

Emily Cole

Professor Leonard

Leaders in Laughter

2 May 2016

How *Broad City* is Broadening Horizons

Comedy has always been about more than making people laugh – and recently that has become truer than ever. From *Full Frontal* with Samantha Bee to stand up routines by comedians such as Aziz Ansari and Amy Schumer, comedy is used to lead people by spreading messages through humor. Two comedians that are true leaders are the creators and stars of Comedy Central's *Broad City* – Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer. *Broad City* tells the story of Abbi Abrams (played by Jacobson) and Ilana Wexler (Played by Glazer), two young women making their way in New York City. (For the remainder of this essay, for the most part, in reference to the comedians I will use Jacobson and Glazer, and in reference to their characters I will use Abbi and Ilana.) In each episode they are put in ridiculous and hilarious situations while at the same time also showing minute and very real aspects of life, often specifically life as a woman, that isn't shown in media. *Broad City* has given Jacobson and Glazer a tremendous platform to become leaders in today's pop culture. Through *Broad City*, Jacobson and Glazer have been making a big difference in today's world by being leaders through applying three of Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner's "The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership®": Model the Way, Challenge the Process, and Encourage the Heart.

For Jacobson and Glazer, it was a long road to their current success with *Broad City*. Abbi Jacobson was born on February 1st, 1984. She grew up in Wayne, Pennsylvania, and then moved to Baltimore to study video production and fine arts at the Maryland Institute College of

Art (MICA). After graduating from MICA in 2006 she promptly moved to New York City. She took classes with the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, where she met her partner in crime, Ilana Glazer. Ilana Glazer was born on April 12th, 1987. She was brought up in St. James, New York and attended New York University before also taking classes at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre and in turn meeting Jacobson. The two spent the next several years performing improv and stand-up routines around the city before beginning their biggest project, and greatest achievement, to date.

In February of 2009, Jacobson and Glazer launched *Broad City*, a short web series on Youtube featuring Abbi and Ilana, two fictionalized versions of themselves. For two years they wrote scripts, shot film, edited, and posted two-five minute videos telling the story of Abbi and Ilana – young women who were best friends getting into sticky but in turn hilarious situations. Two years later in 2011, Amy Poehler, renowned actress and comedian for works such as Parks and Recreation and Saturday Night Live, approached Jacobson and Glazer about turning their web series into a real television series. Together they developed a pilot, which they pitched to the cable network FX, but the network did not approve of the script. They then turned to Comedy Central, who loved the script and contracted them for a pilot. This pilot turned into what is now three completed seasons of ten episodes each and raving reviews.

This journey is the first way in which Jacobson and Glazer are leaders because this shows them practicing “Model the Way.” Though many individuals are currently finding fame and success through Youtube and other web and media outlets, few have broken out into mainstream media such as TV and movies. By turning a small series that was only being made for fun into a TV show and a career “modeled the way” in two approaches. The first was modeling the way for other actors, comedians, and personalities to turn their hobbies into careers. They modeled that

with hard work and determination that a person can make a living and be successful doing what he or she loves. They also modeled for networks that it is possible to take a risk on ideas or people that are not inherent to the industry. By just creating *Broad City*, Jacobson and Glazer have become terrific leaders in the entertainment industry by “modeling the way” of what is possible with perseverance.

The second and most important and prevalent of “The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership®” that Jacobson and Glazer exemplify through *Broad City* is “Challenge the Process,” and they “Challenge the Process” in two specific ways. The first is in how they use the comedic situations in which Abbi and Ilana find themselves in to make political commentary on aspects of life and society. This commentary has been most apparent during the most recent third season. One example occurs in the very beginning of the season premiere, “Two Chainz.” The episode opens on Abbi and Ilana meeting at a very chic restaurant for brunch. As Ilana approaches Abbi at the restaurant, she states, “Hey, I’m sorry I was late. I got into this depressing article matrix about these Saudi women who have to ask their ‘keepers’ permission to leave the house, like please. I was just so pissed...” and later on during the brunch as they continue to discuss it, Ilana states “People don’t know about this. They need to wake up to the injustices of the world!” This then all ties into the plot of the episode when Ilana drops the key to unlock the heavy chain that she is wearing as a belt around her waist down a sewer grate. Rather than Abbi and Ilana then just moving on and going about finding a way to help Ilana, Jacobson and Glazer use this as an opportunity for one more line about this important issue, in which Ilana says, “You know, having this twelve pound chain around my waist for a few hours is *nothing* compared to the metaphysical chains of those Saudi women and their ‘keepers.’” These pieces of dialogue challenge the process by first of all bringing to light the injustice that women are facing

in foreign countries and making this political commentary, but also from a creators perspective it challenges the process of what is normally written about even in politically charged humor by making it about foreign affairs which not many comedians in this country touch on.

Another important example of this occurs in the season three finale “Jews on a Plane.” While on a long plane trip from New York to Israel, Abbi gets her period and all of her tampons are in her carryon which because she was late to arrive to the airport was stuck with the cargo under the plane. During their immediate search to find a solution to Abbi’s problem, the characters pause for a moment to discuss the issue of feminine product availability:

Ilana: This must be what homeless women feel like.

Abbi: Dude we’re just in coach it’s not that bad –

Ilana: No, no. Like, how do they get tampons? If you get a couple bucks, do you buy food, or do you buy tampons?

Abbi: Woah. Tampons should be free. Every woman should have access to tampons – all different sizes.

Ilana: And the only reason it’s not that way is because the government hates women.

Abbi: This is true.

Obviously in the last line Ilana has taken it to an extreme generalization, but the commentary still stands. It is true that tampons and other sanitary products are not usually available for free and that this is a problem that many homeless women face. This dialogue in particular challenges the process because it’s not simply comedians making jokes about horrific situations to make them less scary and easier to comprehend. This is two comedians taking a funny situation and using it to make straightforward commentary about the issue of accessibility and sexism when it comes to the need for sanitary products, specifically tampons.

The second way in which Jacobson and Glazer “challenge the process” is by braking out of the expected roles that women are “supposed to play” – both in real life and on TV. Abbi and Ilana are very *real* characters and the viewers see them doing things that often isn’t seen in media. One episode in season three opens with the two of them video chatting each other while in the bathroom and muting their microphones whenever they defecated. In season two, Abbi finds herself in the home of Kelly Ripa and gets extremely drunk and mischievous with her. The show does not shy away from Abbi and Ilana swearing frequently, drinking, and quite often smoking marijuana. In addition, the show is extremely sex positive – and that doesn’t just mean the trope of “boy meets girl, girl meets boy, they fall in love, and then they have a passionate night of romance.” Sex is seen on *Broad City* very casually and very naturally. For example, Ilana is in a very casual sexual relationship with another character on the show, Lincoln. She always describes it as a “friends with benefits” situation and doesn’t feel the need for any relationship to be satisfied. Ilana is also openly queer and polyamorous, a fact that is normal and accepted on the show. She is seen having oral sex and kissing women and it is never questioned or made into a big deal. Abbi is also sexually active and again does not portray the standard trope. She has “one night stands” but is not portrayed as a slut or provocative, and there is even an entire episode in which other sexual positions are explored between her and a partner. All of this is normalized and discussed openly between Abbi and Ilana, and by doing this they are challenging the process by normalizing what is often seen as “unladylike,” by making Abbi and Ilana very honest and unkempt and real, and by being extremely sex positive, queer positive, and substance positive.

The last of “The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership®” that comedians Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer to be leaders is “Encourage the Heart.” They do this by being

important icons in the pop culture world. They are both women who are Jewish, (and in Glazer's case she is also a person of color and her character is queer,) and by just being people with these marginalized identities who are very successful and popular in the media, they are encouraging the hearts of others who share these identities. I personally am a queer, Jewish woman, and by seeing two women whom I share qualities with succeed in a field in which I am interested in, this encourages my heart by showing me that it is possible for me to achieve my goals even with my marginalized identities. And, by adding in dialogue and character traits that accentuate these traits more, Jacobson and Glazer and encouraging the heart not just through themselves, but through their work.

I first discovered Jacobson and Glazer and subsequently Abbi and Ilana when my dad showed me an episode of their web series back from 2010, which featured the two girls dog sitting for a neighbor who never actually leaves – she actually stays and stalks them as they take care of her dog. After then discovering that the two of them had a TV show on Comedy Central, my dad and I started watching it religiously and when I'm home even now that I don't live there we still watch episodes from the most recent season together. Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer matter to me for a few reasons. First is what I mentioned before in that I see myself in them and I see that my goals and dreams are possible even for someone who doesn't fit the typical comedy ideal. Additionally, I really appreciate the feminist and other political stands that the show often takes and I appreciate how they use their comedy to make real commentary about the injustices in the world and finally, I think they matter to me because I really enjoy watching their material. It is so far fetched while being so relatable, and it is very hilarious. They have inspired me to pursue some comedic ventures of my own, and I think that their story of turning a hobby into a successful career is an important and inspirational one. Using three of Jim Kouzes and Barry

Posner's "The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership®," Model the Way, Challenge the Process, and Encourage the Heart, Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer have clearly become leaders through their comedy and entertainment. *Broad City* has allowed Jacobson and Glazer to model the way for others wishing to pursue their hobbies as a lifetime career, to challenge the process of the injustices in the world and how comedy engages speaking about them, and to encourage the hearts of others with similar identities never to give up. The show is already contracted for a fourth and fifth season with Comedy Central, and I look forward to seeing them grow into even stronger leaders in the years to come.

Works Consulted

"Two Chainz." *Broad City*. Comedy Central. COM, NYC. 17 Feb. 2016. Television.

"Jews on a Plane." *Broad City*. Comedy Central. COM, NYC. 20 Apr. 2016. Television.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ilana_Glazer

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abbi_Jacobson

<http://www.leadershipchallenge.com/About-section-Our-Approach.aspx>