



Mistakes I Made at Work: 25 Influential Women Reflect on What They Got Out of Getting It Wrong

By Jessica Bacal

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In *Mistakes I Made at Work*, a Publishers Weekly Top 10 Business Book for Spring 2014, Jessica Bacal interviews twenty-five successful women about their toughest on-the-job moments. These innovators across a variety of fields – from the arts to finance to tech – reveal that they're more thoughtful, purposeful and assertive as leaders because they learned from their mistakes, not because they never made any. Interviewees include:

- Cheryl Strayed, bestselling author of *Wild*
- Anna Holmes, founding editor of Jezebel.com
- Kim Gordon, founding member of the band Sonic Youth
- Joanna Barsch, Director Emeritus of McKinsey & Company
- Carol Dweck, Stanford psychology professor
- Ruth Ozeki, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Tale for the Time Being*
- And many more

For readers of *Lean In* and *#Girlboss*, *Mistakes I Made for Work* is ideal for millennials just starting their careers, for women seeking to advance at work, or for anyone grappling with issues of perfectionism, and features fascinating and surprising anecdotes, as well as tips for readers.

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Editorial Review

Review

- One of "Ten New Books You Need to Read This Year" - *Fast Company*
- One of the "Top 10 Business and Economics Books for Spring" - *Publishers Weekly*
- "Bacal . . . hit pay dirt: stories filled with humor and humiliation, plus loads of hard-earned career management advice." - *ELLE Magazine*
- "crucial character boot camp . . . an important book because it shows that life is not a magazine spread." - *The Globe and Mail*
- "wide-ranging enough to avoid the stiflingly corporate perspective of many mainstream conversations about women in the workplace." - *New York Magazine*
- "shines in its recognition of the futility of the one-size-fits-all professional recommendation" - *Forbes Magazine*
- "generous display of guts and wisdom . . . the stories are pure gold." - *Bust Magazine*
- "will be of huge value to women today . . ." - *Verily Magazine*
- "the printed equivalent of a long, hot bath at the end of a terrible day at work." - *The New York Times*

About the Author

Jessica Bacal is the director of the Wurtele Center for Work & Life at Smith College. She lives with her husband and two children in Northampton, MA.

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PART I

Learning to Take Charge of

Your Own Narrative

After teaching elementary school and then freelancing to make money, I honestly couldn't believe my luck when I got a three-day-a-week job at Smith College on the Women's Narratives Project (WNP). And I was even more excited when I realized that it meant I sometimes got to sit around a table and talk with amazing women. WNP was the visionary brainchild of two deans, Maureen A. Mahoney and Jennifer L. Walters, who

wanted students to reflect on and clarify their values and goals. In order to do this, they posed some seemingly illicit questions—illicit, anyway, in an environment of high achievers: What’s the difference between what your family wants for you and what you want for yourself? What does success really mean to you? What would it be like to fail? Mahoney and Walters used the term “narratives” because it implies that the ways in which we understand and talk about ourselves are always evolving—it will likely be different in five or ten years than it is today. In addition, the word “narratives” alludes to multiplicity: “Each of us could tell several different stories about who we are right now,” they reminded students.

I soon found that my own story was changing. This part-time “day job,” one I’d initially accepted because I was a writer with a young child, was becoming something I cared about. I’d once thought that my career would feel gratifying only if I was publishing fiction, but I began to see this wasn’t true because I loved talking to and working with college students. I’d once imagined that to be a good mother, I’d need to work a reduced schedule so that my son wouldn’t have to be in “too much” child care. Now I was soaking up new research on women, work, and life, including a groundbreaking study that tracked one thousand infants over twenty years and showed that forty hours a week of quality child care doesn’t interfere with development. (One of its principal investigators, Kathleen McCartney, later became Smith’s president.) My son, I realized, was thriving at his loving preschool—even if I worked full-time, he’d be just fine. A new narrative was forming.

The ability to reflect on our own narratives is important for several reasons. It can help us to find a next step: in this section, Lani Guinier discusses coming to see that climbing the ladder from law clerk to lawyer to judge just wasn’t for her and that she was happy to leave a prestigious job as a “referee” to work at the less prestigious, but more rewarding, NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. Reflecting on our own narratives can also help us to advocate for ourselves in difficult situations: Reshma Saujani talks about the importance of becoming comfortable with sharing the fact that she’d taken out heavy loans for graduate school; this comfort allowed her to frame and share the story of her career leading up to a run for political office. Finally, understanding our own narratives can help us to make choices every day: Cheryl Strayed talks about the “paralyzing” nature of a writing task that just felt wrong, and the realization that she would need to be engaged in an authentic way with any assignment.

Even if we never put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard), we are continually writing and rewriting our own life narratives. They help us to understand who we are now and where we are going. And they are always evolving.

LAUREL TOUBY

“I rejected the very idea of office politics. I felt it was a waste of time. It just pissed me off. Why do I need to go over there to get to here? It’s like, Here’s what I want. Here’s what you want. Let’s get this done.”

“Don’t be nervous” is what Laurel Touby says when we sit down in a Manhattan Starbucks and she hears that she’s my first interview for this book. She checks that my tape recorder is on; she moves it toward her to pick up her voice and leans in close. In photos, you’ll often see Laurel Touby in the bright feather boa that she used to wear at her famous parties. She is striking looking, and when she speaks publicly, she’s direct in a way that can be disarming. I’d anticipated feeling intimidated by sitting down with her, but that’s not the way it actually felt at all. There’s a generosity about Touby, an openness that put me completely at ease.

Laurel Touby founded the most successful networking site for people in the publishing industry. It's called Mediabistro.com and includes an incredible trove of information, including instructions on how to "pitch" to specific print and online magazines, courses that you can take online, job listings, and much more. It all began in 1994 with a party she and a friend threw in order to meet other people in journalism and to feel less isolated in their lives as freelancers working from home. The parties became increasingly popular and spawned an e-mail newsletter (this was back in the early days of e-mail usage) and later a website—which became Mediabistro.com. In 2007, Touby sold the site for \$23 million, and she now spends her time supporting other entrepreneurial ventures in a variety of ways.

Lessons I've Learned

Some work environments are a better fit than others.

My grandfather paid for my education, and that was my big break. It enabled me to pursue a career of my choosing without having debt hanging over me. But he also told me that I had to do something lucrative. "Work for a company that's going to pay you well and take care of you," he said. That was the mentality back then: companies take care of you. And I bought into it.

After college, I moved to New York City, where I literally knew only one person. Without the support of family and friends, I was anxious all the time. Even when I landed a job as a media planner for Young & Rubicam (at the time, the largest ad agency in the world) I felt as if I was holding on to a rock wall, just hanging on for dear life—which made it all the more upsetting when I was nearly fired.

I thought I was doing quite well at work, picking everything up. I was staying late and coming in on weekends; I was accomplishing all that was required of me, and like many women, I thought "my job" was only my performance. What I didn't realize was that I was also being judged by how I came across socially, even during downtimes. At the watercooler or over lunch, I'd been acting fun, casual, speaking my mind, cracking jokes—I wasn't shying away from being my true, somewhat edgy and irreverent self.

After about a month, my supervisor called me into her office and gestured to the chair across from her desk. I sat down, thinking I was going to be commended for a job well done. Instead, her face grave, she said, "Laurel, we're going to have to put you 'on watch.'"

"What do you mean, 'on watch'?" I asked.

She replied that they had a system there for monitoring employee behavior. People on watch were not fired immediately, but they were given a warning, which gave them time to try to improve and allowed supervisors to continue to assess them.

This took me completely by surprise. My brain hung on one final-sounding word. "Fired?" I asked, tears rolling down my face. "Why?" I had been so proud of myself and was just blindsided by this news. "What is wrong with me that I didn't see this?" I wondered.

She went on to say that the conversation wasn't about my work at all, but that several people had reported to her that I was "mean." I guffawed through my tears. "Mean?" I asked incredulously. "What did I say that was mean?" She repeated back to me a few of the "mean" statements I had made. I explained to her that those had been lame little jokes I blurted out while standing in line at the copier or fixing my lipstick at the mirror in the bathroom. Having never experienced a professional environment, I was awkwardly trying to connect with my colleagues.

The consternation lifted from her face like a veil. She gave me a strange look and said, “You know, you don’t seem mean. Look at you. Unless those are alligator tears, you seem very genuine and sweet. I think I know what’s going on here. It could be a culture thing. Maybe you just don’t fit in culturally and people don’t understand your humor.” But, I stammered, how could they not “understand” my humor? Isn’t all humor pretty much the same? She pointed out that many of my colleagues were from the South or the Midwest. I was from an East Coast city— Miami, Florida. Perhaps my humor was a bit too ironic or cutting. “Why don’t you stop making jokes,” she suggested, “and let’s meet again in a week’s time?”

I had my doubts. I wondered how I could have been so off base in my very first job, when the stakes were so high. If I were fired, who else would hire me? I’d have to return to Miami to work for my grandfather’s construction company. (He was actually eager for that, but to me it was the very definition of failure because it would mean I wasn’t making it on my own.) Would I be able to switch off the joke making and present a “false face” to the world?

My supervisor opened up to me then. She explained that she understood all too well; in fact, she’d had to learn how to alter her personality when she began working for Y&R. “I’ve done it and you can do it, too,” she said assuredly, explaining that she’d been the first black woman to be promoted from the secretarial pool to manager and then senior manager. “We’re going to have to just prune you around the edges,” she told me, with a bit too much glee. “You’re a wild tree and we’re going to make you into one of those well-manicured bushes.” She was using the first two fingers on both hands to make scissoring motions high above her head, as if clipping away at a bush that had grown there.

“A topiary,” I said. I’ll never forget that image of her clipping my personality with her scissors—or my sudden realization that what she was really saying was that at the top of her game, she still couldn’t be herself.

But I’m competitive and had to prove that I could fit in in corporate America. I stopped acting playful or making jokes, and I began to pay attention to every word that came out of my mouth, which meant I was straight and boring all the time. I had work “friends,” but I tucked my real personality away when I was with them. Before the week was up, my supervisor called me in and told me that the watch had been lifted and that everything would be fine as long as I didn’t joke anymore.

There’s a set of corporate behaviors—ways of speaking, of addressing people, of responding to things—an entire protocol and vocabulary that I just forced myself to learn. While I eventually mastered these things, I began to wonder if working for a large, highly corporate entity might not be for me.

Even the best job is never a sure thing.

By the early 1990s, I decided that I had proven myself—I’d “done” corporate America. Looking for something more creative, I applied for a job at Working Woman, a magazine that was one of the first for women looking to build their careers. The editor in chief offered me the job, warning that I’d have to take a huge pay cut, but I was willing to do anything to escape my situation, including watching my salary drop from a meager twenty-two thousand dollars to an even more paltry sixteen thousand. Without hesitation I accepted, overjoyed to be working for a magazine I respected.

From the moment I stepped foot in the office, I felt like I was home. The place was all about nurturing its employees so that they could grow. “I could be here forever,” I thought. My bosses were supportive and allowed me to take on increasingly ambitious projects, but at the same time there was a feeling of “put in your dues and wait, and you’ll be rewarded.” So I did. At first, I wrote the captions beneath photos, and then

they let me write content for the little boxes that accompanied stories, then the sidebars, and finally, an actual article. I learned to edit and write headlines over the first three years that I worked there, and I was promoted and then promoted again, reaping the rewards of my hard work.

But then a new boss came in, and instead of kowtowing to her, I stayed loyal to the leader who had been pushed out— meaning, I didn't play politics.

We all had to apply for our jobs again, which included answering a survey so the new editor in chief could get to know us. One of the questions was “What are your favorite magazines?” A colleague told me, “I'm going to write that Vanity Fair is my favorite mag. I've read up on this editor, and I know she admires it.” I thought this was ridiculous, since Working Woman was about women and their careers, and much of Vanity Fair is about pop culture and fashion and celebrities. I understood that the new editor in chief supposedly wanted to make Working Woman sexier, but I didn't agree with that. I read Inc. magazine, which is aimed at growing companies and is about the best ways to do business, and I thought our magazine should aspire to be like that. I went with my gut almost as an act of defiance—a show of loyalty to the previous editor. Somehow I hadn't remembered the lesson from my first job, which is that it's not always wise to place your personal authenticity ahead of the hive mind. To be honest, it's stupid if you want to survive in a big corporation.

Still, in my wildest dreams I didn't think I could get fired for expressing my opinion. I put stock in the virtue of hard work: if you had a high-performing employee, you kept her. But doing a good job—and essentially playing the role of a good girl—doesn't necessarily lead to security.

This was the experience that taught me that wherever you go, whatever job you take, you always want to be working on boosting your career skills, not in the hopes that you'll get a reward from your current company or boss—because they might not be there one day. Instead, you almost need to see yourself as a freelancer, building skills and capabilities to take with you to the next job and the next job and the next job. That's your toolkit, and you should be adding to it all the time, because you can't rely on a company to take care of you and nurture you and bring you up in the world the way they used to back in my grandfather's time.

I was horrified to learn that the new editor of Working Woman had intentions to wholesale fire half the staff. She didn't care about us and all that we had worked for. She didn't care about all that I had accomplished. It wasn't school, it was business, and she wanted her team in there. She left me a message at home saying, “Call me back.” I was having knee surgery, and when I listened to my answering machine I was a little bit outraged—not only did she not realize that I was in the hospital, but she was planning to fire me over the phone!

I'd been at Working Woman for three years on the Monday that I hobbled into the office, pretending I'd never gotten the phone message. I was scared to go in there on my crutches and face her and the pain and fear. Still, I pushed myself to be strategic, and I sat down and negotiated a deal to write for the magazine, which I don't know if she would have been willing to give me over the phone. Then I was on the streets, but at least I had a contract.

Even in your own business, you still have to cope with office politics because you're managing people.

I began networking again. I had done a good job of staying in touch with connections in publishing, and a colleague at Glamour said that there was an opening for a business editor. I was hired to work from home, on contract, turning in assignments once a month. Now there was no chance of my going into an office, being myself, and shaking things up!

During those years of working without colleagues, I began hosting cocktail parties because I was lonely and wanted to meet people. I micromanaged the parties, making sure everything was right. The music couldn't be too loud; the space couldn't be too dark. I forced the guests to introduce themselves to each other, moving them around in the room. Some would get annoyed, and others would relax and just go with it.

People were just starting to use e-mail at that time, and I began e-mailing the guests to invite them. When I decided to launch a website, the Internet felt pretty much brand-new. The site was going to be a way for people who went to the parties to learn about job openings and to connect online. I soon found that I was good at coming up with a vision to make it grow. For example, we began saying to people who posted jobs that they should send us one hundred dollars if it was helping them find employees. If it wasn't, then they shouldn't send anything. Thousands of dollars' worth of checks started coming in. We also offered online classes for people in publishing, which became popular and made a lot of money. In 2000, I was able to raise a slug of capital, five hundred thousand dollars, to expand the company.

With the cash, I began to assemble my own team. I hired six young people, just out of college. They were doing what I wanted—more or less—and I was top dog. One day, one of them came into my office. He knew me well, because he'd been my first intern. He said, "You're upsetting people and we're all ready to quit."

Holy shit, I thought. It was all happening again. I'm not fit for an office environment—even my own office!

He said, "When you are upset with someone—or about something—you can't show your anger and disappointment. You need to control yourself more."

I thought, "Great, I can't do anything." I felt like I shouldn't be around people: keep Laurel away from people! I apologized to everybody and admitted that I was learning how to be a manager. And after, I tried to be gentler. I worked on the phrasing of things, so instead of saying, "I don't think this is going to work; can you fix this, this, and this?" or "That press release needs to sound more alive," I would say, "This part is great, but let's fix that so it sounds more alive." Same message but sugarcoated.

We did have some people quit, but we had a core group of five who stayed with me from day one all the way to the moment we sold the company and even after the sale. Eventually the company became so successful that I was able to hire someone to manage my staff; I remained the outward-facing person who dealt with the press and with customers. And years later, those first employees came to me and said, "You really cared about my career development and about teaching me, even though at the time I didn't understand." That was gratifying.

To create a business, you have to be assertive. You have to be fast. You can't waste time. You don't have time, so you act first and worry about it later. In the corporate environment, risk is not encouraged. It's worry first, and maybe act later, maybe not . . . maybe never get there. Being an entrepreneur, implementing my own vision and subsequently working with other small businesses to help implement theirs, is much better suited to my personality than being employed by a big company. Even though my grandfather thought that a long-term job would offer me security, he couldn't imagine how the world would evolve—because companies just don't provide that to people anymore. That's why it's important these days to build the capacity to contribute within your field and also to pursue work environments that feel like the right fit for you.

LAUREL TOUBY' S TIPS

Know yourself, and don't try to be someone you're not. Don't try to shove down your personality if you

have too much personality for the corporate environment. Users Review **From reader reviews:**

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