

Industry ROUNDTABLE

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

PRESENTED BY:



The data is clear: Having women take on leadership roles is good policy and beneficial to an organization's bottom line. Law firm Hodgson Russ and *Albany Business Review* convened a panel of female executives to discuss their experiences and thoughts about the challenges of moving into – and thriving in – leadership positions. Cindy Applebaum, *Business Review* publisher and market president, moderated the discussion.

► MEET THE PANEL



NANCY CAREY CASSIDY

Title: EVP and COO

Company: Picotte Cos.



KATHLEEN GODFREY

Title: President

Company: Godfrey Financial Associates



DENISE GONICK

Title: President and CEO

Company: MVP Health Care



MARIANNE POMPA LAROCHE

Title: President

Company: Pompa Bros.



DR. LAURA SCHWEITZER

Title: Vice president for health sciences

Company: University at Albany



HEATHER TANGORA

Title: President

Company: Tangora Technologies



Coming from the perspective that a mentor speaks to you and a sponsor speaks about you, have you had mentors and sponsors in your career? And what was their importance to you?

DENISE GONICK: I have had both mentors and sponsors in my career, although interestingly, I don't think I would have characterized them that way or given them that label at that time. Clearly, I've had relationships with people where I've been able to engage both in talking about different challenges and working through things, as well as people who encouraged me and spoke for me within the business setting.

HEATHER TANGORA: I still have mentors, but I've never had a sponsor. Mentors are so important through the entire business journey. I use them as sounding boards, kind of a board of directors since we're a small business. I need their advice, their guidance, their experience, to help us continue moving forward.

NANCY CAREY CASSIDY: I certainly had mentors early on in my career because I was going into an industry in which I had no background or training. The two Picotte brothers were certainly my mentors. As I progressed through the company, they transitioned from mentors to sponsors. Now, I mentor several people in the company, trying to follow in that tradition.

KATHLEEN GODFREY: I've had both mentors and sponsors, and I have served as mentor and sponsor. The mentoring I received early in my business was really crucial. I learned how to avoid land mines. I learned who I could trust, who I shouldn't trust. And when I had a sponsor in a prior career, it was very useful in



helping me realize that I didn't want to be in that career anymore. I realized that I needed to make a change.

DR. LAURA SCHWEITZER: In academics, we have officially appointed mentors that are referred to as advisors, so I've had that throughout my academic career. Outside of the traditional academic setting, I was part of a leadership development institute at Drexel University in 1999, and the director of that has been a mentor of mine. The special thing about that relationship is she really pushed me to imagine myself in roles that I didn't imagine myself in. When my career goal was to be a provost, vice president for academic affairs, the day that I got that job, she called me and said, "What's next?" I almost got angry with her because I felt it was a bit much. You know, I had finally achieved my career goal, but it wasn't good enough. She really pushed me to think about college presidencies.

MARIANNE POMPA LAROCHE: My father's probably my mentor. He would always answer my questions with a question to make me think. He was always there with strategies, procedures and the way things were done. As a sponsor, it would be my mother. She was also in the business and we spent most of our time with her. She tried to be the balance in the man's construction world for me, building up my self-esteem and teaching me to be independent. And I, too, have done the same thing with other women in construction. I find that sometimes they become my mentor instead of me mentoring them.



What is the value of women-only professional associations, and how do they help women leaders work through challenges?

TANGORA: I actually belong to two. I belong to the Albany chapter of WPO, which stands for Women Presidents Organization. And I belong to FEW, which is Forum of Executive Women. They're both very different. WPO creates a roundtable, a very confidential situation where you can discuss personal and business. FEW is more social. It's all business women. It's networking, but also discussing business challenges or successes. Both have a great value to me.

CASSIDY: I work in an industry that is predominantly male, so if we limit ourselves to just participating in women only forums, we miss a lot of what's going on in the industry. I encourage people I'm mentoring



DONNA ABBOTT-VLAHOS

to participate in things like BOMA, Building Owners and Managers Association, and NAIOP, which is the National Association of Industrial and Office Parks. But I also think women's organizations are very important so that people can brainstorm. I was one of the founders of FEW, and when we first started, it really was a brainstorming session. It did become a little bit more social, but we used to throw really heated topics on the table and debate them. It was more important to me when I was much younger, because I was the first female member of the Fort Orange Club, which at the time was the networking organization in the Capital Region. And I didn't have the opportunity to go to many of the events, so I would find myself going to women's events until they finally let me in the front door of the Fort Orange Club. So that was a big mountain. It was all due to a man who was president of the club. He was basically adamant that we were going to change the rules and let women in.

GONICK: There is a value in some of the women's groups. They provide an opportunity for very specific networking and an atmosphere of trust where no topic is off limits. In fact, even with respect to the mentoring question, the way I approached it was to go up to somebody and ask them a question. Because it is still perhaps a different lens through which we see an experience or life in business, those associations really have a value.



What barriers do women face when going for and taking on leadership roles?

GODFREY: There is a cultural expectation that girls and women should be likeable. And so when you have to make a decision between being liked and being respected, there's a little bit of an identity shift. It shouldn't be a trade-off, but a lot of times it is, because you do have to make difficult decisions and you have to have uncomfortable conversations. There is still a lot of gender bias. Some of it's very subtle, but there have been so many headlines about sexual discrimination and sexual harassment. And when women have children, maybe it's unconscious, maybe it's not so unconscious, there's this perception that she can't be a lead-

er because she's a mom. It almost precludes you from stepping into those roles. Or, people perceive you differently when you do.

SCHWEITZER: In our field, search committees really drive who is chosen for leadership positions. And search committees are comprised of people at the rank or above the rank of the person being searched for. In academic medicine, you typically have men in those roles, so it's very difficult to populate search committees with women and/or minorities in medicine. There's been an intentional effort to do that. However, the women and minorities that are selected are typically more junior to the men. The men, who are more senior – because that's who's more senior in academic medicine – are there and really dominate the conversation. Plus, there's a tendency among all people to find people like them. They envision people like them in roles of leadership. It's very difficult to break the mold, where there's a senior male-dominated search committee, to have them not hire another senior male. That's been a major impediment in academic medicine in getting women into leadership positions.

LAROCHE: Coming from the male-dominated construction field, there's very few women my age or older, so for them to become leaders, obviously, there's an age barrier right there. For the younger women, you're dealing with culture, family and industry. It's always been a man's world. A lot of the schools want to push people into advanced placement where they might have a trade or a skill, and we're not finding them. Those barriers alone are more critical than the economic or the social aspect of it – the denial, the lack of respect for women – that we're still trying to break through.

GONICK: We have a tendency to promote men based on potential but women based on their experience, and a lot of women will hold themselves back. They'll look at the job description and say, "Gee, I've got seven out of 10 things so I'm not qualified so I'd better not go for it." Most men don't make that hesitation. They say, "Yeah, I've got that. I can do it." There's this

whole cultural element about how you express confidence in a socially acceptable way. I think that's where, to link it back to where we started with sponsorship, sponsorship isn't just about putting your name forward for the board. It's also about talking to women about those types of issues, and not being afraid to try. I think some of the best things we've learned come from failure. Learning how to deal with failure so that you keep going, makes you a more seasoned leader.



How often do you find yourself the only woman in the room, and how do you deal with that?

CASSIDY: I have a lot of war stories, from being the only woman at the turkey shoot at the Fort Orange Club, to attending a program at Harvard University where there were 50 people selected and I was the only woman selected. It was interesting because the program started on Mother's Day and I had a 1-year old. It was very hard for me to drive to Harvard and leave my baby and join 50 men in a room for a week. I've always believed the same thing: Be yourself. You're in the room because you belong there. Don't be intimidated. Speak up when you have something to offer. Listen when it's time to listen. You can learn from each other. Very often, younger women sometimes feel like they need to take on the persona of the men in the room. You don't. You really just have to be confident in what you know, ask questions and listen.

GODFREY: I'm frequently the only woman in the room, or maybe one of two women in the room. Again, I walk in there with the attitude that I belong there. In my industry, the financial world, there's now recognition that women have money and assets and they control money and assets. So now, I'm more welcomed because I'm a woman, because the men want to know what makes you tick and what should we change and how should we talk to women or how can we better communicate with women. So actually, being the only woman in the room, you're like a rock star these days.

SCHWEITZER: I'll talk about the flip side. I'm now inter-

SPONSOR CONTENT

INDUSTRY ROUNDTABLE: WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

PRESENTED BY: Hodgson Russ LLP



im dean of the School of Public Health and my leadership team is all women, which for me has been amazing, having been in academic medicine and always being the only woman in the room. The leadership team is all women and I've been having so much fun. It's just been such a joy for me, especially as many of them are mid-career women in academics, and I really feel like I can come in and not only get the work of the school done, but really mentor these wonderfully talented women.



Are men always the obstacle?

LAROCHE: I don't believe men are the obstacle, although I've had times when men come into the office and want to speak to the "man in charge." Once I explain to them what the situation is, we're fine. But my husband also became a stay-at-home dad from the birth of our first child, because my parents found out we had an agreement that whoever had the better job would work. So, all of a sudden I got a raise and my husband stayed at home with the kids. I was more the obstacle in dealing with men because I was trying to be a supermom. I was trying to work the hours I had to work and be on the different boards and fundraisers and go to the kids' events, and still try to lead the men who had been under my father for years. I was more of an obstacle than the men.

GODFREY: I don't think men are always the obstacle, although there does sometimes seem to be a higher bar set for women, higher expectations. Going back to the family thing, I don't think people ever ask men, "How do you handle it all?" Because they don't. There is a little bit of a double standard in that respect. I'm not sure where that falls, but I don't

think men are always the obstacle.



What role do you see men playing in women in leadership?

GONICK: I think the sponsorship role would be really helpful. It would be great to be talking to a roomful of men about some of these issues, too. If you accept what the data suggests, which is that companies where you do have women on boards or women in the C-suite, have better results, and that it's good for business, then how do you get there? Engaging men in the solution is really a critical next step in this, and that means addressing some of the unconscious bias.

TANGORA: I work with my husband, so we have different strengths and we're different types of leaders. We work parallel, but both of us are leaders in our own right. We're able to have strong communication, give support, and we're able to discuss our visions and how we want to get there. Often, in the evening, I'm going to different events and he's home cooking the dinner. It works out really well for us.

GODFREY: I think men are starting to realize that gender diversity is an issue. I think the millennial generation is demanding it. They want to work with companies that have diverse leadership. And to piggyback on what Denise said, if you look, there's a ton of data, objective data, to show that Fortune 500 companies with greater than 20 percent women in leadership do better. And they do better over the long-term. There is a European country that will not allow a publicly traded company to be listed on their exchange unless they have 15 percent women in leadership.

GONICK: I think it's Norway and it's 20 percent.

GODFREY: Yes, and so if you look at the performance data, companies with a diverse board, with women in the C-suite, do perform better. They're more profitable.

SCHWEITZER: The Business Review published a Siena poll a couple years ago about this question. The women in business who were polled, agreed that there were obstacles. The people on the street who were polled, recognized that there were obstacles. There was only one group that didn't recognize that there were obstacles to women in leadership, and that was men who were CEOs or in top leadership positions. There's a huge education piece here that needs to happen.



Do women in leadership have a responsibility different than men to address gender issues?

TANGORA: As women, we need to be the leaders. We need to be mentoring. We need to lead by example and encourage women to perform at their peak and keep setting the bar higher and higher so they keep achieving more and more. We need to keep creating job opportunities and pay women equally, and eliminate the stereotype that women can't be in leadership positions.

SCHWEITZER: Women have to make good decisions based on objective evidence. And it shouldn't just be assumed that because you're a woman you're going to support the woman for that next promotion. So up to a point, and certainly personally, I feel like I have responsibility for mentoring the next generation. But I think we have to allow women the latitude to make tough decisions, even when that decision does not favor a woman. I think that's where we have to draw the line.

Diversity is a cornerstone of our culture at Hodgson Russ.



Attorney Advertising

Practice restricted to U.S. law

Women attorneys are integrally involved with the leadership of the firm, and ours was the first AMLaw 250 firm to be managed by a woman. *The National Law Journal* has ranked Hodgson Russ LLP among the top 50 law firms in the United States for prevalence of women partners.

To learn more, visit HodgsonRuss.com.

SPONSOR CONTENT

INDUSTRY ROUNDTABLE: WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

PRESENTED BY: Hodgson Russ LLP



LAROCHE: I think our industry needs more men to campaign for gender diversity by encouraging and supporting women, but then we need the women to feel confident and comfortable in going after a role that they're qualified for.



Do you think younger women are aware of the challenges that previous generations have faced and the challenges that remain?

CASSIDY: No. I have a 20-year-old daughter and she and I get into epic battles over feminism. When she finally decided that she needed to inform me that, "Mom, feminists today don't feel that they have to do everything," I reminded her that's because of the feminists of yesterday that they can. She has yet to accept that premise. We're still working on it.

GONICK: I also think there's this difference between where you are when you're entering the workforce. You're going through school, going through college, and starting your career, and that can look very equal between men and women. But it tends to change as you get further on. And often times, that's where you're dealing with issues around family. That's where really incorporating that into your life – how you can have a meaningful and satisfying career while also having a meaningful and satisfying family life or home life – becomes more challenging.

LAROCHE: In the construction industry, girls that are coming up applying for scholarships, say, "Oh, yeah, I've got this. I have great relationships with the guys at school and they respect me." But I don't think they understand the enormity of it when they vie for the same positions or are in a position of power or leadership with these guys.

SCHWEITZER: Whether young women understand or not, they're entering into a period of time where it's going to hit them square in the face. If they don't understand, there's going to be a rude awakening. I worry about this next generation and what they're going to be facing in order to just even stay where we are. I tend to think there's going to be tremendous backsliding in the next several years, unfortunately. I feel like across the country, reproductive rights that were assumed to be taken for granted, are being questioned now. Those areas in which we made great strides are being challenged right now.

GODFREY: I think there's a sense of complacency with some young women. I watched the whole Mad Men series, and my daughter watched it with me, and she was stunned. It was a great teaching opportunity for me to talk to her about what it used to be like. She had no idea, no idea whatsoever, that women couldn't do the things they can do now, back then. It was like a light bulb went off.



Some philosophies, like Sheryl Sandberg's book "Lean In," stress self-confidence, risk taking, and aggression for women leaders. In this context, is aggression a pejorative or a key trait for leadership?

SCHWEITZER: I think with aggression, you could take the same set of behaviors in men and the same set of behaviors in women. You might describe the woman as being aggressive, which definitely has a negative connotation to it, and that same set of behaviors you would relate to as being assertive in men. I don't like the word because it's got a negative trigger to it.

LAROCHE: I didn't like the word aggressive, but I think in this context, it was referring to a key trait. I like the



DONNA ABBOTT-VLAHOS

word assertive, but I think we need a balance. You can't rule with an iron fist, but you also can't be everybody's best friend.



How can we cultivate a corporate culture where women can be ambitious regardless of their personality?

GONICK: I think that's about listening, and again, recognizing that having a diversity of perspective and experience and style tends to create a better result. There's a larger question about diversity in our community that, as our own demographics are changing like the rest of the country, we're going to have to face within that lens as well. You don't want to have this gap, this distance, between what you're doing and the community at large.

TANGORA: I think if you understand your own personality and what your strengths are, then among people on your team, you can work better together.

LAROCHE: I think women that have a trade skill need to feel confident and need support in that role that they might not need an MBA and still be just as qualified and just as intelligent as others.



Where do you see the local community on the spectrum with regard to women being taken seriously in the workplace?

CASSIDY: I actually think we're a little ahead of the curve. There was one point when a woman headed almost every college and university in the Capital Region. I think, because we are the state capital, we do see a little bit more of women in leadership because of women in government. However, there is still a major imbalance, whether it's the U.S. Congress or the state legislature, of women in those bodies. If you look across upstate New York, the mayors of major cities are women. There is a leadership group of women in our community.

SCHWEITZER: Compared to the rest of the country, I think we're very fortunate. There are more women leaders and more support for women leadership. I spend a fair amount of time in Kentucky because that's where my family is. It's very different there. Unfortunately [Kentucky] is most of the country at this point. So I think it's good here.

TANGORA: I feel we're taken seriously here as leaders, and we have the support. On the spectrum of

one to 10, we're maybe at a five.



What will be the biggest challenge for the women coming up behind this group of leaders?

CASSIDY: I'm going to echo something else Laura said earlier. There is backlash in the nation right now. I am quite concerned for the next generation with what's going on in Washington, D.C. Basically, we're going backwards. The President, by executive order, did away with one of the bills that supported women's pay equity, and to me, that's an attack on women, as well as the issue with reproductive rights.

GONICK: Stamina. You have to keep at it. This isn't an issue that gets solved overnight. For all the progress we've talked about, we've also talked about how hard it can be to keep going as you go through different phases of life.

GODFREY: There is a sense of complacency on a lot of things, and it can undo decades of progress. It's kind of scary.

TANGORA: Job equality, pay equality, work opportunities, advancement, college debt, cost of living.



Whether they're male, female, younger or women in the prime of their careers, what advice would you give to them as they come into a leadership role?

TANGORA: Do what you love and learn how to get paid for it.

GODFREY: Try to develop a bigger picture because it's not all about you. It's about the world and your community. And vote, absolutely.

SCHWEITZER: Learn how to say no to all the hundreds of requests that will come your way, but be prepared to say yes to the right request. Have the courage to step out of your comfort zone and say yes when an opportunity comes your way.

CASSIDY: Participate. Participate in things that you enjoy, but participate in things that are also going to advance your community, your co-workers and your country. And if you're not registered to vote, register and vote and become part of what makes the U.S. unique.