

 **Commentary**

# Reprogramming ideas about leadership, success

BY NEERAJA  
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**N**ot long ago, I was watching an episode of a legal drama TV series and the main protagonist – a cocky New York City corporate lawyer – said something that stuck with me. At the climax of a crucial scene, he stared at his associate and said:

“That’s the difference between you and me. You want to lose small. I wanna win big.”

As you might assume, the protagonist was an ‘attractive white male in an expensive suit that exuded arrogance.’ After this scene, I stopped the show and thought to myself: Are these the qualities of a leader?

Ever since, I have been intrigued by the concept of leadership, particularly its relationship to gender and race.

As a third-year undergraduate student in the Department of Computer Science, I understand what it feels like to be a minority trying to suc-

ceed against a majority-led field. In my case, my gender makes me a minority. Computer science is a male-dominated discipline. Consequently, men are more likely to succeed. Knowing this, many of my family members and peers have questioned my decision to pursue this field. But when faced with these kinds of questions, I reply: Why shouldn’t I take the opportunity to defy the odds?

Truth is, I didn’t become a computer programmer to challenge society or to prove anyone wrong – I followed my passion. I am not intimidated by biases, but as I progress within my chosen field, they are becoming harder to ignore.

This past winter, a mentor recommended I attend a public lecture by Jessica Grahn, a Psychology professor in the Brain and Mind Institute. I attended not only because the title – *What Do Leaders Look Like? Combating Myths, Bias, and Anxiety on the Path to Success* – piqued my interest, but also because the presenter was a woman talking about leadership,

thus, giving me an alternative to the typical male-centred perspective.

Grahn began her lecture by giving two different versions of her professional journey.

The first was a linear, well-formulated narrative in which she knew exactly what to do at every step of her career and had planned her entire future from the start. Her second version – the true version – contained many twists and turns, was filled with moments of uncertainty and involved constant rapid decision-making based on the uneven landscape ahead.

The first version, she noted, is what comes to mind when one thinks about the makings of a leader – a series of successes straight out of the gate. This is partly because successful people tend to not broadcast their flaws or the flukes that got them to where they are. But Grahn stressed such ideas fuel biases and stereotypes.

The second story, she said, showed uncertainty and a lack of direction, but those are not necessarily the enemies of great leaders and, in fact, are often

crucial steps on their journey to greatness. There is no denying, however, that leaders are hard workers and have a penchant for seeking opportunity.

I’ve been led to believe leaders know what they want in life and that one mistake can jeopardize the path to success. However, like with Grahn, my own personal experiences have proved this untrue. Throughout my undergraduate career, I have contemplated different career options; exploring these alternative paths has helped me discover my passions. Indeed, my ultimate goal is to do well in a field I enjoy and to overcome obstacles by learning from my mistakes.

A leader should not have a label. Instead, they are individuals who are passionate about the work they do and driven to achieve the best results in any given situation. To overcome biases and stereotypes associated with leadership, it is necessary for everyone to take it upon herself or himself to bring about change. Biases,

myths and stereotypes will stop you from achieving your goals only if you believe they will.

With respect to women in computer science, it is little known the person thought to be the first computer programmer was a woman named Ada Lovelace, a mathematician who introduced many concepts in computing and was a leader in the field during the 1800s. Sometimes, all it takes is a little perspective to change your views on leadership.

It is perfectly acceptable to refuse to build your success story based on the rules set by society. **WN**

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 **Letters to the Editor**

## Support should grow for Friends of the Garden

While no longer an active member of Western’s Friends of the Gardens (FOG), I applaud the noble effort the Friends (who remain five in number) who for the past 27 years have staged an annual plant sale.

More than \$70,000 has been raised over these years by FOG, most of which has gone toward undergraduate Science student bursaries. In addition, several tables have been donated by them to the greenhouse. The

members include staff members, alumni, two members from the community and, during the sale, some students come to give a hand.

Having a yearly plant sale has not been an easy task. In the beginning, the group regularly tended three gardens plus, in many cases, their own gardens which, at that time of the year, needed a great deal of work. Then, there was unstinting support from Parking Services, Facilities Management, Food Services and other branches of administration.

People on campus came and went and many supporters of this group moved on. Some of the replacements are unaware of

FOG and its contribution.

During spring, seedlings (the future plants for the sale) are nurtured in a room in the greenhouse, cuttings are struck and divisions are divided from mature plants. In addition, members grow their own annuals, veggies, herbs, etc., in their own homes preparing for the event. The aforementioned sale requires a mammoth effort – heavy tables, plants and other equipment must be hauled up from their place of storage in the B&G basement and later carted back downstairs.

Now that this year’s sale has netted around \$3,000 for the bursaries, the group can get

back to doing some work in the gardens – pulling weeds, clipping down those omnipresent weed trees, rescuing precious plants in danger of being smothered – all those fun things gardeners love to do.

I would like to say a big ‘thank you’ to Western’s Friends of the Gardens for all the hard work they have done and continue to do for the university. Long may they thrive.

**FRANCES HOWEY**  
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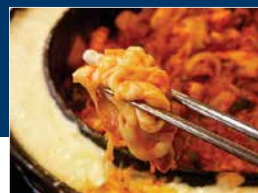
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