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# WHAT MOTHERHOOD TAUGHT ME ABOUT LEADERSHIP

## WOMEN CAN ALSO GIVE BIRTH TO EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

By **RUPA SIVANOLI**  
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**B**ECOMING a mother 17 years ago, completely changed my world. I was neither prepared nor felt capable for what was in store for me.

Having my daughter, Shriya turned out to be the best thing in my life as I was forced to acquire and apply life lessons and competencies that I may have otherwise missed out on.

Upon closer reflection, a significant number of these learnings hold the same value for me as I lead others in the workplace as well.

Being a working mother in a demanding field of people development and management consulting, I am always on the lookout for ideas and insights to make my life easier.

Here are some of the things I have discovered along the way that may be useful to others.

### 1 How to eat a humble pie

Every mother knows you can never say never, because as soon as you do, whatever it is you said you would never do, invariably happens. Whether it's inadvertently using swear words while driving my young daughter to school, or being caught out in a white lie, I learned pretty early on to tolerate regular servings of humble pie.

And as a result of being "there" time and time again, I've developed a lot of empathy for those around me struggling to live up to values they hold dear. In managing others we are all striving to demonstrate the right values, but there are times we falter and need to cut each other some slack.

### 2 It's not about me

Of course, I need to take care of myself and look into my needs but being a mother is really about putting my child first. There's this sentiment floating around that warns women they will lose themselves to motherhood. They're right! But the woman I "found" as a result of "losing" myself to motherhood is someone I like much better.

Making sacrifices of self for another human being is not a bad thing. As managers, most times it's about the team standing out and receiving the credit rather than the individual.

### 3 It's not a competition, it's a commitment to improvement

Motherhood is not about who makes the best chocolate cake for canteen day or, who can help with costume design and choreography for concert day or, who has the contact details for the best Bahasa Malaysia tuition teacher or, who can lobby the guru besar for better exposure for her child.

Sometimes the environment your child is in can trigger such behaviours. Especially, if you see other mothers "get ahead" in the game by doing some of these things.

Personally, I gave up the battle for "Mother of the Universe" a long time ago. Save your mental and physical energy for things that really matter and that is within your control, like a good long talk

with your teenager or an evening at the playground with your toddler.

Sometimes at work, others play the political game and carry favours to gain mileage but at the end of the day if you remain focused on your team's needs, you can't really go wrong.

### 4 I can't control others

Yes, I brought her into this world, but I didn't really create her. She is her own person on her path to discovering herself. It's become increasingly clear to me that I am not supposed to control or manipulate my daughter to do what I want her to do.

My role is to facilitate her growth process to become who she is meant to be by her own definition of what fulfills her, even if that's totally different from what I had originally imagined!

As leaders, each of our team members bring unique strengths and abilities to the table and our role is to observe and harness it and align it to their own ambitions. The more we attempt to lay out the path, the less they grow as individuals.

### 5 It's better to laugh than cry (or scream)

Motherhood has got to be the world's most aggravating and frustrating job at times. The relentless nature of the work can drive a person to tears. Laugh instead. What other job can make you wonder about that odd smell and result in you finding another person's vomit stains on your nice office clothes?

In today's world where work is unrelenting and ever changing, sometimes the best way to cope is having some perspective and seeing the humour in things that don't always turn out as expected.

### 6 This too shall pass

There are so many stages of motherhood, and they all have their challenges and blessings. When I'm in the middle of a particularly tough one, I try to remember that it is just that (a stage) and that today is not forever.

On the flip side, it's more important to stop and savour the beautiful moments for the exact same reason: because today is not forever.

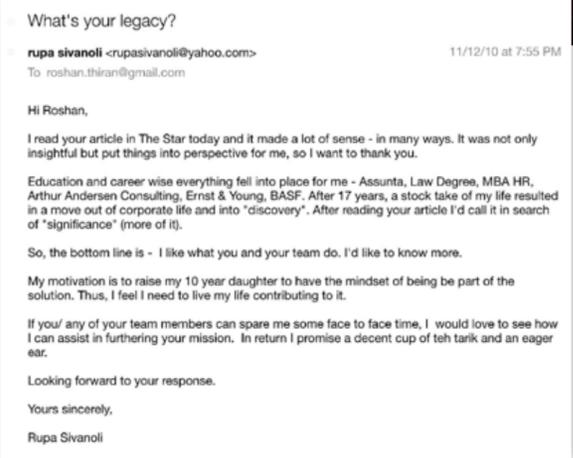
At work, when things get particularly challenging and I'm kept awake at night due to my inability to see a solution, I just tell myself that in time it will be ok and this too, shall pass and inevitably it does. I sleep a lot better now.

### 7 The best things in life really are free

Forget about exotic vacations, roadshow like birthday parties and designer wear for your child. Smiles, cuddles, companionship, conversation, a sense of belonging, a reason to get up, the



Rupa and her daughter, Shriya. Pic courtesy of Rupa.



A screenshot of Rupa's email to Leaderonomics CEO Roshan Thiran back in 2010.

satisfaction of watching another person grow under your care. These are the best things of motherhood, and they are all free. Free!

The same goes for nurturing team relationships. It's the lunch time conversations, banter, humour, teasing and learnings that we make from one another that fill us as human beings. Well okay, the big bonuses help too but at the end of the day, we all like to come to work where we are interacting with each other as friends.

### HAPPY PEOPLE ARE FREE TO BE THEMSELVES

Of course I appreciate structure and order in my home as much as the next person, but I've learned that when our family is really doing what families do

Motherhood has also given me the ability to focus and be fearless in going after what I want. Seven years ago, I wrote an e-mail after reading an article in *The Star* written by Leaderonomics chief executive officer Roshan Thiran about leaving a legacy.

I am where I am today because of it. The old me would not have had the guts to be so bold but I felt the need to build a better Malaysia for my daughter.

With motherhood and leading others, for me the joy is in the journey. You'll never do anything so hard and yet so gratifying.

The greatest work any of us will ever do will be within the walls of our homes and our workspace. The idea is to make it worthwhile so that we can be proud of the impact we have made.

By **FREDA LIU**  
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**W**HEN I found out I was pregnant, I was completely in tears. I was in a state of shock to say the least. I definitely wanted children but wanted to wait for the situation to be "perfect" – and I realised it would never be.

I believe I was in tears because it was the final sign that I had to grow up. I was no longer only responsible for my own life; I have the future of a child in my hands.

What is my role as a mother? I have to begin with the end in mind as Stephen R. Covey wrote in his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

I imagined myself on my 80th birthday (or at the deathbed if you're the macabre sort). What would be my true measure of achievements? Would it be riches or the external successes, or would it be the wonderful relationships and memories I have garnered? The clearest thing I could see is the kind of man my son would grow up to be.

When my marriage ended, I felt like the biggest failure. I tried to salvage my marriage for six years because I wanted the image of "family" as God intended it to be.

I even felt like I had failed my son big time. On the other hand, I couldn't help but count my blessings. I was thankful for my two mothers.

### THE TWO MATRIARCHS

To this day, my former-mother-in-law still lives with me. Bless her heart. I would not know what to do without her generous support and love in caring for my son.

With her around, I am rest assured that someone who loves my son unconditionally is always there to give me time to do other things. Mum (as I call her) is a pillar of strength for me and for that, I am eternally grateful.

Growing up, there was never a moment I felt I couldn't do anything. If I wanted music or Mandarin lessons, my own mother would be there chauffeuring me around; never complaining.

Because of Ma, there was never a stigma about what a girl should or shouldn't do. She has always encouraged whatever career choices I make.

By **HOLLY RUST**  
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BY now we all know that managing life, family and a career can sometimes seem impossible. With the advancement of technology over the last two decades, work tasks have become much easier.

However, these advancements have created an *always-accessible* work expectation. Having worked in the corporate world for over a decade, the most important thing I've learned is how imperative it is to set boundaries not only for yourself, but for your superiors as well.

Setting boundaries and adhering to them promotes a healthy work-life balance. Working hard does not mean working longer hours or being plugged-in at all times. In fact, working longer hours has proven to be unproductive.

The more time you allow yourself to complete a task, the more time you will take to do so. Before long, you'll find yourself overwhelmed and the quality of your work will inevitably suffer.

Working hard by working smart is the key to a successful balance. You must know your limits and know when it's necessary to unplug.

# WHAT'S YOUR LEGACY?

## BECOMING A MOTHER IS MORE THAN JUST PROVIDING COMFORT AND SECURITY TO YOUR CHILDREN



Freda (second from right) with her family. Pic courtesy of Freda.

### MY LIFETIME INVESTMENT

Having a child is an investment. And this is time spent with my son. In 2015, my goal was to have 52 golden mother-and-son moments in a year which essentially means we would spend some uninterrupted and meaningful time together one day, a week.

Since then, I have made it my annual goal to have these 52 golden moments with him. He is growing up fast and if I don't spend quality time with him, I would lose that connection.

He is watching my every move and not so much on what I say. Right now, I hear him saying things like I spend too much

time with him and how come I squeeze, hug and kiss him so much.

He asked why I can't be a normal mum and kiss him minimally? I replied to say that when he grows up, he can say he was over-kissed and over-hugged as a child and that there was never a shortage of love.

### MY GREATEST LEGACY

A mentor once told me, "children are temporary guests in your household" and "do not deny your children the privilege of struggle." My son's time under my guardianship is limited although I will always be his mother.

I also can't mollycoddle him because the assurance that he will be fine when I am gone is the second best gift I can give him. It's no fun being the disciplinarian, but I make conscious effort to explain why he is reprimanded when he needs.

One of the best gifts I can give him is the scriptural knowledge: "And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?"

Education is fine but I would rather he grow up to be a balanced, well-adjusted, loving, loyal and committed man. As a single dad recently told me, "Reliability is the new sexy."

**Happy Mother's Day to all mothers!**

■ *Freda Liu is a faculty trainer of Leaderonomics focusing on public relations and broadcasting. She is also a radio presenter/producer on BFM89.9. Leaderonomics wishes all mothers a Blessed Mothers' Day! E-mail us at editor@leaderonomics.com to share some of your motherly thoughts with us.*

## MANAGING WORK EXPECTATIONS IN A PLUGGED-IN-WORLD

If you allow your colleagues to always interrupt your personal time, this will become habit. If you answer clients' messages and e-mails at midnight, this will become their future expectation.

Once these behaviours are set, there's no turning back. I spent many years learning this the hard way. What started out as kind gestures, quickly turned into the status quo. Eventually this environment I created took over my life.

Accessibility can be beneficial if you know how to manage it. Technology allows you to work from anywhere, but it also allows you to always work.

Here are some tips to help you foster a work-life balance.

### 1 EACH DAY, PERIODICALLY USE THE DND (DO NOT DISTURB) BUTTON ON YOUR PHONE

If you are up against a deadline try to limit all your distractions for at least an hour. You'll be amazed at how much you get done. Use this button on your cell phone once you get home too, even if it's only a few nights a



The writer working, just hours after delivering her son. Pic courtesy of Holly.

week. It allows you to focus on your family and enjoy your free time without constantly checking e-mails or text messages.

### 2 LEARN TO SAY 'NO'

Don't get the reputation of a "yes" person. Once the word gets out, everyone will bring his or her concerns and projects to you. You have enough

on your plate, so it is perfectly acceptable to decline from time to time.

### 3 VACATION MEANS YOU'RE ON VACATION

Answering e-mails and making calls while on vacation is a big mistake. It's rare to even take a vacation, so why not enjoy it? If you seem available, work will make you available.

### 4 PRIORITISE YOUR TASKS

If something can wait until tomorrow, do it tomorrow. I used to be that person who had to clear my desk before I went home. Once I learned how to delegate and prioritise my work in order of importance, I was able to manage my day and get home at a decent hour. Set a goal of what you need to accomplish and work towards it in your allotted time. Anything remaining will be there when you wake up – I promise.

### 5 SET YOUR EXPECTATION EARLY ON

Let people know your limits. Do not answer calls or e-mails unless it's an urgent matter. If you do respond, let people know it was the exception. Don't feel guilty about taking and enjoying free time because you and your family deserve it.

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