

Women in the Intelligence Community:  
A Discussion with Sue Gordon and Stephanie O’Sullivan  
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[Stephanie O’Sullivan](#) and [Susan Gordon](#) retired from the Intelligence Community (IC) as Principal Deputy Director for National Intelligence in 2017 and 2019, respectively. Both served almost three decades in the national security establishment as government employees and contractors. At the start of their government careers, they were among the few women in their offices; by the 2000s, a “sisterhood” had begun to emerge as more women rose to leadership across the Intelligence Community.<sup>1</sup> In their own leadership roles, Stephanie and Sue helped foster this increased diversity.

We invited these two [CSET](#) Distinguished Fellows to speak candidly with staff about career advice and their experiences as leaders in the IC. Highlights from this discussion are summarized below. *Quotes have been edited for length and clarity.*

### **Chart Your Own Career**

Entering the National Security workforce in the early 1980s, Sue and Stephanie were among the few “professional” women in their offices. Stephanie started as a contractor, Sue as a new CIA analyst. A former university athlete, Sue’s experience playing sports provided a significant advantage in her early career because she was “comfortable with competition—people trying to win” and didn’t take most things personally. Stephanie’s willingness to leave less fulfilling work environments and move for new opportunities offered experiences that ultimately drove her success.

Sue attributes her success to her reputation for “getting hard things done,” comparing herself to [Mikey from the old-school Life cereal](#) commercials: “I’d take on new things.” Her willingness to shoulder new—and often difficult—positions and projects “became a vehicle for other opportunities.” Over time, her reputation afforded her the opportunities to try, learn, and excel. For CSET staff, she noted that “you are building a resume and a reputation with everything you do.” She encouraged people to “focus on the mission” and not let detractors change your commitment to the organization’s goal, but also never to assume the organization will “make all the decisions to chart [your] career path” for you. Stephanie added that if something isn’t working for you in a job, “vote with your feet and change the circumstances.”

<sup>1</sup> By the end of FY18, women represented 39 percent of the IC’s workforce compared to 43 percent of the Federal workforce overall (FY’16). Women represented 31 percent of senior-pay grade (SIS) equivalents in FY18. Source: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Demographic Report: Fiscal Year 2018: Hiring and Retention of Minorities, Women, and Persons with Disabilities in the United States Intelligence Community* (DC: ODNI, 2019), 11 & 13, accessed July 1, 2020, <[https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/EEOD/FY18\\_IC\\_Annual\\_Demographic\\_Report\\_V6\\_ExecSec.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/EEOD/FY18_IC_Annual_Demographic_Report_V6_ExecSec.pdf)>

## **Focus on Your Performance and the Mission**

Both women encountered gender bias and harassment, especially early in their careers, but became advocates for diversity and inclusion as IC leaders. The common denominator helping both to advance was their single-minded focus on the mission. As Sue noted, “organizations care about achieving their mission.” Despite gendered concerns about marriage (Stephanie) or children (Sue) affecting their commitment to the job, their dedication earned them respect and helped them advance within the intelligence community.

## **Protect Your Life Outside of Work**

Toward the mid-point of her career, Sue took an eight-year hiatus from the CIA to care for her children. Sharing childcare responsibilities with her husband allowed Sue to advance quickly in her career upon her return. Informed by the experience of working and managing a family, Sue was “ruthless” in tracking the workload of her team and the life trade-offs made to achieve work goals. She “tried to make sure they didn’t have to make a choice between life outside the office and work.” Stephanie, similarly, noticed her colleagues started rhetorically asking “what am I doing to myself?” and making changes for themselves and their teams. As Sue put it, having things outside of work that people—not just women—valued prompted policy and cultural changes, making the IC a better work environment over time.

## **Be Yourself**

Despite attaining the second-highest position in the IC, both women encountered condescension and challenges. They encouraged CSETers to “find someone that you trust so much that you can reveal your uncertainties and your fears to.” That confidant, whether a partner, a mentor, or a friend, can help talk through a decision and assuage doubts, but ultimately, “no one can ever tell you what to do about any decision--because if there was an answer you’d already do it.”

“Listening is a super power,” Stephanie noted. “I know it’s not always possible to blend in and you should never become something that you are not. You need to be yourself—that’s where your strength lies. I only have so much energy, I can only put it on what matters. Don’t try to crush yourself into someone else’s mold. Be yourself....and you can surmount” anything.