

Samantha Perry on Gail Collins

Gail Collins was the first female editor-in-chief of the New York Times op-ed section and is the author of four books on politics and the changing role of women in society. Throughout her life, she has achieved demonstrable four-way wins through: being “real” in aligning her actions with her passions, being “whole” by considering and respecting her mother, husband and children, and being innovative in developing creative career paths that have led to impressive accomplishments both in and outside of her work domain.

Biography

Though always dreaming of becoming a columnist, Collins’ career began as a reporter. After moving to Connecticut with her husband, she took her first full time job as a reporter covering the state legislature. When the newspaper shut down, Gail wanted to continue reporting on state politics. So, in 1972 she founded the “Connecticut State News Bureau” (CSNB): her own news service covering state politics for multiple local newspapers. She built up this business for eight years before selling it. At the time it was sold, it supplied 30 different newspapers and was the largest news service of its kind throughout the nation.

She then worked for several different New York newspapers, during which time she successfully transitioned from reporter to columnist. In 1995 Gail was offered a column on New York City at the New York Times (NYT). After six years as a columnist, she became the first woman editor-in-chief of the op-ed section of the NYT. In 2007, she stepped down from this position and convinced the NYT to grant her a leave of absence so that she could spend more time with her children and finish her latest book. The book, titled *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to Present*, was published in 2009 and has been an enormous success. Gail has since returned to the NYT and now writes a semi-weekly op-ed column.

Embodying Total Leadership: Integrating different parts of life for mutual gain

Collins has taken a number of actions that have successfully integrated different domains in her life for mutual gain. First, choosing to pursue a career in journalism was a four-way win for Collins. Not only did this choice result in a highly successful career, but it also fulfilled a deep passion that she had felt for writing from a young age. Additionally, her mother had wanted to be a journalist herself but had not gotten an opportunity to do so. As Collins wrote, “Whenever I did something that involved writing [growing up], it was really special for my mother.” Since Collins’ mother is one of her key stakeholders, pursuing a profession in journalism gave her a substantial satisfaction in the family domain as she was fulfilling one of her mother’s hopes. Within the community domain, being a journalist enabled Collins to educate her readers and raise awareness within her community around important issues, which meant a lot to her.

Another successful four-way win for Collins was her decision to leave her hard-earned position as editor-in-chief of the NYT’s in order to have more time to spend with her children and to work on her latest book (“*When Everything Changed*,” which chronicles how the role of women in society has developed since the 1960s). While some may have seen this decision as detrimental to her career, it actually ended up benefiting not only her family life, but also her career, community and self domains in ways that she may not have experienced had she stayed in the editor position. “*When Everything Changed*” was a wild success and served to build a name for her that bridges an even broader set of networks than before. Furthermore, she interviewed dozens of women across generations during the research phase of the book, which led her to feel an even stronger connection to the community of women who went before her in paving a path for women in the workforce. On a personal level, she treasured the time she spent at home, spoke about feeling more satisfied with her fulfillment of her role as mother and wife, and described the process of writing this book as a “treat.” Collins’ influence on society has grown since writing this book as she has become even more vocal around a number of social issues, including the fact that inequality has shifted from gender-based to class-based, and as she

describes, “we’ve leapt into a world where half the labor force is female, yet we have not dealt with questions of who takes care of the kids when both parents work.”

Lessons learned and their application

One of the key lessons from Collins’ life is that the foundation for lasting four-way wins is knowing what is important to you and pursuing it relentlessly. As Collins’ career path demonstrates, building upon this foundation requires innovative solutions to challenges and conflicts that arise between the different domains. At least twice in her life Collins created an innovative line of work that enabled her to achieve multi-domain gains: first by founding CSNB, which empowered her to pursue her passion for reporting on state politics while at the same time staying close to her husband, followed by her stay-at-home mom/author role discussed above. Another key learning embedded in Collins story is the importance of having the courage to ask for flexibility at work in order to achieve multi-domain wins. Had Collins not asked for a leave of absence from the NYT, she may never have known that the kind of four-way win that she experienced while writing her book from home was possible.

These lessons have direct application to my life, particularly as I prepare to step into a position at McKinsey. I know that I am passionate about international development, and as a result of learning Collins’ story I think I can and should push harder to get staffed on economic development projects there. This would enable me to pursue my career passion and have a greater influence on my community while at McKinsey. Once I have children, I will surely face a similar situation in which I will need to have the courage to ask for a more flexible work situation so that I can manage both work and raising kids.