

Three Timeless Lessons From Grace Hopper

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Last month, President Obama posthumously awarded the [Presidential Medal of Freedom](#) to one of America's most influential yet least-known women, Grace Hopper.

Despite her relatively low profile, Hopper was hugely influential in the birth of modern computing. After taking a leave from college to join the U.S. Navy Reserve, she worked as a programmer on the [Harvard Mark 1 computer](#) and then went on to create the first compiler – a tool that translates code from one programming language to another, and that no modern engineer can live without.

Although technology has come a long way in the years since the Mark 1 computer, Hopper's inspiring life is filled with timeless lessons from which we can all learn:

Find a way or make a way. When Hopper graduated from Vassar College in the late 1920s (and later went on to earn a master's degree from Yale University), just 4 percent of women earned college degrees, and less than half entered the workforce. Hopper was an extraordinarily gifted mathematician, yet the prospect of her finding a job in the private sector that matched her skills was virtually non-existent. Refusing to let her skills go to waste, she chose to enroll in the Armed Services, where she spent virtually her entire career making full use of her talents to invent and inspire.



Live a life of passion. The allure of earning wealth in the technology sector is strong, but I haven't met a single successful innovator in my career who didn't start from a place of profound passion for their chosen field. Given the blood, sweat and tears one must put into entrepreneurship, it's simply not possible to sustain on something you don't love doing. For Hopper, the urge to solve complex problems came with virtually no financial reward. She never became wealthy from her work, which was always done in service to her nation. Many times over the years she had opportunities that would have led her to greater financial success, but she always chose to do what she loved best – working in public service and contributing to the public good.

It's never too early (or too late) to give something back. More than just a brilliant coder, Hopper was a mentor to thousands of women and men who followed the path she blazed. Looking back on her career, she said, “the most important thing I've accomplished, other than building the compiler, is training young people. They come to me, you know, and say, ‘Do you think we can do this?’ I say, ‘Try it.’ And I back ‘em up. They need that. I keep track of them as they get older and I stir ‘em up at intervals so they don't forget to take chances.” As a mentor myself, not only is it important to challenge as Hopper did, but it is important to realize how much you personally get by giving back to others.

As President Obama put it, “from cell phones to cyber command, we can thank Grace Hopper for opening programming to millions more people, helping to usher in the information age and profoundly shaping our digital world.” As a female leader in technology, I am forever grateful to Grace Hopper for her leadership and for her everlasting imprint as a role model for millions.

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