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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to briefly recap some of the "tips from the top" which were offered to me by top and senior women working in Australian and American universities. This was part of my doctoral research which explored the perceptions of 24 top women academics/academic managers. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with top and senior women to explore, amongst other issues, their experiences of "life at the top" and also analyse their suggestions for improving conditions for women and other minority groups wishing to participate and influence organisations at the top levels. This paper is also a response to the demonstrated keen interest from senior and top women in practical strategies to improve their professional performance in the organisations where they work. Hopefully, this paper will enable women and men aspiring to leadership positions to reflect and benefit from the practical experience of others who are their predecessors or peers.

TITLE PAGE

Title: "Tips from the Top: some findings from a study of top university women"

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Title: Changed to "Tips from the Top: some conclusions from a study of top university women."	**Title: "Great title" – 1st reviewer** **"Slight change" – 2nd reviewer**
Extra background paragraph added to provide this background.	**Requires inclusion of some background to contextualise study- 2nd Reviewer**

Footnotes removed and only a few were incorporated into revised text	**Too many footnotes, incorporate into text - 2nd reviewer**
Spelling correction made	**'Self-depreciating' should be 'self-deprecating' on page 2 – 2nd reviewer**
Not added due word limit constraints and also this would compromise the anonymity of the study. Can give details in presentation for the women who were willing to be identified	**More information on women would be good – 1st reviewer**

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to briefly recap some of the "tips from the top" which were offered to me by top and senior women working in Australian and American universities. This was part of my doctoral research which explored the perceptions of 24 top women academics/academic managers. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with top and senior women to explore, amongst other issues, their experiences of "life at the top" and also analyse their suggestions for improving conditions for women and other minority groups wishing to participate and influence organisations at the top levels. This paper is also a response to the demonstrated keen interest from senior and top women in practical strategies to improve their professional performance in the organisations where they work. Hopefully, this paper will enable women and men aspiring to leadership positions to reflect and benefit from the practical experience of others who are their predecessors or peers.

1.1 Background

This research originated as a doctoral project exploring the perceptions of 24 top women academics/academic managers located in Australia and the United States and provided a snapshot of life at the top during 1998-2002. Thirteen Australian and eleven American women were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Most of the

women were either vice-chancellors or university presidents, with other ranks including deputy vice-chancellors/presidents, pro-vice chancellors, deans, heads of departments and divisions and the professoriate. Institutions in Australia included universities from the group of eight, Australian Technology and new generation universities. In America, the institutions ranged from the Ivy League, other large public and state universities and several community colleges.

One of the most interesting aspects of this study (Tilbrook, 2005) is the "tips from the top" by the women interviewed. They provide a unique insight into the things these women sought to benefit from and the aspects of their personalities they wished to improve or modify in their journey towards very senior positions in universities. Their advice and recognition of the importance of the assistance they received is, hopefully, useful for other women and minority groups hoping to make a similar successful journey. Many of these insights are also relevant to men who wish to attain these top positions.

There was a ready willingness by many women university vice-chancellors and presidents to concede that these chief executive positions are not only hard to attain but extremely demanding and difficult to do well (see also Kerr and Gade, 1986). In the words of an Australian vice-chancellor of a technology university: "They're horrible jobs. They're terribly difficult" (Interview: AUS 2: 5) and she conceded that "I think it is perfectly reasonable for both men and women to make a personal decision that they don't want to do that kind of stuff" (Interview: AUS 2: 5; see also Interview: AUS 6). This is similar to the comment by Joseph F. Kauffman, an American, who stated "There is not much joy in being a college president today" (Kerr and Gade, 1986: 119; see also Currie *et al*, 2002; Burke, 2005). There is also a willingness by these women to recognise, that for many people, particularly women, the lack of balance that these positions demand may be a major barrier for women in the pipeline (Interviews: AUS 2: 5; AUS 6; US 3; US 6). Perhaps the greater complexity of women's roles makes women more aware of the

hardships involved, giving even successful women a degree of ambivalence towards the benefits of their successful careers (Interviews: AUS 2: 5; AUS 6; US 6; US 9; see McKenna, 1997; Kolody 1998, cited in Wyn *et al*, 2000; Currie *et al*, 2002; Chesterman *et al*, 2004).

1.2   Tips from Women at the Top

Advice to aspiring women took many forms from the initial, self-deprecating comment of a well respected associate professor in teacher education who served as a mentor for many academic women throughout her long career: "I'm not sure - it obviously didn't do me any good [laughs] - I would have liked to have been dean" (Interview: AUS 13: 8), to the succinct "Go for it!"(Interview: US 10: 10) from an American university president of a networked state Californian university. The advice from these successful women can be grouped into several broad categories ranging from structural or systemic assistance, such as functional training, networking, and mentors, to a range of specific personality traits that women believed were important and could be developed over time to enhance their personal career portfolios.

1.2.1   Taking Advantage of Structural Benefits

Several of the women interviewed emphasised the importance of mentors for their careers. Four Australian vice-chancellors (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 6; AUS 11; AUS 12) and an Australian pro vice-chancellor (Interview: AUS 8) reiterated the importance of having good academic mentors and networking, both within their academic disciplines (Interviews: AUS 5; US 1) to gain a reputation and then contribute to major national policy making committees. Another suggestion was to start with areas outside teaching and research and progress to committees that make serious institutional decisions (Interviews: AUS 7; AUS 9; US 6; US 10). Several American women also reiterated these views, with an Afro-American senior administrator also describing the importance of establishing a supportive network outside your own institution:

My advice to people is that they should establish a network outside of their institution that will allow them to be reciprocally involved with changing ideas and what not, but people who don't have the problem they have at this place but know about it from having it somewhere else (Interview: US 5: 26; this comment is similar to the findings of Bell *et al,* 1993: 114).

Another important benefit to be accessed was functional training for the job. Despite the obvious benefits of this training, an American president commented that many things are important for chief executives, however, "they're not easily learned" (Interview: US 3: 55). An American senior financial administrator also suggested that accessing appropriate functional training was necessary (Interview: US 7).

1.2.2   Consolidate Your Career

Tied to the earlier advice on the importance of benefiting from mentors, developing networks, and also taking advantage of structural on the job training, was a considerable amount of advice concerned with consolidating one's own career. This was probably the second strongest theme in the advice given, second only to the necessity to reflect on one's own personality, and individual strengths and weaknesses. According to an Australian vice-chancellor (Interview: AUS 12), people need as much encouragement, time and direction in their career as possible. Rigorous career planning was viewed as essential and this involved strategically targeting people, referees and also networking to facilitate future career opportunities (Interviews: AUS 5; AUS 8; AUS 12; US 1; US 2; US 9; US 10). An Australian professor emphasised the importance of establishing an international research reputation because this can be achieved individually despite your gender, level or status in the university (Interview: AUS 5: 14). Another pro vice-chancellor reiterated the importance of being "absolutely research orientated" (Interview: AUS 3: 9). It was better to consolidate your academic career before

aspiring to being a top executive because the core business of universities is teaching and research, not management (Interview: AUS 9: 15). Sometimes the advice on career development and consolidation was more light-hearted, as in the words of an Australian vice-chancellor reflecting on her successful career: "I have discovered … that good girls generally don't get noticed and bad girls probably do" (Interview: AUS 2: 1; see also White, 1995). Many women also spoke of having the courage to say "yes" to an opportunity (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 3; AUS 7; AUS 8; AUS 10; AUS 11; AUS 12; US 1; US 3; US 5; US 9; US 10).

The career advice of the American women was similar to that offered by the Australians, with additional comments on the importance of gaining as much experience as one can by serving on major university committees and obtaining visibility within the school. University committee membership also provides valuable networking opportunities and the ability to contribute on a broader organisational level. Personal career research was once again viewed as important and several women suggested talking to people in the type of jobs that one wants to obtain in the future (Interviews: US 1; US 7; US 9). Two American presidents emphasised the importance of a thorough financial rather than accounting grounding (Interviews: US 3; US 6), coupled with an understanding "that a budget is the way in which a plan is made specific" (Interview: US 3: 54). This reiterated an Australian vice-chancellor's comment that on the job functional training in areas such as finance, was most important for aspiring and successful vice-chancellors and university presidents (Interview: AUS 12).

Despite similarities with some of the advice given in various portraits of chief executive men (Kotter, 1982, 1990; Cox and Cooper, 1988; Easterly-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 1991, cited in Ross-Smith, 1999; Padilla, 2005), there were differences when women are offering advice to other women striving to succeed in a male dominated field. According to an

American president of a Californian community college, women have to be more careful and unrelentingly competent:

> *As one [advisor] put it, "just survive" ... it is such a complex matter of what ... makes one succeed and how one defines success and so it's ... hard to say. But I think what you do is you ... really succeed at what you are doing in every level ... so you're prepared for the next ...* (Interview: US 4: 29).

The continued minority status of women at the top of organisations means that there is very little tolerance for mistakes made by women at the top (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 6; AUS 12; US 2; US 3; US 6; US 10).

Top academic managerial and executive success is only achieved through leading, empowering and enabling other people, so it is fundamentally about the "importance of how you deal with people and how you involve them" (Interviews: US 3; US 6; US 8; see Brown, 1992; Marshall, 1984, 1995a; Sinclair, 2007). It is essential to understand, "when you are giving a person a task beyond their ability" or when it is necessary to provide "them with the support for them to get it done" (Interview: US 3: 55), and this necessitates an ability to realistically assess the capabilities of others. The ability to approach issues analytically was another strong theme (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 3; AUS 6; AUS 7; AUS 9; AUS 11; AUS 12; US 1; US 3; US 4; US 6; US 7; US 8; US 9; US 10; US 11), as was the necessity for executive women to develop considerable self confidence, based on a breadth of experience (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 3; AUS 5; AUS 6; AUS 8; AUS 11; AUS 12; US 1; US 3; US 4; US 6; US 8; US 9; US 10; US 11). A demonstrated willingness to take on assignments and show initiative was emphasised by some women (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 5; AUS 7; AUS 9; AUS 10; AUS 12; US 1; US 3; US 4; US 8; US 10).

1.2.3   Realistic Self-Assessment

Perhaps the most important thematic advice to aspiring women concerned the necessity for a vigilant and realistic insight into personal strengths and weaknesses. The preparedness to work hard on remodelling "the self" was critical in the quest for top jobs. An Australian vice-chancellor, whose interview highlighted that she had spent considerable time in self-reflection to understand her own personality and particular talents, reiterated this theme:

> *I think you have to do two things. I think you have to be very clear about your strengths and weaknesses and go to work on your weaknesses very purposefully and not avoid them however painful it is to address them* (Interview: AUS 12: 50).

Another important aspect associated with a thorough self-assessment of personality, values, talents and aspirations, was the advice given by an Australian vice-chancellor: "be true to yourself" and "do not compromise … on what you believe in" and "if you have ambitions, live them" (Interview: AUS 11: 15). This was similar to the Australian emeritus professor who stated: "You've got to be yourself, otherwise you're just a manufactured person and everybody twigs to that" (Interview: AUS 9: 13). A similar perspective was advanced by the American president of a private New York university who reiterated "you [must] be yourself … you can't be an actor or an actress all your life" (Interview: US 3: 14) as "your own style is your own style" (Interview: US 3: 55). Another older, distinguished Australian academic counselled "stop wishing", be patient, consolidate your career, "then you will identify yourself as somebody who can be taken seriously in the top executive position" (Interview: AUS 9: 14-15).

Resilience was an important personal characteristic as entry into the public realm meant a preparedness, in the words of the oldest Australian woman interviewed, "to take criticism on the chin" (Interview: AUS 9: 16). Greater visibility as a chief executive

meant that it is important to be guarded when revealing aspects of your private life and your strategies in advance (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 6; AUS 7; AUS 10; AUS 12; US 3; US 6; US 8; US 10). Repeatedly women advised "Do not be too open" (Interviews: AUS 9: 13; AUS 2; AUS 5; AUS 6; AUS 12; AUS 13; US 3; US 5; US 6; US 11) as this openness could be misrepresented as weakness and exploited by people wishing to gain an advantage (Interview: AUS 6). A recurring theme was that many women have a tendency to be "too honest and way, way too open" (Interview: AUS 7: 31), preferring to reveal too much to others who may use this information for their own advantage (Interview: AUS 7: 34). Therefore, it is important to remember the adage "don't tell more than you need to tell" (Interview: AUS 7: 31) and this was the succinct advice from a high profile, now retired male vice-chancellor to her prior to her commencing as a deputy vice-chancellor in another institution. This message was reinforced by the advice to listen more and speak less (Interviews: AUS 12; US 1; US 3).

Interpersonal skills, diplomacy (Interviews: AUS 12; US 6; US 7; US 11) and political astuteness (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 6; AUS 11; US 7; US 9; US 11) were also emphasised, because senior and top positions are "about relationships" (Interview: US 7: 7; see Sinclair, 2007). As one American senior administrator commented, "they have to like you" (Interview: US 11: 9), so being a friendly, "likable person" (Interview: US 11: 9) is a useful characteristic (also see US 8: 26). The importance of an approachable manner was confirmed by another American university president "… I don't know that it could rest on gender ... I think it is more a style issue … and so a kind of outgoing, kind of people friendly style whether you're a man or a woman produces a certain response". Equally necessary were the stereotypical male executive virtues of learning to control your temper and not showing emotion under pressure (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 5; AUS 6; AUS 7; AUS 10; AUS 11; AUS 12; US 3; US 5; US 6; US 8; US 10; US 11). Several women suggested that you really cannot ever afford to show anger (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 6: 10; AUS 12; US 3: 48).

Given the difficulties of these positions, a sense of humour to inject balance was also valuable (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 6; AUS 12; US 3; US 6; US 8; US 9). Anger was also viewed as problematic: "you really cannot show anger … particularly if someone is trying to needle you, you give them a victory" (Interview: US 3: 48).

1.2.4   Infrastructure Support for VCs/Presidents

The needs of people at the chief executive level are somewhat different to others in senior management or academia, due to the unrelenting demands of the position and the greater responsibility. Consequently, as one Australian vice-chancellor ironically remarked, "training for CEO positions - it probably would be quite useful, the trouble is of course, it's liable to put you off" (Interview: AUS 2: 13; Chesterman *et al,* 2004), whilst at the same time admitting that "It's better to be worked to death then bored to death". Yet, in this aside she hints that one of the greatest problems for women in these positions is the tendency to wear themselves out on the job (Kolody, 1998, cited in Wyn *et al,* 2000; Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 3; AUS 5; AUS 6: 13, 22; AUS 7; AUS 8; AUS 9; AUS 10; AUS 12; US 4; US 6; US 8: 16). The president of an American community college commented on the danger of wearing herself out - "I think that I definitely have that propensity," as she described herself as "looking more haggard than I wish" (Interview: US 8: 16).

Taking a break for holidays (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 12; US 3; US 6; US 9) and building in rewards for themselves, that were not reliant on the job (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 12; US 3; US 6; US 8), are important but as an Australian former vice-chancellor commented, being a woman at the top does not provide you with the infrastructure of "mates" to take care of the shop that men often surround themselves with at the most senior organisational levels (Interview: AUS 6: 21). Moreover, "male presidents are good at helping each other if they are in trouble", due to their longer more established networks (Interview: US 10: 9-10). This requirement, to provide professional peer support for university presidents and

vice-chancellors, is the "second stage" for women's executive networks (Interviews: US 10: 9-10; AUS 6; Chesterman *et al,* 2004). Even greater care is needed as a chief executive officer of an organisation as people "watch your performance" (Interview: US 3: 11) and merely a headache or any visible sign of tiredness can be misinterpreted as indicators that the institution is in trouble (Interview: US 3: 25). For example, "… if you look troubled, if you've got a headache they think that the institution's in trouble" (Interview: US 3: 25). Self-renewal is more difficult due to the isolation imposed by the job and the difficulty of scheduling holidays or breaks.

1.2.5   Coping with Loneliness

The loneliness at the top was a recurrent motif. Frequently, a loss of "friends" along the journey to the top was experienced. This was sometimes due to long standing colleagues experiencing jealousy and resentment at the women's changing perspectives, due to embracing different roles from their previous work as purely academics (Interviews: AUS 11; US 3; US 4; US 6). It also stemmed from the necessity to continually change institutions, states and sometimes even countries in the quest for the top positions. This comment from an older married American president, that describes taking up her current presidency in New York after 24 years in her first Catholic university in another American state, captures this increasing isolation from work colleagues and the loneliness that characterised the first eighteen months in her new position:

> *Every step of the way you lose, lose some people that you thought were important … that were important in your life … and … you thought somehow could make that separation [between yourself and your office] and then they can't … I was always very fortunate because I have had friends outside of the organisation …and without that it would have been extraordinarily lonely … but I left them, I left my [adult] children, I left all my friends, we came here and I was so desperately lonely … I think part of it was I was surprised at how people dependent I had become … you had this whole network of support …until it was gone … but that is a real price. I don't know if men have that same experience … that was the biggest thing … and the hardest thing* (Interview: US 3: 39-41).

Practical ways of countering the dangers of isolation and loneliness at the top were to reach out to other women at similar levels and utilise presidential and vice-chancellor networks. Whilst this was difficult for the pioneering vice-chancellors and presidents (due to the scarcity of women in these positions) it is much easier today with increasing numbers of female peers (Interviews: AUS 6; US 3; US 4; US 6). Possibly, the greater competitiveness evident amongst Australian universities in their attempt to achieve global prominence will make this peer support increasingly difficult as universities become increasingly corporatized (Jarvis, 2001; Marginson and Considine, 2000).

Despite the inevitable isolation of top positions, it was seen as important to constantly conduct reality checks by hiring people who think differently from the CEO but who share a common set of values (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 11; AUS 12; US 3; US 6; US 8; US 9), to guard against becoming increasingly insular and provide the encouragement to continue to take a few risks (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 6; AUS 10; AUS 11; AUS 12; US 3; US 4; US 6; US 8). Utilizing informal networks of peers in other institutions was also a strategy to provide professional and psychological support.

1.3   Do Women at the Top Have Special Needs?

1.3.1   EEO/AA initiatives and the Treatment of Women

One of the criticisms of EEO/AA initiatives in the past is that they have failed to adequately recognise the differences between the needs of men and women (Bacchi, 1996; Burton, 1991, 1992; McBroom, 1992. Bradley (1996: 86) argues, "that the impetus of liberal feminism is to make women more like men". EEO/AA initiatives concentrated primarily on women as workers in the work force, (Burton, 1991; Pioner and Wills, 1991; Bacchi, 1996) hence, often neglecting the special requirements of women due to pregnancy and the need for maternity leave, or the fact that women provide most of the care for elderly parents (Interview: AUS 6), parents-in-law and their extended families

(Interview: AUS 13). Many women have dual roles: the primary responsibility for their families and important functions in the workplace (Valian, 1998) For as Fraser (1993: 129) suggests: "As long as the worker and childrearer roles are constituted as fundamentally incompatible with one another, it will not be possible to universalize either of them to include both genders".

The complications caused by trying to fulfil two different major roles have led many commentators to suggest that the modern phenomenon of the "superwoman" (Shaevitz, 1984) is nothing but a recipe for constant tiredness, poorer work performance, fractured time for children, and insufficient personal time for themselves (McBroom, 1992; Frieden, 1991; Apter, 1985: 146-151; Schaef, 1990; Wolcott and Glezer, 1995; McKenna, 1997; Maushart, 2001; Bittman et al, 2004). Unfortunately, "institutions are not now - and I don't think ever will be fully family friendly" (Interview: AUS 12: 31) as an Australian vice-chancellor who is a single mother with a young pre-teenager admitted. For her, this was related to the fact "… that there are real impediments in terms of gender roles in society" (Interview: AUS 12: 31). This comment is similar to Sinclair's (1998: 84-5) portrayal of high achieving women where she states that she found that "The experience of the interviewees highlights that, first and foremost, women are judged against a maternal norm - they are expected to support [others] and be selfless"

One of the major issues identified by this study was that of juggling parental duties or other caring responsibilities with top jobs. This problem was a major personal concern for women and impacted on their careers. For predominantly academic women, the flexibility of their academic schedules enabled them to cater for their families to some extent, but they usually still bore the major domestic responsibilities (Omar and Davidson, 2001; O'Laughlin and Bischoff, 2005). This either lessens their focus on their academic careers or causes them to work excessively long hours (Hochschild, 1997a; Hochschild, 1997b; Currie et

al, 2000; Raddon, 2002; Acker and Armenti, 2004; Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 4; AUS 6; AUS 9; AUS 11; US 2; US 3; US 8; US 9; US 11).

One way to ameliorate the problem is by the introduction of family friendly policies to enable men to accept more domestic responsibilities. Unfortunately, the majority of men do not take advantage of these incentives and the problems of the work/family interface remains gender based, with women being the major users of such initiatives (Beechey, 1987; Baxter, 1992a, 1992b, 1993; Bittman, 1991; Bittman and Lovejoy, 1993; Bittman and Pixley, 1997; Cass, 1985; Wolcott and Glezer, 1995; see contributors to Haas *et al* (eds.), 1999; Kodz *et al,* 2002; Drew and Murtagh, 2005; Burke, 2005; Probert, 2005). Although this impacts more on women due to the contemporary gender regime, it is also hard to see how even top executive men in the corporate world and universities have sufficient time to devote to their partners or any children (Drucker, 1995; Burke, 2005). Even in 1967, Drucker (1995: 51) had commented on the "impossibility" of one person undertaking the presidency of a large university".

Throughout the study it was the older vice-chancellors or university presidents who acknowledged this problem most fully. In many cases, they had come to their jobs later in life, usually in their mid-fifties or even later, after their families had grown up (Interviews: AUS 2; AUS 6; AUS 11; US 3; US 4; US 6; US 10). Recognising this phenomenon for women, an Australian former vice-chancellor spoke passionately of the special needs of women due to their current gendered roles as carers:

> *And I think unless the realisation that you're dealing with a particularly unique, small group of women, under enormous pressure who will usually come into the job later, because of families… and women who don't have children will often have parents to look after and the men hardly ever look after their parents… until we get that realisation* (Interview: AUS 6: 20).

This comment is similar to Coonan (in Bowen 1998: 191) who believes that it is very important that women with children make it to the top, however, she qualifies this by saying that "…I am inclined to think that if you want to reach the absolute top of the tree, in whatever field you are in, whether you are in business … it means making some very cruel choices … One of the choices may be that you can't aim for the very top and also have the sort of family responsibilities and commitments that are going to distract you and take you away from that single-minded pursuit". Consequently, women have the extra burden of these gendered expectations (Interview: AUS 12), as well as the range of challenges that Marshall (1995b) identified as confronting them in their top management roles.

1.4   Conclusion and Acknowledgements

These "tips from the top" from highly successful university women, illustrate the complexities involved in gaining and maintaining leadership positions in universities. Intertwined with these helpful tips, is the recognition of the unrelenting, often exhausting, but ultimately highly rewarding work characterising life at the top. The willingness to undertake realistic assessments of their professional capabilities, coupled with the ability to sculpt these into a good organisational fit is apparent. This individual flexibility also stems from a sophisticated systemic and structural understanding of the myriad complexities involved in leading and managing dynamic organisations.

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