

Marilyn: A Woman In Charge

Reviewed by
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Women represent more than 60% of the public relations workforce, but only hold 20% of leadership positions in the field (Shah, 2019). Recent social movements such as #MeToo have forced the public relations industry, as well as others, to take a long hard look at gender inequities. Part of the public relations' reckoning has included chronicling the oft overlooked roles that women played in the history and evolution of the industry. In *Marilyn: A Woman in Charge*, Dick Martin, former chief communications officer for AT&T, provides a riveting account of Marilyn Laurie's rise from a volunteer grassroots organizer for Earth Day to being the first woman to join the executive committee of a Fortune 10 company as AT&T's chief communications officer. The book follows Laurie's journey from being a "little Jewish girl from the Bronx" to a trusted and respected advisor for one of America's greatest companies.

Structure and Organization

Martin uses his own experience as Laurie's colleague, archival data and interviews with family, friends and colleagues to provide a firsthand account of Laurie's trailblazing career and a rare insider's view of public relations' role in a large corporation. The book begins by describing Laurie's childhood as a second-generation immigrant and a

child determined to chart her own course. The first chapter is dedicated to Laurie's upbringing, education and young adulthood; while the remaining chapters highlight her career trajectory.

Laurie's first public relations purview occurred when she volunteered to help plan and publicize a national day to promote conservation. Laurie's tenacity and intellect helped the grassroots organization launch the first Earth Day and successfully put conservation on the public agenda. Little did she know that her involvement would afford her the opportunity to promote conservation for one of the country's largest employers. Laurie joined AT&T in its ninety-fourth year, when it still handled 90% of telephone calls in the U.S. What began as a position to encourage employees to recycle, turned into a 25-year tenure. Each proceeding chapter provides a third-person account of Laurie's life and career intertwined with quotes from her office files, speeches, papers, and oral histories she recorded.

The story of Laurie's rise from rank-and-file employee to executive provides a vivid image of public relations' role in corporate America as well as the treacherous terrain of maintaining a corporate image and reputation. Laurie's unconventional path from a public relations technician to key decision maker highlights the various roles public relations professionals can play within organizations. The book shares the good, bad, and ugly of Laurie's experiences at AT&T. The candid recounts are both interesting and insightful; and are presented in a way that appeals to aspiring public relations pros as well as those who are in the trenches now.

Contributions to Public Relations Education

Laurie's story is one of triumph and defeat, thus providing a realistic depiction of life as a resilient professional and leader. The book provides real world examples of public relations' multi-faceted functions, including community relations, media relations, crisis management, investor relations, internal communication, development,

change management, executive communication, strategic planning and succession planning to name a few. It also shows the roles public relations professionals can play such as, advisor, boundary spanner and serving as companies' "peripheral vision." According to Laurie, "The purpose of public relations is to bring the policies and practices of an institution into harmony with the needs and expectations of the public. Sometimes that means persuading the public that the institution is doing the right thing; sometimes it means persuading the institution to change its behavior" (Martin, 2020, 304).

Laurie's story also demonstrates higher-level insight into developing an organizational mission, vision and goals; differentiating the organization; interacting with the dominant coalition; knowing your organization's business; demonstrating business acumen and professional expertise; obtaining a "seat at the table;" remaining vigilant and willing to challenge ideas and policy; facilitating organizational and crisis learning, and ensuring the organization is following the values it espouses. Laurie's story also has an underlying theme that demonstrates how being open to opportunities and being courageous enough to go into uncharted territory can greatly impact one's career trajectory.

This book is a great resource for public relations students and pros alike. The book can supplement an introductory public relations text by providing examples of public relations roles in various contexts. It can also be used in a public relations administration or public relations management class to explore the nuances and intricacies of serving in leadership roles within a corporation. The book also delves into the various stages of crisis management, which also would make it appropriate for a crisis management class. The book could also be used in a seminar class to help students learn about the innerworkings of corporations and the public relations function. Novice and seasoned public relations professionals and public relations educators can also benefit from the

account of the consummate public relations professional.

The book also provides an example of a leader exiting a role on their own terms, and finding new purpose after. The book concludes with Laurie's last months of life; and her introspection and reflection as she reconciled her own mortality. While this recount was sad, it also serves as inspiration and sage advice for readers to ponder. Overall, I think *Marilyn: A Woman in Charge*, could greatly contribute to any public relations curriculum because of the insight it provides.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The major strength of this book is Laurie's captivating story of rising through the ranks of a Fortune 10 company and defying the odds by becoming an executive. Martin shares Laurie's story in vivid detail; incorporating her thoughts, feelings, ideals and beliefs throughout. These inclusions allow readers to get an insider's view and connect with Laurie as if she was recounting her own story. While the book does a wonderful job chronicling Laurie's career and her ascent to break many glass ceilings, the book does not discuss her life outside of work beyond mentioning her spouse and children seldomly. As readers follow Laurie's career, they likely would wonder if Laurie's ambition took a toll on her personally, but this is not addressed until the book's conclusion. At first Martin seems remiss to omit this integral perspective; however he dedicates an entire chapter to discuss the implications of gender stereotypes and differing perceptions of women's roles. He also uses this opportunity to share Laurie's own reflections regarding how her career impacted her roles as wife and mother. By this point in the book, readers are also likely to realize that Martin is remaining true to Laurie's character and outlook by addressing these issues separately from her career trajectory. The chapter also provides a candid outlook on the challenges of working mothers and the current practices regarding support services for them.

I truly enjoyed reading this book and learning about one of public relations' trailblazers. I am confident that students would enjoy reading Laurie's story and could make connections with the book, course content and their career aspirations. I plan to use this book as a companion piece in my Principles of Public Relations course. If you are interested in reading an excerpt from the book, visit the PRMuseum Press website. Martin also developed a discussion guide that provides questions and assignments for each book chapter. The guide is free and available for download on the PRMuseum Press website.

References

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