



When they say you can't, go do it

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Women's Global Leadership Conference in Energy, Houston

19 November 2024



Thank you so much, Kim [Coomber-Hallum].

And hello, Houston!

How are you doing?

It is always great to be back in town after having lived here for 10 years.

I was just here a month or so ago.

I watched the Texans beat the Jags, and caught up with friends over chips and salsa at Pappasito's.

It felt like a perfect Houston weekend.

This city is, quite simply, the home of the energy industry.

And it's an industry that is making progress.

In bp, for instance, I'm proud to say that half our executive leaders and board members are women.

Nearly half of my leadership team are women.

And we're making progress at all levels of the company, too.

But I also know from experience that, as women, we face choices, changes and challenges that can have a bearing on our careers.

Some of our own choice, sure.

But others, not.

And my main message today is that regardless of what life throws at you.

Or what people may say...

Do not allow it to stop you from reaching your potential.

It reminds me of a poem, by an American poet, Edgar A. Guest, called 'It couldn't be done'.

Some of you may have heard it before.

The poem has always resonated with me, because it feels relevant to my life.

In it, Guest writes how people will always tell you that you cannot do things.

When, in reality, you can.

Many times in my career, I was told certain things could not be done.

But I learned I was wrong to believe such a thing.

Even for a second.

And that it – whatever ‘it’ was at the time – can be done.

Just like the poem says.

So, to bring this to life, I would like to share with you my experiences of growing up.

How that translated into my early career – and...

Three lessons I learned, which hopefully you will find useful.

Growing up

So, let's begin by going back.

Because, for me, this idea that ‘it couldn't be done’ stems from my childhood.

I was born in Centerville, Illinois, then grew up on a farm in Northeast Arkansas.

As some of you might know – or can imagine – life on a farm is tough, unpredictable.

You can work hard and things still go wrong.

However hard we tried, and my goodness we did, this always seemed to be the case.

That it just couldn't be done.

For example, have you ever tried ploughing a garden behind a donkey?

As a consequence, my family struggled financially.

Forget having nice shampoo or conditioner.

We couldn't even afford soda.

That's what enticed me to seek a ‘good’ job at a young age.

To treat myself to some of the luxuries that we just could not afford.

And I remember thinking that...

When I grow up, I want to find a job that will bring me greater security.

So I can buy shampoo and conditioner that smells nice, and so I can get a Diet Coke.

Fortunately, I was good at math and science.

And was not afraid of a challenge.

And having grown up around big farm machinery...

Working in a low-margin, tough farming business...

And getting your hands dirty...

I was drawn to chemical engineering.

I believed it would offer me the chance to get away and make my way to something better.

So, I studied at the University of Arkansas.

It was there that a professor spoke about the opportunities in the oil and gas industry.

That you were only constrained by your own abilities.

So, I tested that.

Early career

And in 1996, I took my first steps into our industry as a process engineer.

Little did I know that my early lessons in perseverance and resilience were building blocks for the future.

I started at Exxon, and I was based just outside Houston in Baytown.

It got off to an interesting start.

On my first day at the refinery, I stepped into the elevator and was mistaken for everyone but a process engineer.

On my way to the eighth floor, every person, male and female, said: “Whose assistant are you?”

I was speechless, I didn’t know what to say.

People had these expectations about me in less than a 30-second elevator ride.

Also back then, women in our industry were expected to wear a dress or skirt if they went into the corporate office.

I didn’t own a dress – I did grow up on a farm...

I owned pants!

I was told, wearing pants just couldn’t be done.

I should go buy a dress.

I graciously declined.

Seems crazy now, but it’s true.

You see, people had perceptions about women in the industry.

And what they should and should not wear.

And it went further.

In the early years of my career, people would comment about how I was being perceived.

And by people, I mean senior leaders – who should have had more perspective.

Both, men and women.

They’d say things like: “You need to do more of this, less of that.”

“You need to smile more; you squinch your forehead too much.”

“You’re too aggressive, Amber.”

Then the next year, it was: “You don’t speak up enough – you’re too quiet.”

It was exhausting – I felt like I was constantly chasing my tail.

Sacrificing who I was.

And I began to wonder if it was like this everywhere in big industry.

I longed for the day when no one cared if I had dirt smudges across my face.

Especially when it came to advice about my personal life.

Because, early on in my career, there were a few challenges to navigate.

I got married.

Had two beautiful children.

Then I got divorced.

And during this period, my sister was going through a difficult time.

So, she and my niece – who was a small child at the time – came to live with me.

All of this had an impact, of course.

It meant I had to juggle my work and my personal life.

And I felt I had to do it without anyone seeing any effect on me at all.

The mental weight was often immense.

Today, my niece is still with me.

She's now 21 and in college.

And she also has a job.

I also remarried later.

And my husband, Adam, had three children already.

So, we are very used to juggling work and family.

But back then, you'd think my career was over.

At that time, I was helping my sister to get back into school.

And I wanted – and needed – to be around to support her and my niece.

But senior leaders at my company wanted me to take a new role that required me to move.

I told them what I was trying to balance.

And that I needed some time to make sure she was successful in restarting.

They said that making the choice to stay meant my career was over.

That is literally what they said.

And you guessed it, they said: "It couldn't be done."

At the time, all these experiences helped me to ask myself a few questions.

"Can I not compete?"

"Are my priorities wrong?"

"Am I just not cut out for this sector?"

I expect many of you have faced similar questions.

So, I took time to reflect on myself, and I prayed a lot!

And I made up my mind.

I said to myself: "I am a good person.

"And I am good at what I do.

"It can be done! And I will show them!"

It was at that time that **three things** became clear to me.

And these have put me in good stead ever since.

What I've learned

The first lesson: don't try to live up to other people's expectations.

Most of the time, they are misplaced, anyway.

That doesn't mean do not listen to other people's points of view.

Or acknowledge your weak spots.

We should, for sure.

But don't be overly influenced by other people's prejudices.

People will always see things through their own lens.

But what's right for somebody else, may not be right for you.

You need to make your own way.

And you need to deliberately decide what that is.

The second lesson I learned was that 'life happens'.

I used to look around at colleagues and believe that the ones moving up were free from distractions.

Usually men.

But also, women who didn't have children who had an impact on their time.

I was wrong.

We all have personal stuff going on.

It could be kids to look after.

But it could also be ageing parents who need our attention.

Or siblings, pets.

It could be something related to health and wellbeing.

Or even just life admin.

All these things take time and energy.

And that's ok.

And once we realize that everybody has things going on, we tend to be more understanding of other people's needs.

Even now, as a leader at bp, I must balance work and home life.

Yes, sometimes, I have to work weekends.

Or days on end.

I'm often travelling, too.

But equally, if I'm needed at home, then I go.

Simple as that.

It's about give and take.

Life happens.

So, let's all be kinder and more helpful to each other.

Understand that we all have things going on away from work.

Things that you often don't see.

And I believe the things that happen in our personal life can help our professional lives.

It gives us perspective.

Grounds us as people.

Makes us more efficient.

And it makes us more resilient.

Which leads me to my final lesson.

That's about seeking and giving honest feedback.

I've been guilty in the past of taking things so personally.

Getting upset about feedback.

Letting it sit with me for days.

The reality is that we won't like everything people say to us.

That's life.

And I'm not talking insults or bad behaviour.

There's no place for that.

But we cannot be offended by everything, either.

Sometimes, we have to take feedback on the chin.

Hani, my business advisor, is here today.

She's fantastic.

Where are you, Hani?

She'll tell you that I'm a straight talker.

I say things how they are.

It's not personal.

I just want us to do the best we can.

I'd like to think that Hani and my team give me honest feedback, too.

My teams are colleagues and friends.

But we're honest with each other as well.

That's how we succeed together.

And today, I have a dream job...

A tough job...

But a great job as a leader at bp.

And right now, we need to have honest conversations about the scale of the challenge our industry is facing.

Energy transition

Not only does our industry need to continue to provide the world with the energy it wants and needs.

But it also needs to transition to net zero emissions.

And there are plenty of people who say that our industry isn't up to the challenge.

That it cannot be done.

Yes, it is a complex challenge.

And it requires our best engineers, scientists and innovators on the case.

Many of those people are women.

People like many of you here today.

And we know, don't we ladies, that it can be done?

And with that, I'll leave you with some of the words from Edgar Guest's 'It couldn't be done' poem.

Words that have served me well.

I have modernized it by changing 'he' to 'she'.

But it's our conference today...

So, I figure, what the heck! We can do what we like.

So here goes:

Somebody said that it couldn't be done

But she with a chuckle replied

That "maybe it couldn't," but she would be one

Who wouldn't say so till she'd tried.

So she buckled right in with the trace of a grin

On her face. If she worried she hid it.

She started to sing as she tackled the thing

That couldn't be done, and she did it!

Somebody scoffed: "Oh, you'll never do that;

At least no one ever has done it;"

But she took off her coat and she took off her hat

And the first thing we knew she'd begun it.

With a lift of her chin and a bit of a grin,

Without any doubting or quiddit,

She started to sing as she tackled the thing

That couldn't be done, and she did it.

So, there you have it, Houston.

My ask of you is this...

When they say you cannot, go do it.

Take off your coat.

And take off your hat.

And go to it.

Thank you so much for having me.

And thank you for listening today.