

# Women in leadership: Caroline Moultrie up close and personal

*Women in industry achieving the top positions are a rarity, especially for those who came up during the early noughties, when gender inequality was even worse than it is today. Finding your way to the top of the mountain is never easy, but generally people have stories filled with mentors and resilience in their journey. Maddyness spoke to Caroline Moultrie, MD of MMGY Hills Balfour, an integrated marketing company to find out her story.*

Temps de lecture : minute

---

30 October 2020

Caroline details her life lessons per decade, equality in the workplace and in particular bringing men into the conversations about it; her mentors, motherhood and the C-suite woman, and staying 'feminine' whilst in the boardroom. Her actionable take homes for women who want to be heard in the boardroom, and how speaking up is always a good idea.

At Maddyness we always want to champion and empower women and we believe that by opening up conversations about how women got to where they are now, we can help illuminate and pave the way for future generations. Imparting and sharing wisdom will always be a powerful tool in any person's arsenal, because as they say knowledge is power. With that in mind, grab yourself a cup of tea, or glass of wine and read all about Caroline Moultrie below:

[Maddyness] You have a very broad and yet

in depth knowledge about marketing in the travel industry can you talk us through your career path to such a top leadership position?

[Caroline] Armed with a Business and Marketing degree, my first job was with Virgin Atlantic Airways. I was invited to join Virgin's management program and I suddenly found myself in my dream first job, surrounded by aeroplanes, the most incredible people and the opportunity to get to grips with the real 'business of travel'. Looking back, there was no question in my mind that Virgin was the right company for me. From my very first interaction, it was clear that this was a company who at its heart, wanted me to succeed. They have a phrase in Virgin called 'Virgin flair', and if you didn't have it, you weren't recruited! I now recognise the intangible qualities of this were the ability to support and praise instead of criticising, to genuinely care for all people from the junior to the senior executives and be a great listener who not only hears the recommendations from employees but acts upon them. Culture for me, is the lifeblood of an organisation and whilst I didn't realize it at the time, my experience at Virgin set me on a course for career success and the values I felt aligned with back then, I still believe in and practice, over two decades later.

From there I joined the Monarch Group and Tour Operator Cosmos Holidays, working again in marketing but this time building their e-commerce, direct to consumer website and driving traffic to their newly formed platform. I was then headhunted to join the Manchester Airports Group (M.A.G.) and I worked my way up to Group Marketing and Commercial Director, managing the portfolio of airport brands across the group. After almost a decade there, I had built up a broad set of skills, spanning across marketing, communications and PR, business strategy,

website and e-commerce development, commercial and revenue generation, route development and aviation.

I remember a distinct turning point just before my 30th birthday when I began to question my purpose in life and started to view the world differently and as my confidence grew, I started to recognise that it was possible for me as an individual to make a positive contribution to the world and the people around me. I became less and less interested in the narrative of company growth against all odds.

*That, combined with my constant hunger and curiosity for global issues, I began to long for a role where I could make a real difference and to be 'at the table' rather than preparing the table.*

The more I read, the more determined I became and when a mentor of mine suggested I interview for a senior role operating out of London for the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), I decided to take the leap of faith and since then, I have never looked back. After a full immersion into the world of government policy, economic research and advocacy, I became Executive Vice President, advocating to governments about the economic contribution of Travel & Tourism around the world. I found myself on stages and platforms quoting GDP and impact research and talking about travel & tourism being a force for good.

During my seven year tenure, I was proud to have elevated the awareness and the importance of the Travel & Tourism industry with governments around the world and drove the highest levels of membership engagement. But, I was still craving something more and this time for the responsibility of running a P&L which is when I moved to integrated marketing company MMGY Hills Balfour where I joined as

Managing Director last September. I felt like the stars aligned when I was offered this role and, just like at Virgin, I knew from the moment I stepped through the door that I belonged here.

To feel valued as a woman and now working mother, surrounded by incredibly talented and passionate team members, all of whom are so different, diverse and brilliant, made the decision to move roles incredibly easy. It was like all my years of experience Travel & Tourism combined with my life stage and knowing what I didn't want in a role as much as what I did want, all came together when I joined MMGY Hills Balfour.

## What was the most valuable lesson you learned along the way?

I have learned many valuable lessons at different stages in my life. Here's a look through the decades.

In my 20s the most valuable lessons were:

- 1) Careers don't happen overnight. As a graduate, you feel that you can achieve anything in a very short space of time. The reality is, it takes much longer than you imagined, you quite quickly start to question if you will ever get there, and you will feel like a failure. So just know, everyone feels this way, especially in their 20s. You're not alone and it's completely normal.
- 2) Push out of your comfort zone. Travel, talk, meet as many people as you can, experience as much as you can and do all you can to educate yourself about people, cultures and traditions to broaden your horizons. Meet people who are different to you as this will grow your emotional and mental strength as well as help you develop your opinions.
- 3) Start saving money ASAP! Siphon off as much as you can afford every

month into a savings account and name that account 'DO NOT TOUCH'. You'll be surprised how much just a small amount can add up over a year and it will always give you comfort that you have something saved 'just in case'.

Lessons from my 30s:

- 4) Eliminate negative people and focus on YOU being enough. For whatever reason in your 30's, some people in your working life will root for you to fail. It's not your problem, it's theirs. Life is too short to let people make you feel like you aren't worthy. Feel settled that you are enough and focus on working hard.
- 5) Embrace failure. Everyone fails; failing is what success is built on, so embrace it and do not fear it. Failure means you're getting things done - the more you take risks and make hard decisions, the closer you are to realising your potential.
- 6) Don't make excuses, apologise and take responsibility. No one wants to hear excuses, people just want to know it won't happen again. Knowing how to make a sincere, heartfelt apology is one of the best personal and professional skills you can develop. Apologies cost you nothing and normally solve everything.

Lessons now in my 40's:

- 7) Figure out what you like doing and do more of it. Time is your most precious resource. Do not waste it on work you don't want to do and people you don't want to be around. Pinpoint what you are good at and enjoy and find a way to do more of it.
- 8) Be your authentic self. We all spend far too much time at work not to be ourselves, and, apart from anything else, it's exhausting! The moment you embrace who you are and what you stand for, the more balanced and

centred you will feel. Secondly, know that it is ok to be vulnerable and do not be ashamed to show it.

9) Know your superpowers. Imagine you are stuck in a lift and have to explain what you're really good at to a stranger. It's likely you will have always possessed this and what may have been seen as a weakness in your 20's is now a superpower in your 40's. My superpower that I most love is having a degree of emotional intelligence. The ability to recognize one's own and other people's emotions, to guide your thinking and behaviour is going to be a super power of the future.



You have some fantastic advice, can I ask who are your mentors and what have they taught you?

My mentors are my step-father Paul Thompson, Brett Tollman, CEO of The Travel Corporation and David Scowsill, former President and CEO of WTTC.

Whilst I have been lucky to have worked with a professional coach over the years and valued the experience very much, the mentors in my life are the people who in some way, have helped propel me forwards by giving me advice at certain cross roads; helped me to consider balance and the importance of family. Interestingly, so far, all my mentors have been men. I was not partnered formally with any of my mentors; rather, I sought out certain individuals who recognised my abilities and saw something in me that I didn't see myself. I strongly believe that one has to be proactive in making the partnership work and seeking out mentors who help you to see your own abilities.

Do you believe that for true equality, men need to be part of the solution? If so how can we include men in the conversation on women's place in the boardroom?

The first and important point to recognise is that gender equality is not a 'women's issue'. To truly have gender equality, people need to come together and fight for what's right. From political economist John Stuart Mill to EGOT winner, John Legend, male allies have long supported the struggle for gender equality and played critical roles in the women's movement. But there is still a long way to go, and we'll only get there by drawing more men into the conversation and encouraging men to be part

of the solution.

Today, the narrative needs to shift from the pros and cons of gender parity to finding long-term solutions for women in senior leadership positions. We need more women at the top, not only to have an impact on the organisation's bottom line, but because the top layer of the organisation needs to lead by example. Urging women to develop their leadership skills, proving that they are capable and prompting change in a corporate culture has to come from CEOs. This is a joint, male-female effort that stems across entire organisations and one that could incite real change and finally shatter the glass ceiling.

## What do you feel are the main hurdles for women in achieving a leadership position and what is your advice for women aspiring to C-suite level positions?

The biggest hurdle we need to overcome is the belief that we don't deserve to have a seat at the table. Once you realise that only YOU have your experience, then that seat becomes much more comfortable.

The percentage of women in leadership roles is not where it should be, but it is slowly changing. Some sectors, travel & tourism being one, over-index in the employment of women and has a growing number of women in C-suite roles around the world. Women like Gloria Guevara, President of WTTC, Jane Sun, CEO of C-trip, Desiree Bollier, Chair of Value Retail, Patricia Espinosa the executive secretary of the United Nations Convention on Climate Change, are all incredible, trailblazing women demonstrating strong leadership. But more needs to be done and if you are in management, male or female, we all have a role to play, be that by actively recruiting women onto boards or shining a light on other women who aspire to climb the ladder.



Secondly, it's about getting the balance right, whether you have a young family or not. We tend to push ourselves and think that we are invincible and unfortunately for a large percentage of women (and men), it takes an intervention such as, in my case, the death of my father or a physical level of exhaustion that makes one pause, reassess and figure out what it is that YOU want out of life.

*The best advice I have if you are a working mother, is to create a structure around you that works for you and your family. Share the load with your partner and your support network and over communicate with the people who are helping you.*

I feel as a leader, we need to set some principals that can be mirrored throughout the organisation. It is my job, now as MD to recognize strengths, shine a spotlight on the ambitious and recognise the triggers for everyone in the organisation, as the solutions for my colleagues in their 20's will be different for colleagues in their 30's and then in their 40's and 50's.

For me, becoming a mother of two has been a powerful gift. It teaches me every day to be more confident in my own skin and believe in who I am. They are my world and my central force of gravity, everything I do is now for them and I find I am stronger and more whole as a businesswoman because of them. I have learned that being present is critical, seeing and really listening to what is going on around you is ever more important. Try to pause more to enjoy the moment of today, and not race towards 'what's next'.

# There is a school of thought that women need to embody masculine traits to get ahead? Do you agree?

I actually believe the opposite. First, being authentic should be your main goal, therefore embodying traits not natural to you will wear you down and drain your energy. Secondly, emotional intelligence is the superpower for leaders of the future and in my experience, women are naturally better at emotionally connecting. The ability to recognise one's own and other people's emotions to guide thinking and behaviour is by far the most critical skill for future leaders.



Read also

[Is Emotional Intelligence the number one leadership trait?](#)

Teams led by people who possess high emotional intelligence tend to

work hard and persevere which is especially important right now, as the world adjusts to this new normal. I think the problems come from the fact that we all have a picture in our heads of what a leader looks like. This picture was formed by generations of (mostly male) politicians, revolutionaries, CEOs, and sports celebrities. We expect a leader to be self-confident, strong - and yes sometimes even a bit aggressive. To some extent, you do need these qualities alongside a healthy dose of self-belief and thick skin. Women need to break through the feeling of 'imposter syndrome' and feel entitled to lead, and become 'one of them'. It all starts with your understanding of your own role. The most important person to believe you can pull this off is yourself.

## In your opinion what is more important, talent or ambition, on the road to potential success?

It depends how you define success. Innate talent has little to do with a person's ultimate success. What matters is whether we are willing and able to devote ourselves to deliberate practice. I lead towards psychologist Angela Duckworth's learnings which found that talent does not equal success. Her study has found that it takes 'grit' - a combination of passion for a goal and the perseverance to achieve success - and I agree wholeheartedly with this view. To succeed you need to set yourself clear and simple goals coupled with passion and perseverance. Additionally, practice, preparation and planning are critical.

## How do you get your opinion across in the boardroom?

The boardroom can be an intimidating and overwhelming environment. Existing hierarchies, alliances, and large personalities made it difficult for me. However, a little confidence goes a long way in a boardroom and

from my experience, it involves moving out of your comfort zone and having confidence in your thoughts, opinions, and questions. Always try to back up a comment with evidence or research and make sure you are very prepared. Read the previous board papers thoroughly and if you are presenting, it's a good tip to connect with the key stakeholders ahead of the meeting so that you have some supporters in the room or on the call.

Most importantly, speak up. It's not so much about what you say and how much you say - it's more about when you say it and how. Speak up early during a meeting - it's like signalling to the crowd "I am here, I am awake, I have important thoughts to contribute". Don't be too polite and let others interrupt you easily. Letting others interrupt you is a pretty clear sign to everyone else that what you have to say is (at least in your own eyes) less important than what the other person has to say.

There is an old saying - 'if you waddle like a duck, swim like a duck and act like a duck ... then you are a duck.' To some extent you need not only to fit the part but look and act the part. Remember, a board member sits above an organisation and does not work in it, so language and positioning needs to reflect a more elevated role where wisdom and judgement are more valued than organisational capacity to get the job done.

## Will flexible working (as experienced during COVID-19) help women move forward in the work place?

We all remember a few years ago when South Korea expert Professor Robert Kelly was giving a live BBC TV interview when his four-year-old daughter boldly danced into the room. Working parents around the world gasped in horror. The clip, which inevitably went viral, was the ultimate working-from-home nightmare! Yet within a week of lockdown, as schools

were forced to close and much of the population to work from home, many working parents had experienced their own comparable scene during a video conference call. The difference? No one batted an eyelid. With other childcare options from grandparents to nannies ruled out, there was no avoiding the fact families would be front and centre in this new home-working reality. Which, of course, has its upsides. One of the joyous things is the number of children that now appear at our senior management meetings, we all know each other's families quite well now; they were just names before.

These are moments you wouldn't have had otherwise; it's been really good for team morale and bonding. I for one am incredibly grateful for the unprecedented amount of time I'm getting to spend with my own children whom I would barely see in a pre-Covid working week. Flexible working is not only important for working parents and women in particular but also the new workforce coming through. This is likely to be a top priority for millennials when job hunting. As the coronavirus pandemic continues to force millions of employees to work from home, one thing is for sure, flexible work options are here to stay and it's my view that this will have a positive benefit on working women, I'd go so far as to say, long-term flexible work options could be a game changer for women at work and at home.

## What is the best piece of advice that you received?

Gosh that's a tough one as I have received so much great advice in my life, however the few that resonate as I get older are:

1. Life is so precious and so short - don't waste time being unhappy.
2. Remember, you are enough.
3. No matter how hard it gets, the sun will come up tomorrow.

# If you had to pick what is your favourite quote?

“Go placidly amid the noise and the haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible without surrender, be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly, and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story”

Max Ehrmann’s Desiderata has such a profound effect on me each time I read it. It reminds us to have faith in ourselves and to develop trust in the way things unfold, it talks about being gentle with yourself and to be cheerful, no matter what life throws your way.

---

Article by Cleo McGee