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Commentary: Why seeing is so important to believing

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I saw the Challenger explode from an airplane on the way home from Cape Canaveral, waiting for the launch. I was in middle school at the time, and a space camp devotee who wanted to be an aeronautical engineer someday. I've always loved math and science, and because I saw Christa McAuliffe as a woman preparing to go into space, I learned there was room for women in aeronautical careers. Seeing is believing.

I veered a little from that childhood goal, still studying math and science but choosing a career in engineering. On one of my first days working for Ford Motor Co., a colleague old enough to be my father said, "You're not supposed to be here. I was never supposed to work with a woman, let alone an African American woman."

It was the first time I'd heard so directly and unfiltered that there were limitations to what I could do. I was fortunate to grow up in a family where women built careers and became leaders. My mother had a career as an educator rising to leadership levels while my father owned and operated a funeral home in Muncie, Ind. I was raised around value for education and a lot of business activity. I had a family who believed in me and told me I could do whatever I set out to accomplish.

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to lead. If I joined a club, I wanted to be its president. Student council, cheerleading, I raced to the top. But I had encouragement and support. I believed I could ascend the ranks, get to the top. Belief comes from support, which is essential for women and minorities seeking to climb any ladder.

So many women fall out of their educational process or career advancement because of historic perceptions and stereotypes dictating that women belong at home raising kids or leading families. We get in our own way sometimes, too.

But once you decide what is important to you, no one should stand in your way. Not even you.

Women get in their own way all the time. Sometimes it's because we don't see examples of ourselves where we aspire to be, so we don't believe it's possible. If you want to be a plant manager and you never see a woman in that role, it makes it hard to envision you can get there.

The absence of naturally occurring mentors and role models can hinder any person's ability to achieve. Engaging with mentors and having advocates are important components of shedding that lack of belief in what you can do.

For so long, we've heard messages promoting traditional roles — the woman at home and the man as breadwinner. My husband hasn't worked for nearly a decade now, and so many people — especially men — assume he's soft. Then they meet him and they're like, "Oh, this is a real guy." I most assuredly would not be where I am today without his commitment and support to me and our family.

We chose to change the narrative. We decided together that I would pursue my career and he would fall out of the workforce to facilitate that. Stereotypes require conditioning to survive. It's everywhere we turn. On cable business news or the stock market indicators, you don't see many women leading the conversation.

Seeing is believing.

Women must figure out the purpose behind their work and then find examples to build self-belief. We must empower young women with mentors, advocates and clear paths to whatever goal they seek to achieve. We must build relationships that build people.

I'm a huge advocate of business education for women because that's where the power lies. Learning to be comfortable with numbers, to understand the ethics of transactions, to seek service in the commercial sector, these are qualities that are not open only to men. For our

society to truly advance, we must change the narrative that certain genders or races belong in certain roles. Once we open the possibilities to everyone, we create a culture where everyone belongs.