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**TechWomen Women of Influence**

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**-As Prepared for Delivery-**

Good morning Emerging Leaders, mentors, and all those who support TechWomen. I am honored and inspired to be with such a brilliant and talented group.

I was asked to discuss how to be a “woman of influence.” I don’t profess to have all the answers, but I do think that we women can learn from each other. We face many different challenges, but also many of the same.

First, what is influence?

Influence is the ability to affect the actions, decisions, opinions, or thinking of others. Ultimately, mastering the art of influence allows you to get things done.

As we all know, the power of influence is not automatically granted to you when you earn your diploma and begin work. It often takes years to develop the level of influence that creates change in an organization or bestows the credibility to persuade others to support your ideas. Gaining influence can be especially challenging to women in male-dominated fields, including STEM and public safety. Too often, men prefer to listen only to other men. And in some places, the preferred role of women is still to be seen, but not heard.

I can remember attending a meeting years ago to brief a senior official on a topic where *I* was the only expert in the room. But no matter what I said, he would not make eye contact with me, choosing instead to ask my male colleagues—none of whom knew the subject matter— questions instead of me.

And I can remember more recently when I went to a meeting across the country and brought along a man from my staff. One of the gentlemen we met thanked my male staff member for coming and for bringing along his “team.” This gentleman was referring to *me*.

I could give you more examples to illustrate how women are often underestimated – indeed, ignored—in the workplace, and how implicit biases affect us—but you get the point. Fortunately, these experiences, for me at least, have been the exception and not the rule. I’ve worked with many people—both men and women—who have believed in me and promoted me.

As you know, I work at the Federal Communications Commission, which is the government agency that regulates communications services in the United States. The FCC, as we call it, is structured by bureaus with different specialties. For example, there is a wireless telecommunications bureau, a wireline bureau, a media bureau for radio and television, and so on.

I am the chief of the FCC’s Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau. My team, which includes engineers, attorneys, and public safety professionals, promotes public safety through communications. For example, under my leadership we develop rules, and work through public-private partnerships, to promote reliable communications services. We work to ensure that if you call 911 during an emergency, your call goes through, and it transmits information about your location to help emergency responders find you. We work to support the industry’s restoration of communications services after disasters, including supporting the U.S. government’s response to many hurricanes in recent years.

Have any of you received an emergency alert on your mobile phone during your visit to the U.S.? These alerts warn the public about severe weather, missing children, and other dangerous situations. They used to appear only on TV and radio. Since 2012, these alerts have also been sent to wireless phones, and they have saved many lives. I’m fortunate to have led the team that wrote the rules to launch Wireless Emergency Alerts, and to currently lead the effort to continue improving this service.

Did any of you experience the recent electric power shutdowns while you were in California? Over the past several months, my team has been focusing more of its emergency response and preparedness efforts on wildfires and power shutdowns—specifically how they affect communications. In this and other efforts, we work closely with other government agencies and others in the FCC.

The FCC is run by five commissioners, one of whom is the Chairman. It is Chairman Pai who sets the agenda for the agency. And under his leadership, my bureau develops and recommends regulatory actions that the five commissioners vote on.

It is also Chairman Pai who appointed me to my current position almost three years ago. Before that, I served in many other roles at the FCC over 26 years. I guess you could say that I worked my way up the ranks. I am thankful to Chairman Pai for entrusting me with my position, and I am thankful to all those who mentored me along the way—most of whom were women.

Incidentally, I am not only the first woman to be chief of the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau but also, as an African American, the first person of color to do so. I’m guessing that for many of us here, we are or will be “firsts—whether it is the first woman to hold a certain position, or perhaps the first in our family to make a certain accomplishment.

In my case, I was the first in my immediate family to go to university, or college as we say here. My mother was a teacher’s assistant, and my father fixed traffic lights. While they were not college-educated, they were wise, hard-working, and supportive of me. Since I was 15 years old, I knew that I wanted to be a lawyer. I liked to talk and write, and I valued justice. Plus, I liked to argue my point of view. My parents thought, I might as well use my argument skills for good!

I was a shy and anxious teenager, but I was determined. I had to first graduate college, and then get accepted to a law school. One of the challenges I faced was the number of people who discouraged me from going to law school.

Now let’s see a show of hands: how many of you were discouraged from studying in your chosen field?

I know thatZani Gichuki, an Emerging Leader of Kenya, was 14 years old when a friend asked her if she would rather be the wife of a doctor or engineer. Well Zani decided that *she* would become an engineer.

I know that Sitora Salaeva, an Emerging Leader of Uzbekistan, was told by a high school class supervisor that college was only for boys because *girls* should focus on getting married. Sitora has since earned a *master*’s degree in computer engineering.

And I know that Esra’a Alsanie, an Emerging Leader of Jordan, faced a setback when she didn’t get into the university of her choice because there wasn’t a spot. She managed to not only transfer to her chosen university within one year, but also founded the first American Society of Civil Engineers student chapter in Jordan.

In my case, when I was in college, older students and even career counselors told me that law school would be “too difficult.” But I thought about some of the lawyers I had met, and I figured: If they can do it, I can do it too. If it’s hard work, I’ll just work hard. As Mae Jemison, the first African-American woman in space said, “Never limit yourself because of others’ limited imagination.”

I was accepted to the University of Pittsburgh Law School. (By the way, is Gunesh Bakgalova, Emerging Leader from Turkmenistan, here? Greetings to a fellow University of Pittsburgh graduate. I hear that you even got your master’s degree in law. Good choice!)

Anyway, as I began my first semester, I was excited to learn about famous and important legal cases, how courts work, and how to think like a lawyer. I was still shy, but I was eager. When professors asked questions in class, I would raise my hand and answer.

But even if I gave many correct answers, I could not bear the shame when my response was wrong. What’s worse, I was teased by some of the young men in the class. Maybe they saw my face flush when I spoke. Or maybe they noticed the quiver in my voice. They seemed to enjoy my discomfort. I decided the safest approach was to stop speaking in class.

A few weeks after I went silent, one of my professors stopped me in the hallway. She said, “I noticed that you used to participate in classroom discussions. Now you don’t. Why?”

I said that some of my male classmates had teased me for speaking up in class, so I thought it would be better if I’d stop participating. Plus, I was afraid that I might get another answer wrong.

Well my professor gave me some tough love. Now I won’t recount what she had to say about the young men who teased me into silence. She used some language that I can’t repeat here. But she told me that I made valuable contributions to the class, and who cares if I sometimes gave a wrong answer. She also told me that if I didn’t start participating in her class, she would call on me anyway. So after that conversation, I began speaking up in class once again. I guess you could say that she was one of my first mentors.

After I graduated law school, I got my first job at the Federal Communications Commission.

Here, too, I was fortunate to have the encouragement of more experienced women professionals, who gave me advice on issues ranging from how to analyze legal cases, to the best places to get lunch and where I should open a bank account. My professional career began. But as I said before, and as you know, once you earn degrees and get a job, there is still the challenge of maximizing your influence.

So let’s get to some tips. I present these in no particular order, and they don’t apply to all situations. But this is what has worked for me.

**Have self-confidence:** This is critical if you want to have influence over others. How do you gain self-confidence? By waking up every morning and reminding yourself that you are what poet Maya Angelou called a “Phenomenal Woman.” Now sometimes that is not that easy. If you find it difficult to remind yourself how phenomenal and fabulous you are, that’s ok. Fake it. Hold your head up, maintain that smooth stride in your step, and keep the steady in your voice. That doesn’t mean you don’t deal with your feelings or be afraid to admit that you don’t know everything. But deal with those issues in private. Then pick yourself up and come out strong the next day. You always want to project an air of self-confidence when you are in public.

**Get Out of Your Comfort Zone**: A woman of influence takes risks. She knows that playing it safe all of the time will not make an impact. So aim high. Come up with the big ideas. Leave your fear of failure at home. And if you do fail—and we all do and will—then, as an American rhythm and blues band known as Earth Wind and Fire once sang, “Turn It Into Something Good.” View each failure or mistake as a chance to learn: an opportunity to get better and strong, and to do it differently next time.

**Be Prepared**: Always approach a meeting, discussion, or other new situation with preparedness. Do you research on the issues to be discussed, and learn as much as you can about the people with whom you will be dealing or meeting. Formulate your ideas beforehand. The more prepared you are for any given situation, the less ammunition those who would undermine you will have. And the more those in power will come to trust you. Remember, to build influence, trust is everything.

**Use Your Voice**: In law school, I had to learn to use my voice in class despite being teased. And in my career, I have had to use my voice, sometimes loudly, to express my ideas and to let others know that *I* know what I’m doing or talking about. Through the years, I have encountered men who tried to ignore me or who explained to *me* things that *I* actually knew better than them. (Or “mansplaining” as we call it here). How do you handle that? As I said earlier, be prepared and be self-confident.

**Cultivate Relationships for a Strong Network**: Find a mentor – someone who is willing to provide advice and perhaps advocate on your behalf. Throughout my career, I have been blessed with several mentors who advised me in areas such as the do’s and don’ts of being a woman in the workplace, how to strengthen my writing, how to build credibility within the organization, and when it is time to make my next career move. How do you find a mentor? Some organizations have official programs where they pair a mentor and mentee together. My best mentoring relationships came both from my outreach to the people that I admired and from others taking an interest in me.

Maintain contact with people that you meet at conferences, meetings, and other events. You never know when they may be able to provide good feedback on your ideas or serve as an advocate for either your ideas or your next career move.

Build allies within your organization. Get to know your senior leaders, peers, those who work for you, and those in other parts of your workplace. You never know when or how they might be able to help you get something done. Or how you might be able to help them. (And on that note, regardless of what stage you are in your career, you can be a mentor too; helping one another is a two-way street.)

Seek out others who you believe to be effective influencers. Even if these people are not destined to be your mentors, you can still learn from them how they built their influence.

**Empower Others:** Don’t just ask for help; help others to become empowered. For example, I have empowered several women in my organization by giving them increased responsibilities, coaching them, and providing opportunities for them to develop leadership skills.

**Never Stop Learning**: Continue to learn new things, develop new skills, and build on your strengths. You can do this by attending conferences, participating in training opportunities, talking with experts, reading books, and by just being curious and asking questions. In the last few years, I have focused my own continued professional development on leadership, new technologies, and U.S. security issues. My new knowledge and skills have helped me in my current position and will also serve me well when, at some point, I am no longer Bureau Chief.

**Maintain A Positive Attitude**: Always maintain a positive outlook. I have found that positive people often gain the most influence with others and, as a result, can make the biggest impact. People like being around and listening to people who have a “can do” spirit. Along those lines, surround yourself with positive people who are willing to support you.

Thank you again for inviting me to participate in today’s program. As an Emerging Leader selected for this competitive program, you’ve got what it takes. You are already accomplished, but there is much more that you will achieve in your field. You have the skills to address challenges at home and across the globe. Remember you are phenomenal, find your voice, be prepared, build relationships, empower others, never stop learning – and always maintain a positive outlook. I am confident that you will be women of great influence.

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