



Check the Cape at the Door: A Conversation with Lee Woodruff

For years, many professional women have been striving to be the professional superwoman — thriving in their careers, making a difference in the community, and keeping the household running on schedule. The truth is, even under the best of circumstances, this juggling act is hard to execute. But life rarely offers us the best of circumstances. What happens then? What happens if and when we can't keep all the balls in the air?

Lee Woodruff, bestselling author and keynote speaker at the 2019 Key4Women Forum, has an answer. Check your cape at the door, because life is messy.

Woodruff learned this firsthand in January 2006. Her husband Bob had recently landed the dream job of co-anchor of ABC World News Tonight, and the life she thought she had worked hard for and earned was hers. Then the phone rang. It was the president of ABC News. A roadside bomb hit an armored car Bob was riding in while covering the Iraq War. He was critically injured.

Here, Woodruff shares what she learned from that experience.

Curveballs are life chapters

Lee Woodruff was on vacation with her children at Disney when she received the call about Bob's accident. She thought she played life fairly. Bob's career accomplishment was a reward for years of sacrifice and hard work. She was in her 40s, and it was time to relax and slide into cruise mode...or so she thought.

Key takeaways



When life throws you a curveball, be who you need to be to survive.



Storytelling is a skill that is critical to advancing in your career and your business.



Sometimes we have to ask for help, and that's okay.

“Obviously, that’s not how the world works,” Woodruff said. “What I’ve come to realize is life comes in chapters, and within those chapters you’re never going to find balance and you’re never going to be perfect. When life does have other plans and does throw that curveball, it’s not a punishment for things you haven’t done right. Instead, it’s a matter of figuring out how to survive.”

For Woodruff, survival was first about taking charge, then about finding the support system to remain upright and finally finding purpose.

Be who you need to be

When life, or work, deals you a substantial blow, there are a lot of different ways you can initially respond. Woodruff found she had two different responses — one for her children, which brought out “The General,” and one for her, which might have been even stronger.

As Woodruff explains, The General was the take-charge persona she adopted for her children. “I had to give the kids the news and show them I was okay. From my outside body language, voice and words, I needed them to know I would be alright and they would be alright.”

The real Woodruff, however, was just trying to survive. She did not know if they would be alright. She shares that relying on what she calls the “Four Fs” — Friends, Family, Funny, and Faith — kept her upright. She also said that goals, especially elusive goals, became less important. “I leaned on my human connections to find peace and happiness. The chats or walks with a girlfriend were some of the most meaningful moments to get me past the fear of not knowing what was going to happen to us.”

The lesson is, in the face of adversity, there is not one correct response. The key is to be who you need to be to survive—and that can change day to day and relationship to relationship. Also, be strong enough to say yes. Take help when offered, even if you ask for a raincheck.

Tell your story

Lee Woodruff is much more than Bob Woodruff’s wife. She is a business owner and author, and his story of tragedy and triumph resonated because of her talent and ability to document and share their family’s experience.

In her consulting business, Woodruff helps people become better communicators by helping them tell their



personal stories. She says it is a skill that is critical to advancing in your career and business.

“If you think about it, storytelling has been important since the beginning of time. People sitting around a fire,” she said.

“Everybody has a shot at grabbing someone’s attention if you can tell your story. It’s how you can define and encapsulate who you are in a short amount of time.”

Woodruff says women, despite the many gains made in recent decades, still need to work a little harder and smarter to have their voices heard in the workplace.

“A good sense of humor still works every time when a situation doesn’t feel quite right.”

Put the superwoman myth to rest

Woodruff describes the mythical superwoman as the woman who has it all in balance...who can take care of her kids, make the perfect cupcakes for the birthday party, ace the proposal at work, and have the house decorated for Christmas.

She says, “Perpetuating the myth that some people can do all this without a support network of other family, babysitters, cleaning and shopping help is not fair to the rest of women. We all have places in our life that need better attention. You can’t do it all well all the time.”

This is where the idea of checking the cape at the door comes in. Put the superwoman myth to rest and, in the words of Woodruff: “Be real with yourself. Be real with your kids.”

We often say to others, you can't be everything for everyone, but we often fail to follow our own good advice. We create unrealistic expectations of ourselves. What Woodruff reminds us of is that it is okay to fall short. It's okay to admit that you're just doing the best you can.

"It's a real view on life," she says. "We have choices on how to balance things, but everything has a price tag attached to it."

Winning at work may mean not being your best at home, and vice versa. And that's okay. That's the imperfection that is life. If you're going to be your best self, whether at work, home or in the community, you need to recognize this and forgive yourself for not being something that is unrealistic — the superwoman who can do it all. You, just the way you are, are super enough.

The support you need

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