

SPECIAL REPORT

Women in Business



Talent trumps barriers

Women in leadership roles say the keys to success aren't gender-specific

By TERRA OSTERLING
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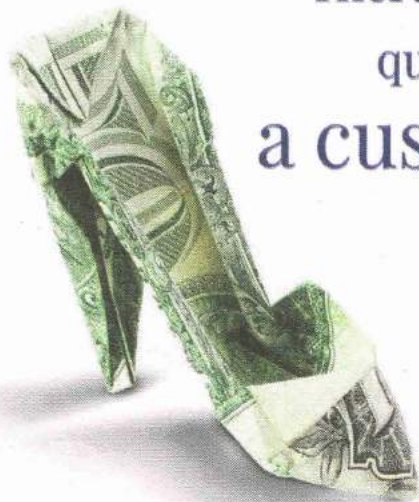
Authenticity, more than gender, seen as key to success



Photo: Kate Melton

Nannette Nocon, private wealth advisor at Nocon & Associates, Ameriprise Financial Services Inc. and 2017 Athena Award recipient, says, "women need to continue to work towards not seeing hurdles as mountains, and not getting in the way of our own objectives."

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Female leaders consider diversity to be a subset of equity in the workplace

By **TERRA OSTERLING**

Katrina Busch's first job out of college at a nonprofit fully immersed her in building relationships among all kinds of people. She moved on to work as an account coordinator at Roberts Communication, then to Eastman Kodak to further grow her career. When the Roberts CEO invited Busch to talk about returning to the company, she made it clear to him that if she went back, "it's because I want to run the place someday."

It is that authenticity together with a focus on relationships that has propelled Busch, who is now president of Roberts Communications, throughout her career—a career that she says has never been encumbered by gender barriers.

"My boss at Kodak was a woman," says Busch, a 2016 Athena Award finalist. "But the division I worked in was a very male environment, and I loved it. There were never any expectations related to gender and I never felt held back."

Exploring how women experience the glass ceiling, or how genders may differ in navigating the workplace, is, perhaps, especially relevant in the current sociopolitical landscape. Busch, however, feels that comparing how men and women work differently—with a focus on how women may still struggle on an unlevelled playing field—is not a fair exercise. Yet she concedes that losing sight of the issue does run the risk of moving women backward.

"Women bring a great sense of openness and willingness to learn, but I've also seen men do this," says Busch. "It's about surrounding yourself with strong, accomplished people."

When she thinks about her strong female friends who have succeeded male predecessors, like herself, Busch does see a pattern of "more"-ness—setting goals to do more, putting in more energy—although, it is a predilection she attributes to individual personalities rather than being a gender trait.

Nannette Nocon, a private wealth advisor at Nocon & Associates, Ameriprise Financial Services Inc., also doesn't see the business landscape in terms of "men vs. women."

Contemplating what it means to consider the differences among genders in the business world, Nocon, who is the 2017 Athena Award recipient, says, "Women need to continue to work towards not seeing hurdles as mountains, and not getting in the way of our own objectives."

Nocon, like Busch, sees relationship-building and authenticity as central to achieving business success. "I've been in business for 33 years—it is important to be true to yourself and to be authentic, to make a better connection," says Nocon. In her field of financial services, she says it is about establishing rapport with clients right away, before engaging in the business at-hand.

Experience tells her that creative client solutions are found by listening and asking questions. "When we ask questions from a place of true interest, and focus on the client, then we are not only confident, our solutions come from a position of care," she says.

Rolling with a situation, listening, and

being open to solutions—the ingredients necessary for thinking outside of the box—are characteristics Nocon does see particularly in women who are mothers.

"Men can do this, too, but I know that especially among the women working in my office that we are able to triage problems by really looking at each situation to identify creative solutions," Nocon says. "When you listen, sometimes you get the solution directly from the client."

Focus on gender only stops short of the bigger questions surrounding inclusion in team-building.

Susan B. Anthony, the Rochesterian and pioneer for equality between the sexes, believed that society will come of age when men and women of all types are working together. Whether it is in the home, in the workplace, or in schools, the combined talents of a team are what matters, says Deborah Hughes, president and CEO of the National Susan B. Anthony Museum & House.

Hughes, a 2016 Athena Award finalist, ponders what the roles of mentorship and advocacy play in how women experience the business world, asking, "Are women advocating for themselves? Are we as business leaders making sure we are advocating for the women who work for us? Do we value them as a resource, and support and pay them fairly? Or, do we take for granted that 'women are loyal?'"

For Hughes, questions about the experiences of women in the business world and defining the value of women's voices are topics eclipsed by the overall important conversation around diversity on teams.

"I see more generational differences than I do gender differences," says Hughes.

Hughes has spent her career working for nonprofits—churches, the pension board of the American Baptists Churches, and at the National Susan B. Anthony Museum & House—in service to the needs of people. She says she has learned that successful teams are built on creative problem-solving in the absence of resources.

While a privileged person may use their resources to find an "app," Hughes' experience is that a person without access to those same resources becomes a better problem solver out of necessity.

"The median annual household income in the neighborhood of the Susan B. Anthony House is \$24,000," says Hughes. "Our neighbors are brilliant at problem-solving because they don't have the resources to hire a solution. Women, as well as men, in this position just have to figure out how to make it work."

Building teams with people who bring an array of perspectives, talents and resources benefits any business or nonprofit.

"Collaboration is an upgrade to the team approach; you can step up to lead, but then step back for someone else," says Rachel DeGuzman, president and CEO of 21st Century Arts, a Rochester-based arts consultancy that offers strategic solutions for artists and cultural organizations.

"Women do have a different type of collaborative approach that brings value to conversations, although I would call collaboration a modern business practice rather than a gender-specific trait," DeGuzman says.

DeGuzman, a 2016 Athena Award finalist, agrees with Hughes: Diversity and

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AUTHENTICITY

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equity among those collaborative voices in any conversation, whether it is running a business or an arts nonprofit, transcends the question about inclusion of women. Value is added when women, persons of color, and anyone with a different set of experiences is present at the table.

“(As a woman) I can’t represent any group entirely—no one can. We need diversity within diversity. All skillsets and backgrounds are important,” says DeGuzman. “To have an impact, voices need to disrupt. Although, men are more rewarded for being a disrupter than women are, especially women of color,” she says.

DeGuzman points out that there are more decision-makers who are women and people of color, and that the traditional consumer is changing. “There is a bottom line reason for valuing the voices of women, and people of color, at the table as leaders, on boards, and as consumers,” she says. “How can you be sustainable without diversity? It is a competitive edge.”

Part of being in business, she adds, is understanding that diversity is a subset of equity, and that possessing decision-making power creates opportunity to have an impact.

“It’s not my opinion,” says DeGuzman. “Objective evidence shows that diversity contributes to success.”

Terra Osterling is a Rochester-area freelance writer.