life, she would pour all that curiosity into mind-expanding symposia, covering such cutting-edge scientific topics as advances in brain research and emerging technologies in biomedicine.

Barbara Lazaroff is cofounder with ex-husband Wolfgang Puck of Wolfgang Puck Worldwide. She designed such iconic restaurants as Spago, Chinois on Main, and the formerly owned Puck restaurants Granita, Chinois Las Vegas, and Spago Tokyo. Barbara is also an author, entrepreneur, product designer, producer, and philanthropist. When in college, she followed her myriad interests to study theater, dance, science and medicine. It is her varied education that has allowed Barbara to access both her left-brain and right-brain skills in the various fields she has pursued.

The Desire to Nurture, Inspire, and Serve Others

Renaissance people do not hold their abilities and their wisdom close to the vest. They share them. Wherever they can, they encourage, guide, and support others, whether it is their life’s purpose or simply an integral part of their lives.

Eva Haller, with all her accomplishments, wants to be known first and foremost as a mentor. Her joy comes from seeing the seed of a wonderful idea grow, with her help, into an effective and inspirational organization. She sees herself as a door opener. As she puts it, “I

watch them go through the door and relish the doors they open for themselves afterwards.”

Kathy Eldon formed Creative Visions as a vibrant tool for inspiring creative artists to use their gifts to transform the world we live in. She believes her purpose is to ignite a spark in these artists, to open their eyes to their own power, so they can realize their potential and effect real change.

A major part of Barbara Lazaroff’s life is devoted to social and charitable causes. Her contributions both in time and money to causes and charities have been substantial. Her involvement often includes innovative ways to raise funds. For example, she and Wolfgang Puck founded the American Wine and Food Festival, which raised many millions for Meals on Wheels and went on for 29 years. For the Zimmer Children’s Museum’s youTHink program, which helps inner city kids, Barbara asked major artists such as David Hockney, John Baldessari, and Robert Rauschenberg for artistic donations. To Barbara, it is simple: “If one person suffers, we all suffer.”

Willingness to Take Risks and Challenge the Status Quo

Renaissance people take risks. They know growth is not possible without doing so. They know that breakthrough discoveries are not made by just accepting what is. Pushing the envelope is part of their psychological makeup.

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Barbara Lazaroff

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Hélène Cardona, gifted in many areas (literature, languages, arts, and sciences), was encouraged by her father to go to medical school. In France, where they lived, the sciences were considered superior to all other fields. But medical school only made her unhappy, and her artist-self called out to her. She risked the ire of her father when she chose to leave medical school and pursue the arts instead. As feared, her father pulled all financial and emotional support from his daughter. “My Dad didn’t want to know me,” she said. “But I had to learn to say no—to a parent, to a teacher, to anyone basically. I had to learn the process of individuation.”

Lydia Kennard challenged those around her when, during the 9/11 crisis, she held firm, despite much resistance, against opening up parking structures at the central terminal of the airport. “Some of our guys,” she said, “went to the FAA and got a waiver ... [They] were like, ‘Well even if there’s a car bomb, it’ll only kill about 200 people in one structure.’ My response was ‘200 people are 200 lives. I’m not taking that risk.’” Pressure on Lydia continued, but vindication came when the CIA and FBI identified a full-scale replica in Afghanistan of LAX as a training center for terrorism. The central terminal remained closed until the threat was resolved.

Conclusion

These Renaissance women can teach us much about enlightened leadership. For them, it is multidimensional in nature: It is open to ideas from many disciplines; it is on a trajectory of growth and expansion; it is curious and creative; it is resilient and risk-taking; and it is service-oriented and motivational. Renaissance leadership recognizes the changing realities of the 21st century and the need for multiple skills and out-of-the-box thinking. It encourages not only the specialists, but the generalists on a team. It promotes taking chances and trial-and-error, and the fluid movement between various domains. Ultimately, Renaissance leadership is beyond ego. A Renaissance leader reaches out to

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inspire growth, excitement, and love of work in all those around.



Dale Griffiths Stamos is the author (in collaboration with her twin brother, W. Scott Griffiths) of RenWomen: What Modern Renaissance Women Have to Teach Us About Living Rich, Fulfilling Lives. Living her own Ren life, Dale is an award-winning playwright, poet, and screenwriter, as well as a teacher, story consultant, and editor. Her plays have been produced throughout the country, her short films have appeared at multiple film festivals, and her poetry has been published in numerous literary journals. She teaches story structure for all genres at the Santa Barbara Writers Conference and is a private manuscript consultant.