



# WORLD OF WORKING WOMEN

## How failure and imagination kicked off a journey

When J. K. Rowling, author of the phenomenally successful Harry Potter series, had been out of college for seven years, she found herself at a dark juncture in her life. At that time, she says, she had failed in life on an epic scale. "An exceptionally short-lived marriage had imploded. I was jobless, a lone parent, and as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain without being homeless."

In short, Rowling says she was the biggest failure she knew. And while she says there is nothing ennobling about being poor, she believes she reaped benefits from her failures. Failure, she says, stripped away all the inessential aspects of her life. She stopped pretending to be anything other than herself, and it was then that she began to earnestly pursue the only work that mattered to her. It was not, she says, the fairy-tale transformation to success so often written about her in the media.

Learning to imagine played an important role in Rowling's life, yet surprisingly it has nothing to do with the colorful world of Harry Potter she created. Instead, she says, she learned to

imagine when she worked for Amnesty International in her 20s. There, she was exposed to people and people's stories from all over the world that were filled with terrible realities that she herself had never experienced; she looked at pictures of people who had disappeared without a trace, read testimonies from people who were tortured, and saw pictures of their injuries. She learned how evil human beings could be to their own kind.

Though seeing this dark side was anything but inspiring, Rowling says she also saw what was good about people while working for Amnesty. People who themselves had never suffered these atrocities organized to help people who had, because they could *imagine* what it was like to be surrounded by malevolence. Choosing to exercise your imagination for the good of others was a humbling experience, she said. Choosing to raise your voice for those who cannot do it for themselves can transform lives in ways we often cannot predict.

Source: *First Draft*, January 2009,  
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## **P.S. Postscript**

**GOOD IMPRESSIONS ARE AT HAND.** Don't discount the importance of a solid handshake. Research from the University of Alabama backs up the conventional wisdom that people with firm handshakes make a better first impression. *Contrast:* Women with a solid grip and men with a gentler handshake were considered more open.

**OVERCOME THE BOSS'S INDECISION.** If you can't get your boss to move on a decision or other action, spell out the consequences. *Example:* The deal that would save \$50 on that new printer expires next week.

**CREATE YOUR SUPPORT TEAM.** If your office doesn't have a formal system of cross-training workers, find your own buddy. Work with a colleague to share responsibilities when needed.

**WRITE YOUR OWN FAQ.** Maintaining a list of frequently asked questions and the correct response will make it easier for those who cover for you when you're gone.

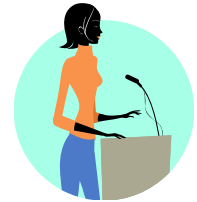
**MAKE THEN-AND-NOW STATEMENTS** to prove your talents. "Two years ago, it took three of us a week to turn around the sales report; now it only takes two of us two days." The facts speak for themselves—a worthwhile thing to remember, especially if you are reluctant to toot your own horn.

Source: *Administrative Professional*,  
National Institute of Business Management

## **'Distill' your next speech**

Speech coaches advise you to organize your speech around the Three T's:

- Tell them what you intend to say.
- Then tell them.
- Then tell them what you just said.



This means distilling the essence of your speech. But how do you package a 15-minute speech into a few sentences?

Listen to your speech, and then write a brief story about it. This will force you to compress a 15-minute speech into a few paragraphs. While writing, you'll also discover whether your speech has any point at all.

Adapted from Aram Bakshian, Jr., *American Speaker*,  
in *Leadership Strategies*

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When you reach for the stars you may not quite get one, but you won't come up with a handful of mud either.



Leo Burnett (1891-1971)  
Advertising executive