

Mentoring through the Language of Leadership

In the February 22, 2008 online edition of The Salem News (MA), I 'met' Tanya DeGenova. In an article about women sharing stories of courage and power, I read the following:

DeGenova once had two factors working against her. First, she was a woman trying to break into a male-dominated field. Second, she was too short.

But that didn't keep her from rising through the ranks at the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"I was recruited in 1974 into the FBI, and when I reported to Washington, I was told I was too short to be an agent," DeGenova said

She can chuckle about that now-outdated idea, but then, DeGenova said, it was a different world.

The progress she made while with the FBI, as well as her experience mentoring young professional women, are the reasons she wanted to share her story.

"We have to encourage women to step forward and share their stories," DeGenova said. "I'm sure in our community we have many women who have very interesting stories to share."

DeGenova will tell one of her most interesting stories: the day she was a first-responder to the attempted assassination of Reagan in 1981 by gunman John Hinckley.

After regulations were changed that did away with things like a height requirement to become an agent, DeGenova quickly worked her way from FBI linguist (fluent in Russian, French and German) undercover agent, to becoming a special agent.

It was as a field agent in '81 that she got the call about the Reagan shooting.

"I just happened to be in the right place in the right time, when I got the call," she said.

She didn't sleep for the next 48 hours; she and other agents had to retrace where Hinckley was that day and the day before, finding witnesses and evidence along the way.

"It was an ordinary day in my extraordinary career," she said.

She's quick to point out, however, "Anybody could have that day in any career."

DeGenova, who runs a security consulting business, said her background as a first-generation immigrant was at the heart of her ambition.

"I don't want to settle for less, I don't want to be a second-rate citizen," she said.

She recently ran for public office, and while she wasn't elected, she says that striving for high goals is something all women should do.

"Sharing my particular story may encourage someone else to step forward," she said.

Sharing stories isn't just for women. Leaders of both genders and at every level have a responsibility to mentor others. And isn't sharing your experience what mentoring is all about?

We often forget that our lives are made up of stories. We have a variety of experiences in our careers - from ordinary to extraordinary - and they are all important. They teach us things, whether we count them as successes or learning opportunities. They validate our beliefs and our values. They help us to stay calm and stable in an ever-changing world. They add richness and depth, understanding and clarity,

humor and pathos to the canvas of our lives. Yet how many of us think to share them with others?

What stories can you share to mentor that new team member? What stories are part of your 'ordinary day' that may inspire or encourage your colleagues? How can you make better use of the 'language of leadership' - the narratives from your experience? We share our stories in many ways. How much more powerful can they be, when shared from the heart - at the right time, for the right reason? Sometimes that's called using stories 'strategically' - the mark of a great leader.

Aloha,