

In this chapter from “How Remarkable Women Lead,” Dame Stella Rimington, the first woman director of MI-5, Britain’s domestic intelligence agency, talks about her career and the strengths of character that helped her reach the top. Her story is particularly relevant to Centered Leadership’s fourth component—engaging, or crossing the line from being a person to whom things happen to being a person who makes things happen.

Dame Stella started at MI-5 in the 1960s and was named director in 1991, after facing down everything from the Pan Am Flight 103 bombing over Lockerbie to a burglary while her daughters were home alone. Since she stepped down in April of 1996, Dame Stella has become an acclaimed writer and novelist. Among her spy novels, her favorite so far is “Dead Line,” the story of a Middle Eastern peace conference under threat. Look for her next one, “Present Danger,” this October in the U.K.

Although Dame Stella was succeeded by a man, MI-5 appointed Eliza Manningham-Buller right after—another remarkable woman leader. And the list keeps growing.

--Joanna Barsh

## **Crossing the Line**

I was in high school when one in twenty-seven girls played sports, and I wanted to be on the tennis team. There was only a boy’s tennis team, so I told the coach I wanted to play. I thought he was going to have a heart attack, but he said, “If you want to play, I’ll let you try out.” I had to play against a guy I really liked. Sure enough, I won and the coach signed me on. Now, if I didn’t make the team, would I have come back? There’s no doubt I would have.

*Donna Orender, President, Women’s National Basketball Association*

Engaging is where it all comes together—when you choose to cross an invisible line from being a person to whom things happen to becoming a person who makes things happen. It literally means breaking the bounds that circumscribe your career and your life. Making the commitment to do so is one of the best things you will ever do for yourself. It takes courage. It takes a willingness to fight for what you want, even though you may, in fact, be fighting your own resistance and fear. It releases unbelievable energy.

Let's make it actionable. Engaging means: Standing up to be counted, owning your development, choosing to act on opportunities that carry risk, and facing your deep-seated fears. Now that's a tall order, and once you commit, there's no going back.

Among the women leaders we know whose lives changed when they seized the opportunity to cross the line is Dame Stella Rimington, Great Britain's first female Director General of Security Services, better known as MI-5. Coming of age in the 1960s, Stella entered a professional world that was not welcoming to women. Her first job was as an archivist, organizing parish and village documents for historians to use.

When she got married and her husband accepted a post in India, she closed that door, only to open another. "I gave up work altogether to go with my husband to be a diplomat's wife," she recalls. "But quite by chance, I got recruited to join MI-5 at a cocktail party. I joined at the height of the Cold War, and India was at the forefront really—East met West in India. There were spies all over the place, and you had this real sense that you were at the heart of a mysterious world. So I joined, thinking, 'Gosh, this is fun'—a kind of James Bond-y sort of attitude, I suppose."

As it turned out, Stella was rather good at this work. In her twenty-seven years with the agency, she was among the first women to advance from clerk to analyst, into the field and on to supervisory roles, until she reached the top. "Once you've done something, people's preconceived ideas about you tend to change," she points out. "Instead of thinking, 'She's a woman, she can't do that,' they think, 'Hang on, she's just done that. Maybe we can have her doing this.'"

## **Standing Tall**

Despite being an anxious child growing up in wartime Britain, Stella found her voice early. "I had a determination to do something. I wanted a life with excitement. People used to ask me, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' I told them, 'I want to be an airline pilot.' Now, women couldn't be airline pilots in those days, but I thought, 'That sounds like an exciting job, and I want to do it.'"

Engaging starts with finding your voice—literally. That's easy for some women to do, but for many, speaking up is daunting. But to lead you must be heard. You must have presence. You must put yourself out there; it let's people see how you think, how you interact under pressure. Some tough love for you: Start working on this today. The longer you wait, the harder it gets to speak up—and the easier it becomes for people to overlook you.

A senior woman in investing told us how she learned to speak up. “Every Monday, we had a senior management meeting. In the beginning, I just listened. I learned from the guys because they were all there. After a while I started to speak up. You don’t want to say something stupid, but you did the work, so you’ve got to talk about it!” What was her secret? Practice. She started by relaying analyses she had done. She observed her role models and learned from them. And over time, people looked to her for her opinion, too.

Take it step by step, as Stella did. Returning to England in the 1970s, Stella continued to work after her maternity leaves, but at a desk job. “The theory was that women could deal with the papers and some intelligence analysis,” she says. “That is very important, but it’s not the ‘sharp end’ intelligence work. It’s not being out in the street, recruiting the human sources and running them. I would describe it as being in a glass box, hemmed in on all sides.”

So Stella and some female colleagues spoke up. “We women—and there were quite a few of us by then—sort of ganged up and said, ‘Why is it that we have a completely different career from men who are exactly like us?’ For the first time, the powers that be started to scratch their heads because they had to find an answer. Their situation was exacerbated by the fact that sex-discrimination legislation was just coming in.” Stella recalls, “In the end, they decided that they would have to promote a few women. Of course, the women who did get those jobs did them quite well. Now women are doing very well in even the most dangerous areas.”

You can learn to speak up for what you want, too. It takes knowing what you want. Surprisingly, the secret to success is usually just asking. Our own preconceived notions may be limiting your definition of what’s possible. Afraid of rejection, some don’t ask. Sometimes we’re afraid we’re not ready. Maybe some of us are afraid to win. But by not speaking up, no one knows what you want. What’s worse, they assume you aren’t interested or maybe not even qualified. So dream a little, and then find your voice.

In Stella’s case, asking got her foot in the door, but she still had to prove that she could do a “man’s job” in the field. Her field test, the standard for male agents, was to walk into a pub, approach any stranger, and learn as much as she could. Then she was to keep her cool when a superior officer entered and blew her cover story. “It was a completely unsuitable exercise for somebody like me, because the pub they chose was a sleazy place near Victoria Station, full of men, and not particularly nice ones,” Stella recalls with a laugh. “They were leaning on the bar drinking pints in their grimy raincoats. I started to chat up a guy who was obviously surprised and thought my profession was something else!” By the time the officer entered the pub, Stella was relieved, “I felt very awkward, actually, in those

circumstances and began to wonder if this was the kind of job I really wanted to do after all.”

Finding your voice is not only about talking. Learning to speak up and refining your message is a form of problem-solving, and as with all problem-solving activities, preparation is important. Take time to do your research and go over what you want to convey. Be specific. You’re more likely to succeed if you think through all the scenarios, visualizing what could happen in the discussion and plan how you will overcome any resistance.

## **It’s Your Future**

There’s nothing like feeling that you are in control to give you the courage to speak up, place yourself in the path of opportunities, and take the risks head-on. When you feel in control, your commitment and energy skyrocket. Better yet, you are less likely to be roiled by negative feedback or sidelined by attacks.

Ownership is also the precursor to success, so don’t wait to be chosen. Find ways to create new opportunities. How? Stella had a really simple rule that kept her on the path: “I don’t like working for people who I think are less competent than I am,” she explains. “That’s probably driven me on, because even though I was never ambitious to get to the top, I always felt I wanted to do the next job up because I could see that it wasn’t being done as well as I thought I could do it.” That’s what taking ownership is all about.

After two years as director of counterespionage, Stella was offered an opportunity in counterterrorism. “I think the boss had some hesitation in asking me because he knew that it was not my area of expertise,” she says. “But I had absolutely no hesitation in saying, ‘Yes, I’d love to do it.’ If somebody offers me something new and interesting, then that’s what I want to do. I don’t think the risk of failure occurred to me. I suppose I thought, ‘if somebody’s asking me to do it—they know me, they know the job—if they think I can do it, well I’m sure I can.’ Obviously in the dark moments of the night you think, ‘Gosh, what have I taken on here?’ But it would never have occurred to me to say, ‘No, I don’t think I can do this.’”

In the late 1980s, MI-5 was battling the Irish Republican Army, which was using terrorist tactics to push the British out of Northern Ireland. The campaign included bombings in London and attacks on British soldiers in Germany. The job became even more challenging, Stella recalls. “About three days after I was appointed, Pan Am 103 was brought down by a bomb over Lockerbie in Scotland. I had no experience of working in counterterrorism. One of the most difficult things

I had to address at that time was ‘What actually is my job now?’ I figured out that it was to make sure those in the field had the skills and the resources they needed and that the operations had been properly thought through. If anything went wrong, it was my job to take the flak and deal with government ministers and the prime minister. I found it quite alarming at the outset, but also extremely stimulating and very satisfying when things went right.”

Clearly, Stella is a role model, even if you don’t aspire to be a secret agent yourself. Consider the next milestone in your career. Do you know what you have to do to achieve it? Do you believe that achieving it is in your control? What are you doing to reach that goal? If your answers are: ‘I don’t know,’ ‘I am being held back by him/her/them,’ ‘It’s not very likely,’ ‘There’s not much I can do to make this happen,’ we’ll offer you some tactics to put all that hesitation behind you and engage the challenge head-on.

### **Risks Come with Opportunities**

Ultimately, as Stella’s story shows, engaging is about risk-taking and often fear hovers just underneath. Choosing to act on your aspiration is seldom middle-of-the-road safe. The women leaders we interviewed took it as part of the package. Some were unafraid; they were born with (or developed) the confidence and courage to dive in; others were more circumspect, using analytic problem-solving to assess risks, make a decision, and proceed.

It’s tough stuff. Stella reflects, “If everything is just too easy and too smooth, I don’t think you end up with the sort of steel and the backbone you need if you are going to take a top job.” When Stella was named head of MI-5, she took on an unprecedented personal risk: For the first time, the government disclosed who the director general would be. The British tabloids rushed to find out where she lived, and when they did, the family had to decamp in the middle of the night.

“That was the time when I felt most divided, because I still had my younger daughter at home,” Stella says. “She’d never told her friends what I did. And then people asked her, ‘Is that your mum? Fancy that.’ When we had to live covertly, we didn’t get mail at the house in our own name. My daughter had to work out which of her friends she could trust. That was the first traumatic moment.”

Let’s face it: Careers—and lives—are built on decisions that involve risk. Think of the alternative—staying on the track others expect you to take. That’s fine if it’s really the right thing for you, based on what you know about your strengths, what you enjoy doing, and what gives you meaning. But what if it’s not? That’s an even bigger risk. Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert, author of *Stumbling on*

*Happiness*, researched the unique ability of the human brain to imagine what might happen under certain circumstances and to visualize the future. We tend to overestimate our potential unhappiness in downside scenarios, and this keeps us from attempting new things. Gilbert found that people who made choices and who acknowledged risk felt happier even in that downside case. If you feel like the change you're contemplating is too big a risk, ask yourself what's the worst that can happen. Then do the "premortem" and figure out what you can do to manage it.

Stella is the living example of how clarity of vision and confidence in your own capabilities mitigate risk. One of the most effective ways to reduce risk is to build expertise in an arena of your choosing. When you start from a firm foundation of subject matter expertise and experience, the risk associated with stepping into a new role or assuming increased responsibility decreases.

And as Stella realized early on, women have one more natural advantage to help them reduce risks: collaborative decision-making. "One of the first things I realized when I became director general was that it's very important to have colleagues around you who are different from you and who are not scared of you—who will give you advice without fear or favor," Stella says. "I suppose I don't feel especially convinced that I know the right thing to do on my own. Too many people in businesses work on a command and control basis. The bosses think: 'I know what the answer is, and I know this is what we're going to do.'"

Stella believes that the best thing is people who bring you diverse points of view and yet still form a team. "You choose your colleagues—not 'yes men' but a team of people who realize the importance of moving forward and achieving some kind of consensus," she advises. "Lead that team in such a way that everybody feels they have the opportunity to give their point of view. Then everybody goes away from the meeting persuaded that the decision is the right one. That's a skill you have to learn."

Many things can hold you back from engaging—upbringing, habit, discomfort with confrontation, self-doubt—the list goes on. But choosing not to engage is like having a giant boulder in your path. Chances are the uneven playing field already makes your path challenging: you don't need more obstacles in your way.

And when you do engage, you'll feel a fire burning within you to seize the day. Go ahead, light that fire.