

This speech was given by Laura Douglas, vice president, Corporate Responsibility and Community Affairs at E.ON U.S. at the June 9, 2010, 100 Wise Women breakfast forum. The 100 Wise Women series is presented by Leadership Louisville Center and Today's Woman magazine.

The Importance of Strategic Risk Taking

Introduction



My personal thanks to each and every one of you for taking time out of your busy schedules to participate in today's activity. As women, we are all quite used to carving time out of our schedules to care for others – sometimes to the detriment of our own interests. However, it's often very, very difficult for us to take time out of our schedule to do something enjoyable for ourselves.

Taking time for ourselves makes us feel guilty. Perhaps there are several of you sitting here this morning thinking, "You know...I shouldn't have taken this time out for breakfast. If I had skipped this breakfast, I could have stayed home and done a load of laundry before heading off to the office."

But I want to let you know -- it's OK to take time out to do something for yourself. Taking time for self is how we get the energy to do for others. It's perfectly OK to be self interested! (...but that's a topic for another day!)

Aside from **taking time out for ourselves**, there are other taboo activities from which we, as women, shy away. That list of taboo activities is quite long. But there's one that really stands out for me.

Growing up, each time I left the house, in addition to saying "I love you," my mother would also say, "**be careful!**" I sometimes find myself saying the same thing to my own children. "**Be careful!**"

Just think about those words. Each time I hear them, I'm left with the feeling that I need to be on my guard. The last thing I want to do is **be reckless**. I may think I'm going out for a walk – to smell the fresh air – or take in the sunshine. But there's something out there ready to swallow me up whole if I'm not "**careful**." I must be on my guard at all times – ever vigilant – on the lookout for whatever it is and whoever it is that means me no good. And to appropriately combat this thing – I can't just behave in a careful manner. I must **BE** careful. I must take on the personality of **CAREFULNESS**. I must swallow it whole and become **CAREFUL**.

This constant admonition from my mother was a pretty powerful thing. It gave me the inclination to play out every possible scenario in any situation so that I could appropriately plan for the future. I was not going to be unwittingly caught off guard by the unexpected. After all, a **CAREFUL** person always had a plan. But in addition to developing plans, my mother's admonition also made me frozen. It caused me to cling to the comfortable scenario. If I had a well developed plan to deal with **situation A**, the worst possible thing that could happen would be to jump into **situation B** – for which I did not have a well developed plan. I may have had a plan for **situation B**, but it was definitely inferior to the plan I'd developed for **situation A**. So I told myself, Why risk uncertainty? Stay where you are! You know how to deal with **situation A!** You've got a lock on **situation A**. Stay there and be cool.

After all of my **careful** scenario development and analysis, I'm here to tell you that there's something really empty about merely **being careful**. Being careful doesn't produce dynamic innovative results. Merely **being careful** doesn't get you noticed. Being careful doesn't propel your life or your career forward.

That's why this morning, I've decided to talk with you about the importance of **taking risks**. Now – I'm not talking about low level, incidental risks like darting across the street against the light. I'm talking about **strategic risk taking**. **Strategic risk taking** is energizing. It will jump start a seemingly stalled career. It will absolutely get you where you want to go professionally.

For the next few minutes, during the time we have together this morning, I want to tell you how I've incorporated the concept of **strategic risk taking** into my own career, and the big difference it's made for me.

Presentation

When my youngest son was growing up, he was a sabre fencer. In fact, he was a nationally ranked champion sabre fencer and medaled numerous times in national competitions – including at the Junior Olympics. I can distinctly remember watching the interaction between him and his coach during a training session one afternoon. His coach told him – “Camara, you must be fearless. The brave people win everything!”

Those words made quite an impression on my son. He became fearless on the fencing strip– defeating young men three and four years older than he was – simply because he wasn't afraid.

Many times, as professional women, we are held back not because of the perceptions of others – but because of our own fears. We are afraid to risk coming out of our comfort zone. We are afraid to try the unfamiliar. Worse yet – we are afraid to fail.

At this point in my career, I can look back at several strategic risks I took which landed me in the spot I'm in today. I'm a vice president in a multi-national corporation. I participate on international teams, and lead significant business efforts. I'm the first AA woman to serve at the VP level at E.ON US in the company's history, and the only woman of African descent at the VP level throughout E.ON AG – which operates in 15 countries. This opportunity came because I was willing to take a series of strategic risks.

Let me start at the beginning.

As you learned during my introduction, I'm educated and trained as a lawyer. I have enjoyed the practice of law. It suits my personality and, frankly, I'm good at it. In 1995, I was practicing law as the general counsel for the Metropolitan Sewer District. I managed a team of in-house lawyers who did personal injury, HR, environmental, real estate development and administrative law. When Paul Patton was elected governor in 1995, he announced that he was looking for what he called Kentucky's best and brightest to take a time out from what they were doing, and accept positions in government for the public good. I thought about what it would mean. Longer hours. A significant cut in pay. A long commute. Travel all over the state. The chance to fail on a grand scale and to fail publically. My boss at the time, Gordon Garner, MSD's CEO, told me I would be selfish to do it. He asked me not to go. However -**For me - It was an irresistible opportunity.**

Although I felt I was an excellent general counsel at MSD, I wanted an opportunity to expand my leadership and policy development skills. The cabinet secretary's position would give me an opportunity to do so. I took a **strategic risk** and went after the cabinet secretary' position.

I was awarded the position. I was responsible for 1300 employees and 11 agencies within state government. The agencies included Mines and Minerals, the Racing Commission, The Public Advocacy Department, The Department of Insurance, Financial Institutions, the Public Service Commission, and Alcohol Beverage Control.

Within the first year of my appointment, the Courier Journal published a story saying that several sworn officers in the Alcohol Beverage Control Department, for which I was responsible, were rumored to be intimidating patrons and employees within night clubs in rural Kentucky. Ironically, their duty was to maintain order in such clubs. I worked with the state police to organize an investigation of the Alcohol Beverage Control Department within my cabinet. I personally interviewed every sworn officer in the department. I carefully reviewed the state police reports. As a result, I fired several long time employees. I also fired the Alcohol Beverage Control Commissioner, delivering the message to him personally after hours. I quickly developed a reputation as an honest, no nonsense, good government "lady." I was quoted in the Courier Journal as saying "the public has a right to demand the very best performance from its public employees." **I had managed to bring order into chaos.**

As a result of taking a calculated risk, I developed the very reputation I had hoped to develop by taking the position. I did it by being a quick study, working hard, relying on the folks around me that my instincts identified as good folks, and constant prayer.

Life was exhilarating. I was readily selected to sit on commissions and clear up other knotty problems in state government. I truly enjoyed public service.

Then, there appeared to be an avalanche of knotty problems. While I was able to resolve them, I was left with the sinking feeling that one day—I would be faced with a problem that even Solomon himself could not unravel. Full of self confidence and an inescapable feeling of impending doom – I strategically retreated back to the practice of law. I accepted a position as Vice President, General Counsel and Corporate Secretary for the Louisville Water Company. I would not have been selected for that position if it were not for the good reputation I built in state government and the strategic risk I took which placed me there.

Those of you in the audience who are lawyers know that practicing law is a very satisfying career on many levels. It is intellectually stimulating. There's nothing like that rush you get when you win a case – or complete that intricate contract where you know you managed to cover all possible contingencies. Practicing law is a wonderful, satisfying privilege. ...and with the state the world is in, lawyers are virtually guaranteed full employment.

Life was good when I joined the Louisville Water Company.

After working as a general counsel again for several years, I was approached by what was then LG&E Energy and is now E.ON U.S. about a position in its communications department.

The position involved developing the company's public statements, communicating with the press, developing crisis action plans, and managing the company's investments in non-profit community organizations. Although the position was part of the General Counsel's office, it was not a legal position. My family and close friends, in whom I had confided, kept asking me why I was going through the recruitment process. **I was, after all, a lawyer.** Why would I ever want to talk to the press?

I thought through my personal rationale very carefully. Truly, the work would take me away from the practice of law – and I love the practice of law. However, the position was within a very dynamic industry – electricity and natural gas. The position would also involve international travel and an opportunity to work on international teams. Most exciting – I believed if I worked hard, the position would provide an opportunity for me to take on increased responsibility through promotions within a significant company.

I was offered the position of Director of Communications at E.ON U.S., and I decided to accept it.

My professional life changed radically. I must tell you honestly – as a lawyer, I didn't speak to the press. As a lawyer, I worked hard to avoid contact between my clients and the press. My new responsibilities at E.ON U.S. not only involved constant press contact, they required me to develop collegial – cooperative relationships with the press. **That was a significant challenge.**

But let me tell you – when you have an energetic, inquiring mind, the worse possible situation for you is to be in a professional rut. When you want to know more -do more – grow more, being in a professional position which offers a safe routine is like being anesthetized. Particularly at this time in my life – when I have an empty nest and children who are up to their eyeballs in their own careers, I need professional challenges of my own.

By the way, I've done my own unofficial poll. I've found that unlike men, we women become much more adventurous when we hit our 50th birthday. We want across the board, no holds barred, straight up, full throttled adventure.

Since I've only included the "fifty and overs" with whom I'm acquainted in my unofficial poll, my survey results could be somewhat skewed. The "fifty and overs" in my circle of friends tend to be much more bodacious than the average woman.

So – since my new position as Director of Communication at E.ON required that I learn how to talk to the press – **I learned how to talk to the press.** More than that – I learned how to deliver bad news with empathy and honesty. I was the Director of Communications when natural gas prices reached an historic high. I had to tell that story without getting stoned, **and I did it.** For me – learning a new skill is exhilarating. I also managed to use the old skills I had polished as a lawyer to my advantage in the new setting. Dependability. Thoroughness. Objectivity. Steadiness.

Taking a strategic risk by accepting a new position which requires one to learn new skills is like the difference between using regular, unleaded gasoline and using jet fuel. Taking a strategic risk can power your career forward dramatically.

OK. OK. I understand that taking a strategic risk does not always result in wild success. Sometimes, we don't always triumph when we take a strategic risk. I'll admit it – taking strategic risk offers both the possibility of dramatic success – and abysmal failure.

I can remember the time, as a young lawyer, I took a strategic risk and **decided to run for District Judge.** In a primary field of eight candidates, I came in third -- missing the opportunity to run in the general election by less than 1500 votes. Although my campaign was unsuccessful, I can tell you precisely why I lost that election. Since my unsuccessful campaign, I have used the painful truths I learned to counsel others on the pitfalls they need to avoid. While I lost my own election,

none of those with whom I've shared the painful details about my defeat have ever lost an election.

Although success is not guaranteed when taking a strategic risk, I submit that we are more likely to be successful if we dedicate ourselves to conquering those things that are within our control.

If you're going into a new industry – learn as much as you can about that industry and the history of your new company within that industry. Learn the new terminology. Find out what the industry issues are, and develop your own informed position on those issues. Get to know the folks with whom you work. When assigned to a team, always go above and beyond expectations. Never settle for just meeting the mark. Exceed the mark. **Make up your mind that no one around you will ever out-work you.**

That last statement is one of the truths I shared with my children early on, and it's one of the truths my mother shared with me. Growing up, there were nine children in my family. We were all good students, and my mother and father would compliment us on how bright we were. However, my mother didn't want us to become complacent. She would say, "the person who's willing to work hard will go much farther in life than the person who is simply bright. Don't let anyone out work you."

Taking a strategic risk and working hard at E.ON U.S. resulted in a promotion to my current position – Vice President, Corporate Responsibility and Community Affairs. This position remains challenging – especially now with the announced PPL merger.

This morning, my message to you is a simple one. Don't be afraid to take strategic risks. In fact, taking strategic risks is the key way to move your life forward. Remember, **"The brave people win everything!"**