

## **“Valuing ourselves so others value us”**

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One of the difficulties faced by the administrative professional today is how they are valued. Traditionally the administrative professional role is filled by women. Society generally and internationally undervalues the roles that women play and this is continued in the workforce. Because of this societal undervaluing, women often undervalue themselves. To break this cycle we must value ourselves more highly.

I am not intending to be negative in the above statements. They are simply statements of how it is. Most societies do not value the traditional roles of women, they do not see the nurturing, house work, child raising roles as having high value and this is often because societal value is equated with monetary reward. Most societies do not pay women to raise their children and they do not pay women to run their own households. These are the roles that women traditionally undertake. There are specific skills that women have or develop to fill these roles and it is these skills that society takes for granted and does not put a monetary value on.

When a woman is a lawyer or an accountant, she isn't a female lawyer or a female accountant, she is known by her profession and unless her name gives her gender away, no-one would know what gender she was until they meet or speak with her. There is often a presumption in the first instance that J. Smith, Lawyer is a male. A moment's thought may change that view but the initial presumption would be "male". Equally, a Personal Assistant or Receptionist is more often than not a female so J. Smith, Personal Assistant has an initial presumption of female. All members of society equate some professions with a gender, this is quite normal.

Very often people employed in the traditionally female administrative roles are employed not only for their gained qualifications, but also for their female skills. Those skills are the qualities that women are often known for: nurturing, peace makers, multi-tasking, gentleness, willingness to please, etc, etc. These qualities are often known as soft skills and they do not have qualifications attached to them. They are unquantifiable, but they are looked for in many of these roles. They are the skills that are additional to any specific qualifications that are required in the role. Though they are essential to the role, they are normally taken as "being there" and are not rewarded separately. You may perhaps get a higher pay rate because you have a higher level of technical skills but you would not get a higher rate of pay because you are female and have female skills which are preferred for a particular role.

Most of these points are things that "just are", they are part of how our society is. The downside, is that because these female skills are not valued in the

usual way of society, by being paid, they are usually undervalued. When you are raised in an environment which undervalues your natural skills, then it is normal for you to not value them very highly yourself. This leads to a trap of expectation. The expectation is that your skills are not worth very much, therefore you shouldn't expect very much or even believe you are lucky to get what you do get because you aren't worth very much.

Putting these points into words makes them very harsh and very condemnatory. I do not wish to do that, what I wish to do is encourage us all to begin to re-evaluate ourselves and to begin to value much more highly what we do well naturally. This does not mean that we will automatically all receive a higher rate of pay but it does start us on the process of being valued more highly in our workplace and, in time, in society generally.

There are several things we can do to begin to value ourselves more highly and most of these things mean that we have to step outside our comfort zone. I know that this is a really hard thing to do, but without that step we perpetuate the undervaluing process.

Let me give you some examples:

In 1970 I joined a Toastmistress Club. Now many of you will have heard of Toastmasters, a highly respected worldwide organisation where people go to learn public speaking. Along the way to learning public speaking they also develop self confidence, skills in running meetings, team work, leadership and many other qualities.

Now in 1970 when I joined Toastmistress, women could not join the all male Toastmasters clubs so a sister organisation had been founded for women. Many of us who established that first Toastmistress Club in Wellington New Zealand, did so because our partners were Toastmasters. An interesting circumstance emerged at renewal of subscriptions. The men wrote out their cheque for membership without a comment, they knew the value of this organisation to themselves; they knew and understood the networking and they knew that they were worth it. I noticed when the women came to renewal time there were complaints, groans and great reluctance usually based on "I can't afford it this week, Johnnie has to have some dental work" and the impression was that they weren't worth it. I was very young at the time and I learnt some valuable lessons from this whole process. My husband felt he was worth it, so I felt that I was worth it. I wasn't, in this new young marriage, about to be out done by him!! I earned money to bring into the relationship, as he did, so I believe I should have some output as well. My husband actually agreed with me. I began to understand the undervaluing that most women are brought up to believe in.

In my own professional organisation the Association of Administrative Professionals New Zealand Inc, our annual membership fee is \$120.00 per year. Once this is broken down into a weekly figure it works out at about one cup of latte a week. I quite definitely feel that I am worth that amount to belong to the only professional organisation that there is for me. I use that example

when I discuss the cost and value of membership with groups in New Zealand. It is interesting to see the expressions on peoples faces change as they realise that the weekly amount is so small and it is how you put that value into context that really matters.

Another way of valuing yourself is to take control of your own professional development. Stop waiting for other people to tell you what you need and how you should get it. Don't wait for the HR manager in your organisation to suggest some training opportunity to you, go out and look for what you believe you need to do. If what you need to do has value for your organisation, then make the case to get them to pay for it for you. Be prepared to either share the cost or to devote some of your own personal time to it. Remember who the main beneficiary of this development is; it isn't just the company that employs you, it is you yourself and it should be putting you on the road to career development and personal growth – don't undervalue yourself by not being prepared to commit to it.

Spend some personal time deciding where you want to go with your working life and how you want to get there. Work out what skills you need to achieve your goal and then set out to get them. It may be that you have the skills but you don't have the qualification to back them up. Look into how you can gain that qualification.

In New Zealand we have workplace assessment. This is a system whereby you can be assessed against the required paper or 'unit standard' as we call it, using your current skills. For example if you have been a receptionist for several years and are really good at what you do, you can be assessed against the unit standard while you are at work doing the job you are paid to do. You may have to do a little research within your own company to complete some parts of it, you may well be observed doing your job and there are likely to be some questions about your role to ensure you have the competency at the appropriate level. What this means is that you don't have to take time off work to achieve that particular unit standard. You can select a range of unit standards most of which apply to your current and past roles and through this process achieve many of the units required to build a specific qualification. You might have to attend night school or learn through distance learning to gain some of the units required. This is a way of achieving the qualification that attests to your capability. It is a way of gaining a recognised qualification without having to go back to school, which many of us can't afford. But an important aspect about it is that it is something that you can drive yourself and it puts you in control of achieving your goal.

Very often the thought of gaining qualifications is very scary and many of us think "exams, stress and often failure". This is one time when you need to step outside your comfort zone and find a way to achieve a recognised qualification. This achievement will go a long way to improving your perception of your own value and you are on the way to improving the way others value you.

Many women have a tendency to put themselves down. When someone says they have done something well, they often brush it aside or they turn the focus onto someone else. This is considered humility and is often thought of as a nice quality. It also has the effect of reminding others that we are not of high value. Within our own roles we need to be sure that we don't over-do humility. We need to be able to accept praise and not be afraid to say, "Thank you, yes I enjoyed being able to use my skills in working with people in that situation". That is graciously accepting praise and also reinforcing the particular skill that you had been able to use, often a skill that no amount of paper qualification can show. No-one likes someone who praises themselves but there is a big difference between that type of person and someone who can accept praise graciously and is able to quietly reinforce what it was that enabled them to do that task well.

Raising your own value of yourself will begin to show in many small ways. It shows in the confidence with which we undertake a task. When we feel good about ourselves we approach life in a more confident manner and generally things go better and more smoothly. We are able to handle difficulties from a base of confidence which will generally allow us to work through them more successfully. It also shows in how we relate to other people. It is easier to look people in the eye when we are sure of our own value.

I work in a scientific research organisation. Most of the people I work with have university qualifications to the level of Doctorate and are very clever people. I don't have any major qualifications but I am good at what I do. I have been able to work well with these people because I value what I do, my manager values what I do and, when the other staff see how my manager and I respect the work I do, they too value what I do. They see it as adding value to their work and the organisation.

When anyone is going through a difficult stage in their life and they perhaps seek professional help with these problems, they will often want to change the world so it suits them better. Most often someone in that situation will be told that you can't change others, you need to change yourself and this will then assist others to view you differently. I believe that this is the rule we need to apply. We need to change ourselves to encourage others to see us differently.

In travelling around New Zealand visiting the Groups of AAPNZ I often hear from members that they are not well paid (and they aren't), that they don't feel valued in their role and other comments of a similar nature. Initially I felt quite angry about this and felt that they were being taken advantage of. I was then involved in putting together a submission to the New Zealand Government's Department of Women's Affairs on Pay Equity. The more I read from our members and the more I discussed and thought about this, I began to realise that we as women are the arbiters of our own future.

We need to begin to take charge of our own futures. This may be in quite small things such as putting our own membership of our professional association before some other costs in our lives. It may be larger, such as taking control of our own professional development and working towards our

own future goals. It may be very large by deciding to leave the job we are currently in because we feel we are not rewarded sufficiently or not valued sufficiently, and choosing another job. If we do make the latter step do remember that a fresh start can give us a great opportunity to change how we behave, but that it is how we behave that will make others treat us differently.

I do not believe that the small steps that each individual takes will immediately change the world. Society is as it is after many generations. It has evolved this way slowly. The submission AAPNZ made to the Pay Equity document will not have an immediate effect but it is a step made by our professional organisation and made also by many others, and from it a Government Task Force Group has been formed to look at what is needed for the future.

I do believe that the small steps we take will help us a little in our own lives and will begin to make the changes that are needed throughout society. You could consider the task too big and that it should be left to others. You may be right but if we don't start somewhere then nothing at all will happen and we still stay right where we are.

My theme today has been that if we don't value ourselves, why should others value us? I value myself in many small ways and I feel I can stand tall among my co-workers and feel valued. I encourage you to feel the same way.