

ON "SHOWING UP" AS A ROUTE TO POWER

Most Americans, at least if the press is any indication, were delighted by Corazon Aquino's rise to the Presidency of the Philippines. Here was a housewife without formal political or managerial experience (except in the home and in support of her late husband) who managed to triumph over one of the major dictators of our time.

Her ascent to power is worth musing over. Yes, there was her tie to her late husband (which made her an important symbol), there was a political organization ready to be tapped, and there was growing discontent on the part of the population. And there was Marcos' agreement to an election—one of those in-hindsight self-defeating moves.

But Aquino's most important act was

simply Showing Up. She put herself in the center of things by announcing she would run. Aquino Showed Up because she felt that the fate of the country depended on her.

In the histories of people who accumulate power, Showing Up is often the first step. They put themselves forward. They attend every meeting. They are in a position to be part of events as they unfold.

Showing Up was probably one of the reasons Marlene Johnson is Lieutenant Governor of Minnesota today, serving with Governor Rudy Perpich. A member of a gubernatorial commission during Perpich's first term, she took the time to get to know him, and then she was one of the few people to seek him out to commiserate after his defeat. Because she Showed Up, she became not only a member of the inner circle that planned his next campaign, but also his running mate.

Showing Up is clearly not all there is to it. But it certainly is a prerequisite—as we see in instances where managers and other potential leaders fail to Show Up. A division president in an entertainment-related company began to lose the respect and support of the chief executive when he repeatedly failed to attend industry parties. "It's not important," the division head argued. "Nothing happens, it's not related to how I do my job." "But if you don't show up," his boss retorted, "you also can't make things happen."

A similar line of argument was used by several women college presidents, when pressed by an important woman state legislator about their absence from meetings of state education

groups. "Nothing happens" at those meetings. But, the legislator argued, by Showing Up they would make connections, become known, and be there when the action starts—or in a position to start it.

I suspect, though I wish it weren't so, that women have a harder time Showing Up than men do—and are thus handicapped in the acquisition of power. (That's one of the reasons the Aquino story is so heartening.)

Two remaining barriers to women's equal ability to Show Up are institutional and structural, and until these are eliminated, women will continue to lag behind. The first is the greater responsibility women still bear for family management, even when they have important careers. This makes it harder for some women to be all the places they would have to be to Show Up effectively, and still handle their other responsibilities. The second is the continuing scarcity of women in key leadership positions—the limited numbers phenomenon. The few women leaders get urged to Show Up much more than their numerous male counterparts do simply by virtue of rarity, and they cannot possibly do it all.

The other reason women may have problems Showing Up as often and as readily as men is the great degree of self-confidence—indeed, self-importance—it takes to Show Up repeatedly. It requires the same feeling of responsibility for events that Corazon Aquino had for her country. A feeling of, "If I don't do it, who will? If I'm not there, how can it go as well?"

People who become leaders believe strongly in their own importance, in their responsibility to contribute. Without this feeling, it is tempting to bow out, stay quiet, call in sick, and use every excuse not to Show Up.

A young woman consultant did this so frequently that her colleagues began to wonder about her seriousness about her work. It did not matter that she was often the number two person on the team or just an observer at a program. By not Showing Up at meetings and events—even though they could indeed go on without her—she missed important relationship-building opportunities; she missed a first-hand feel for key clients; she missed being there to be launched on the route to power. The judgment call that she was sick enough to stay out turned, I think, on her own unwillingness to believe she was that important anyway.

I said earlier that Showing Up is just the first step to power. The second is Rising to the Occasion. Thank you, Cory Aquino, for doing both magnifi-

cently in your first days in office.

SOURCE:

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