

This article is adapted from one that will be published in the IEEE Engineering Management Society Newsletter, Q2 2007.

The Best Advice We Ever Took

by Sue Dorward

A friend of mine helps high school kids decide which colleges to apply to. She recently told me that one of her clients, now in college, wants to pursue a career in computer science. "What book would you recommend that she read to help her succeed in her career?" I could recommend organizations and virtual communities such as Sisters, Women in Technology, and Association for Women in Computing, but I did not know a book or even an article to recommend to this student. There are lots of articles and studies about why women in computing have a hard time, but no canonical book to help women succeed in computing. "Perhaps you should write one," my friend suggested.

Another friend recently told me that she is pregnant. I immediately passed on to her the best advice that I was ever given about having a baby, which was given to me years ago by a colleague and friend who said it was the best baby advice she got. "Get lots of sleep now, and once the baby comes remember to sleep when the baby sleeps. You will need the rest." It occurred to me that this is the perfect litmus test when giving advice: what advice did I personally find the most valuable, which I want to pass on to others when they find themselves in similar situations?

After giving my friend "the best baby advice," I thought about that earlier book conversation and wondered, what is the best professional advice ever given to me for being a successful woman in computing? Furthermore, what do other women in computing consider to be the best advice that they ever got? A collection of such advice would be a valuable resource supporting women in computing.

Before getting into this further, I feel I should give you a few caveats about advice. Giving advice is tricky business, and doing it well requires an in-depth understanding of the other person's situation and preferences, along with good timing and tact. We often forget that what may work for ourselves may not be the best approach for others. Advising people on what to do can prevent them from learning how to figure things out for themselves. (As a coach who has pledged to follow the guidelines of the International Coaching Federation, I am required not to give advice when coaching.) Furthermore, unsolicited advice is

often unwelcome, ignored, or taken as criticism, so sometimes it is best to wait until someone asks before offering advice.

That said, I am nonetheless intrigued by the idea of identifying and passing on our collective "best advice" as women in computing. When advice is prefaced with "this is the best advice I ever got", and supported by a personal story illustrating why, the advisor's message has a much greater impact and is more likely to be appreciated, acted upon, and shared with others. The recipient receives the advice as a gift, rather than a criticism.

THE BEST ADVICE I EVER TOOK

The best advice I ever got (and acted on) was during my first year as a manager, leading and turning around a large, troubled team at a booming dot-com. My manager, a new CTO, shared with me some advice that he himself got as a young manager. (Hmm, advice with a two-generation pedigree seems to be a pattern here.) He told me, "Learn to listen to your inner voice. It may be quiet at first, but don't ignore it. Listen to it, think about what it tells you, and do not be afraid to share your thinking with others. Your inner voice will get stronger with experience and you will learn to trust it. You will learn that your greatest value as a manager is your intuition, especially when combined with judgment and analysis rather than just 'going with your gut.' If it leads you to disagree with others, so much the better. When you voice a different perspective, you add value to the organization."

FOLLOWING THE ADVICE

I did not get much guidance or any training as a new manager, so I was especially grateful for this advice and its implied support. It helped me learn to trust myself as I made new hires, put processes in place, and interacted with my peers and senior management. I did find myself speaking up with opinions that differed from the others', and felt proud that I did so. I am proud of my accomplishments there and the organization that I helped re-create and strengthen. Though my manager may not have appreciated my opposition to him on a couple of issues that I felt strongly about (or the irony that his advice encouraged me to do this!), I never regretted standing up for what I believed in.

IGNORING THE ADVICE, AND REGRETTING IT

If advice is never followed and rather is only valued in retrospect, it is not effective and in my opinion should not qualify as "the best advice." However, going against good advice at times, then suffering and recognizing the consequences, reinforces the value of that advice.

In my case, the booming dot-com grew and changed senior leadership. I found that I did not respect the new leadership and was losing my enthusiasm for working at this company, which I had once loved and believed strongly in. I consulted someone I trusted, who advised me to stay put, in part because of my high salary and the post-bubble job market. I considered a lateral move in order to have a growth opportunity, but my advisor was against this too so I did not push my management to move me.

I knew that money was not enough reason for me to stay and that I needed to grow and to work for people I respected, yet I stayed another year. I ignored and even stifled my inner voice, instead placing my trust in my advisor. (Remember those caveats earlier about giving advice?) I became increasingly unhappy, and it showed. I stopped voicing my opinions and kept quiet rather than engaging in debates, even when I knew that senior management was looking for me to do so. When I finally did leave, I had learned a valuable lesson and learned the hard way the value of my manager's advice.

TELL ME, WHAT'S THE BEST ADVICE YOU EVER TOOK?

Now it's your turn. If you have your own "best advice" given to you that you would like to share, please email me and (with your permission) I may include it in a future publication or presentation. Please include your contact information, the advice, and your story about how you got the advice, how it helped you, and what happened when you didn't follow it (if applicable). And keep your eyes peeled for my follow-up posting!

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