



## Working Together

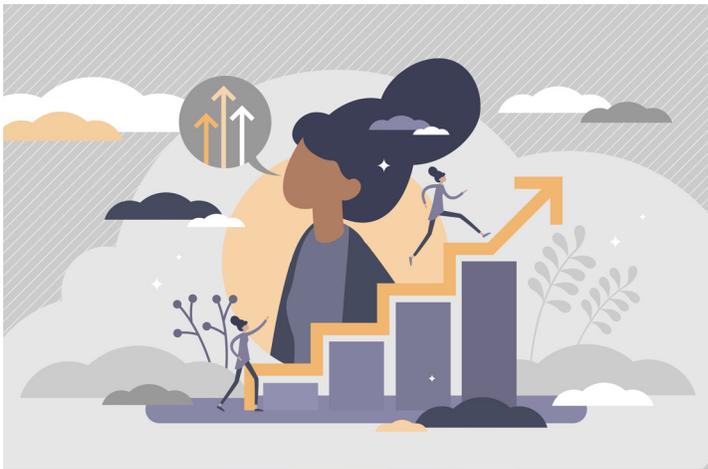
By Reginald Wells, Executive In Residence, Key Executive Leadership Programs

In case you may have missed it, March was Women's History Month. I have been paying attention to the historical contributions of women in a purposeful way since at least the mid-1990s, and happily took on the institutional observance of Women's History Month during my tenure as Chief Human Capital Officer for the Social Security Administration. This year, however, it took on special significance for me.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacted its toll on all of us. For me and so many others, 2020 will be a year to forget. In my case, like more than a half million other American families, the toll was the loss of a loved one. For months, I had empathized with families who lost loved ones, especially those who never got to say goodbye because of acute and long-term care protocols. And then I came to know that agony when my mother contracted the virus and transitioned just after Thanksgiving at the age of 92. Aside from the excruciating sense of loss, I found it hard to shake the feeling that the government she had served dutifully for 45 years failed her by refusing to adopt a national strategy to protect us. I felt betrayed and I felt betrayed for her.

The loss was unlike any loss I had experienced to this point in life; and as I began the healing process by entering the sixth stage of grief that David Kessler refers to in *Finding Meaning*, I did a lot of reflecting on my mother's life and the many conversations we had about the importance of public service. It occurred to me that we had discussed many things about government work, some humorous, some matter of fact and some sobering, including our shared perspective that public service is not for the faint of heart, but I could not recall my mother ever complaining about or mentioning challenges she experienced in the federal work environment as a woman. That moment of revelation bothered me.

Perhaps it was because she was reluctant to relive extremely uncomfortable personal experiences with her son. Perhaps those memories had long since faded into oblivion and she



avoided any sense of cognitive dissonance about her long, rewarding federal career by only remembering the positive. More likely, she did not go there with me because she had learned to internalize and rationalize sexism in its many ugly workplace manifestations as the tax women had to pay. That thought really bothered me and one other thing really bothered me. Earlier this week, some of my undergraduate students revealed in class that they feel marginalized at work simply because they are women. As I lectured to them on the leaders we need,

it was disappointing to hear that they were already experiencing disillusionment at the hands of leaders we can no longer afford to allow to operate with impunity.

I think of myself as an ally of women in the workplace, and yet it never occurred to me to ask my mother specifically about whether she had such experiences; and as I mourn her death in this moment, I could not help but wonder about her experiences with indignities at work, and perhaps worse, during 45-years of dedicated service. It has been my experience as a senior official charged with investigating allegations of all forms of harassment in the federal workplace that women frequently chose to handle the less egregious unwanted advances informally.

I have the pictures. My mother was a strikingly attractive woman, by most standards, at the age of 24 when she entered the federal workplace with the Internal Revenue Service in 1952 as a GS-2. The American world of work in the 1950s was notoriously male dominated and toxic by today's standards, as the television show "Mad Men" portrayed so well. While I would like to think the federal workplace offered better treatment of women, I know from first-hand accounts from those who were there (and extrapolating from my own experience) that government reflects the culture of our country, for better or for worse. While I hope men in the workplace today have been sensitized by the #MeToo movement, I suspect not enough. Misogyny is still alive and well in the world of work and women are still being disrespected much too often to rest on status quo.





We need men in the workplace to step up by actively bending the moral arc and workplace realities of women toward justice and psychological safety. The macho, autocratic leadership styles often revered in the past must give way to humble leadership if we expect to maximize human potential in addressing the challenges of a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) future state. Misogyny is not a problem that women can handle alone. It is a problem that men must address by becoming allies of their female colleagues and rejecting toxic behaviors that foster inequity and the shameful oppression of women.

**About the Author:**

Reginald F. Wells was named Deputy Commissioner of the Social Security Administration's (SSA) Office of Human Resources effective July 15, 2002 after serving short tenures as Deputy Associate Commissioner for Disability Program Policy and Senior Advisor in the Office of Disability and Income Security Programs. Dr. Wells also serves as the Chief Human Capital Officer for SSA. In his capacity as Deputy Commissioner for Human Resources, Dr. Wells oversees a staff complement of 400 employees with an operating budget of \$100 million. Dr. Wells served as Deputy Commissioner of the Administration on Developmental Disabilities from October 1994 to April 2002. He shared with the Commissioner full responsibility for planning and directing 25 federal staff and programmatic activities, including the University Centers, Developmental Disabilities Councils, Protection and Advocacy Systems and Projects of National Significance with a program budget of over \$122 million. From October 1997 to May 1998, Dr. Wells served as the Acting Commissioner of the Administration on Developmental Disabilities in the United States Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF). Prior to his appointment in the Administration on Developmental Disabilities, Dr. Wells had 10 years of extensive public sector experience with the District of Columbia's (D.C.) Department of Human Services. In 1980, Dr. Wells received a Ph.D. in Psychology from Temple University in Philadelphia. He also earned his M.A. in psychology from Temple University and B.A. in psychology and sociology from American International College.