

Be Bold and Reach High

Interview with Sandra Stosz ¹

Servant | Leader | Author | Leadership Keynote Speaker | Leading with Character Blog
First woman Deputy Commandant for Mission Support, United States Coast Guard,
directing one of the Coast Guard's largest enterprises.
USA



Interviewed by Yasmina Khelifi

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Introduction to the interviewee

Admiral Sandy Stosz started out in the US Coast Guard as an ensign serving aboard polar icebreakers, conducting national security missions from the Arctic to the Antarctic. Her forty-year career was filled with leadership lessons gleaned while breaking ice and breaking glass as the first woman to command an icebreaker on the Great Lakes and to lead a US armed forces service academy. Along the way, Sandy served for 12 years at sea, commanding two ships, and led large Coast Guard organizations during times of crisis and complexity. She finished her career as the first woman assigned as Deputy Commandant for Mission Support, directing one of the Coast Guard's largest enterprises. She has lectured widely on leadership and has been featured on CSPAN and other media outlets. In 2012, *Newsweek's* "The Daily Beast" named Sandy to their list of 150 Women who Shake the World. She volunteers in leadership roles for several organizations, including as a trustee for the Coast Guard Academy Institute for Leadership and as chair of the Coast Guard Academy Sailing Council.

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Her latest book: [*Breaking Ice & Breaking Glass: Leading in Uncharted Waters*](#)

Read more and get in touch with Sandra:

Her website: <https://sandrastosz.com>

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Interview

Q1: First of all, thank you for accepting an interview request from PMWJ. You were the first woman to command an icebreaker on the Great Lakes and to lead a US Armed Forces service academy. What helped you to be so successful in your career?

Sandra Stosz (Stosz): Thank you, Yasmina, for inviting me to interview with PMWJ – what an honor! I entered the US Coast Guard, one of the Nation’s five armed services, in 1978 as a cadet at the US Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut. I was in the third Academy class that had women, so I ended up being the first or only woman in most all of my positions for my entire career...I couldn’t escape being the first even though I just wanted to blend in. I retired 40 years later as a Vice Admiral in the position of Deputy Commandant for Mission Support, which is the senior executive level. My last job was roughly the equivalent of the chief operating officer of a public or private organization.

There are a lot of things that helped me succeed. I certainly didn’t succeed on my own! We have incredible people in the US Coast Guard, and I attribute much of my success to those who served with and for me. For instance, when I was captain of the icebreaker KATMAI BAY on the Great Lakes, I relied on the 17-member crew to perform the necessary functions like preparing the ship to get underway, performing the operations and maintenance, and ordering the supplies. Each person on that ship depended on the other to accomplish the mission. That’s how it was throughout my entire career.

I also did my part to succeed by working hard and persevering. Those words are two sides of the same coin. You’ve got to work hard to get ahead, but you can’t quit or give up when you meet resistance—you’ve got to persevere. You’ve got to go around the obstacles or break through the barriers. I learned to take the responsibility to make good choices, then push forward and not blame others if I fell short of my goals. So, success is a combination of relying on your teammates, and doing your part to work hard and persevere to accomplish the mission or get the job done.

Q2: You worked in male dominated environment. Were you discriminated? In what ways?

Stosz: As one of the first women to graduate from the US Coast Guard Academy, I spent my career in a mostly-male environment. For instance, when I entered the Academy in 1978 there were only about 5% women in a corps of cadets of 1,000. I didn't face overt discrimination. But I encountered some men who didn't believe women belonged in the Coast Guard, or any branch of the military. Those men were unsupportive, but they were the small minority. Most men accepted women in the Service, but didn't know how to react to them in the workforce. As the first or only woman at many of my duty stations, I took the initiative to "break the ice" figuratively and help the men understand that working with and/or for a woman was no different than working with and/or for a man. I had been raised with three brothers, and believe that helped me fit in with the men. I was used to being the only woman, so I was comfortable with that dynamic; it was the men who were off-balance. I soon found that being different, as in the only or one of the few women, could actually be a superpower! Since the men didn't know what to expect, I took the initiative to set and explain the expectations. And I did it in a positive way, with humour, which lightened the atmosphere and made it easier for me to build trust with the men.

Q3: What are your 3 top pieces of advice for women working in male dominated environments? For men in environment where there are so few women?

Stosz: Wow, there's so much I'd like to share that might help other women succeed in male dominated environments. I'll offer a few things that worked for me over the years. First, you've got to build trust and earn respect. You do that by practicing what I call "the four L's of leadership." You get out of your seat and walk around (or call if virtual) to look, listen, and learn. You talk to people to find out who they are, what they do, and what they need. Then you do your best to use what you've learned to add value. Only when you've built trust and earned respect, are you ready for the fourth "L," to lead.

Second, you believe in yourself and others. That means using the trust you've built to empower your subordinates. Instead of directing them to do a task, you describe what you want done and let them find the best way to get it done. Empowered people will be inspired to go beyond the minimum required and will draw upon their diverse perspectives to innovate to find novel solutions.

Third, you demonstrate the moral courage to do the right thing, even when the spotlight is shining on you and people will judge you for taking a stand. As a leader, this means holding everyone accountable to meet the standards; making the tough, trade-off decisions that involve risk; and taking responsibility when things go wrong.

My advice for men might sound kind of simple, but it's easier said than done. Men have to actively engage to include women in the workplace. Men, don't treat women any differently than you would treat other men in the workplace! Don't single out the women. Don't presume that all women are the same or think the same, or that one woman can or should speak for all women. Respect the differences! Be sure to welcome and include women in the workplace; don't ignore them because you don't know what to say or do;

engage them in conversation and get to know them better (go back to those “four L’s of leadership”). Be sure female colleagues are not left out of a meeting or get-together, and be sure to listen to what they have to say. Stand up to be a woman’s ally when she’s facing a tough circumstance.

Q4: In terms of statistics, between the beginning of your career and now, has the number of women in US Coast Guard improved? Can you give some statistics?

Stosz: When I entered the US Coast Guard in 1978, I came in with the third class of women to be admitted to the US Coast Guard Academy. The Academy is a four-year college that prepares students to become officers in the Coast Guard. When I entered there were only 5% women in a corps of 1,000 cadets. My class started out with 30 women in a class with 299 students, and four years later only 10 of us women graduated. Fast forward to 2022 and women now comprise 40% of the corps of cadets! And over 90% of cadets, both women and men, graduate. That’s an incredible success story. The percent of women in the ranks of the US Coast Guard, both enlisted and officer, was negligible when I joined over 40 years ago. It’s steadily growing, and is currently about 15%. There are no barriers to entry for women in the US Coast Guard, so we need more to join! It’s a great way to serve a bigger purpose and the benefits including housing, education, and skill training, are exceptional.

Q5: For women who succeed like you, some people tend to scrutinize their personal lives and sometimes think that women need to sacrifice their personal lives to succeed. What’s your opinion?

Stosz: I was once advised, “You can have *anything* you want, but not *everything* you want.” I found that advice to be true. Early in my career, I made choices that aligned with my vision of what success meant. I was really excited about my career and wasn’t interested in starting a family. So, I poured all my effort into serving my country. I remained very happy with that choice throughout my life. But, along the way there were people who tried to convince me that I needed to get married and have kids if I were to be a complete woman. I was told it was selfish to not have kids. People said my biological clock would start ticking and I’d regret not having a family. Well, none of that ever happened. I’m so glad I remained true to myself and lived the life I wanted to live, not the life someone else thought I should live.

As I became more senior in the Coast Guard, I noticed that many younger women were going through the same thing I had – they were experiencing pressure to do everything, and the associated stress. They would ask me if I thought it was possible for women to “have it all.” And I would respond that each individual has the right to live her own life and to decide for herself what “having it all” meant. Everyone is different, and no, women are not all the same. We as a society need to do a better job of respecting that and encouraging each person to find the path that’s right for them. I developed a “menu analogy” to help people understand that each individual must make choices, which often include tough trade-off decisions, on how they want to live their lives.

The menu analogy illustrates the challenges of trying to “have it all” in a simplistic way. When you sit down in a restaurant and the waiter brings you a menu, you can select *anything* you want, but not *everything* you want...at least not at that meal. You might not be able to afford the bottle of vintage wine, and you may want to leave room for dessert. So, it’s a complicated decision on what to select for your meal. If you want to have more, you can come back to the restaurant time and again to sample more items on the menu. So, I counsel young people that although they can’t have everything they want all at once, if they take the longer view and spread their goals out over time, they can fit in a lot over a lifetime.

Q6: You have a 40-year leadership career. What’s your definition of a servant leader?

Stosz: I like describing a leader as a “servant.” To me, the greatest servant leader of all time was Jesus Christ. There are so many lessons in the New Testament that show people how to be servant leaders. Being a servant leader means you love others as you love yourself; you treat others with respect; you’re humble; and in the military, it means you’d lay down your life for your comrade and your country.

Q7: We are in an extreme disrupted time: ~~laid,~~ wars, climate change. What are the 3 top skills needed by leaders? How can they acquire and hone them?

Stosz: Three crucial skills for effective leaders in these challenging times are strategic foresight, decision-making, and adaptability. Leaders have to be able to scan over the horizon to detect approaching threats. They need to balance risk and make tough, trade-off decisions. And they need to adapt continually to be ready to meet new threats and seize opportunities. None of that is easy. To be prepared, leaders need to push beyond their comfort zone so they become accustomed to operating in any condition. During my 12 years of sea duty onboard Coast Guard ships, sailing from the Arctic to the Antarctic, there were times when I was cold, wet, tired, hungry, and scared—sometimes all at once! I felt like I was pushed to my limits and *beyond*. But, that prepared me to lead through crisis and change.

Q8: You are also an active volunteer. How has volunteering helped you in your leadership journey?

Stosz: I served 40 years in uniform with the US Coast Guard. I guess serving is in my blood. When I retired from the Coast Guard in 2018, I knew I didn’t want to start a new career in the for-profit domain. I wanted to volunteer to give back for all the Coast Guard had given me. In some ways, I feel like the Coast Guard gave me more—in developing me and enabling me to achieve my full potential—than I gave to the organization and my country. So, I believe volunteering has helped me to be a better servant leader with a focus on serving others instead of serving my own wants, needs, and desires. So often people chase happiness, looking for more possessions, leisure, power. Yet they feel

empty. Giving back by volunteering is a feeling that transcends momentary happiness. It's deeply satisfying, rewarding, and gratifying to serve.

Q9: Why are you still volunteering?

Stosz: I continue volunteering because I believe I still have a lot to offer. But, I am trying to pare back a little so I can carve out more time to enjoy other aspects of living.

Q10: You write an insightful blog: *Leading with Character*. What do you mean by that? In what ways does character help or 'block' a leader in his/her journey?

Stosz: There are lots of books and blogs written on the topic of leadership, but few that address character-centered, or character-driven leadership. In this complicated world of social media, fake news, and division, we need leaders with upstanding character—those who can build trust and earn respect—more than ever. That's why I write my blog, "Leading with Character." I try to showcase what it looks like to lead with character. Each individual has a set of personal core values that form the cornerstones of their character. And a person's character defines them. Character determines how leaders act, how they treat people, how they get the job done. It determines whether people follow the leader because they *want* to or because they *have* to. Leaders with good character are guided by their core values which serve as their north star, keeping their course steady and true in tumultuous seas.

Q11: You've written a book: *Breaking Ice and Breaking Glass: Leading in Uncharted Waters*. This is a provocative question: In what ways can your experience as a Vice-Admiral be applied in other domains?

Stosz: When I retired from the Coast Guard in 2018, I wanted to give back leadership lessons based on my experiences during that time. So, I wrote my book on character-centered leadership, *Breaking Ice & Breaking Glass: Leading in Uncharted Waters*. The book is designed to appeal to people of all ages at all stages of their careers, be it in the private sector, government, or the public non-profit sector. So, even though my leadership lessons were learned serving in a military sea service, they still apply following retirement.

A vice admiral in the military is equivalent to a senior executive position outside the military. As a vice admiral, I led an organization with around 17,000 people and about a \$4 billion budget. I moved 23 times over my career, experiencing many different cultures. I adapted to working with people across the demographic spectrum, and learned to appreciate those who are diverse in other ways: people with widely differing life experiences, and those with different personalities and ways of thinking. I was thrown

into circumstances I needed to navigate without a playbook, and dealt routinely with change and uncertainty. I learned how to lead and motivate diverse teams, make decisions, and prepare for change. And that's exactly what's needed in senior executives leading large, complex organizations. The US Coast Guard prepared me well, not just for my career, but for follow-on service in other domains.

Q12: Do you have a last message to PWJ readers, please?

Stosz: We all face challenges at work and in life, and we need to be ready to meet those challenges and seize the associated opportunities. There will be plenty of hard times, but those hard times made me a better leader by pushing me to what I thought were my limits and then beyond. And the same can be true for you and those you mentor. So, I'll leave you with my mantra:

Be Bold and reach high,
Believe in yourself and others, and
Become the leader you're meant to be!

Thank you, Yasmina.

About the Interviewer



Yasmina Khelifi

Paris, France



Yasmina Khelifi, PMP, PMI- ACP, PMI-PBA is an experienced project manager in the telecom industry. Along with her 20-year career at [Orange S.A.](#) (the large French multinational telecommunications corporation), she sharpened her global leadership skills, delivering projects with major manufacturers and SIM makers. Yasmina strives for building collaborative bridges between people to make international projects successful. She relies on three pillars: project management skills, the languages she speaks, and a passion for sharing knowledge.

She is a PMP certification holder since 2013, a PMI- ACP and PMI-PBA certification holder since 2020. She is an active volunteer member at PMI France and PMI UAE, and a member of PMI Germany Chapter. French-native, she can speak German, English, Spanish, Italian, Japanese and she is learning Arabic. Yasmina loves sharing her knowledge and experiences at work, in her volunteers' activities at PMI, and in [projectmanagement.com](#) as a regular blogger. She is also the host and co-founder of the podcast [Global Leaders Talk with Yasmina Khelifi](#) to help people in becoming better international leaders.

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