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Ascending the Glass Cliffs

“There’s a special hell for women who don’t help other women.”

—Madeleine Albright, the first woman to become U.S. secretary of state

By Nancy Weingartner

No one who attended the Women’s Foodservice Forum’s 2009 Executive Women’s Summit is in any immediate danger of going to hell—at least by Ms. Albright’s definition.

Sharing and caring seem to be the birthrights of the women who traveled to the Grand Floridian, one of Disney’s seemingly endless Orlando properties. These are the women who hold the rank of vice president and above, the ones intent on getting into the C-suite, if they’re not already, and to changing the face of the pale-skinned, male-oriented board of directors governing the foodservice industry. Ironically this was the perfect venue for an event that excluded men. I had a hard time imagining my male boss checking into a hotel where towels were wound into a likeness of Mickey Mouse’s head.

The summit has two distinct purposes, said chair Mary O’Broin, VP of marketing, Americas for Unilever Foodsolutions: executive leadership development and peer-to-peer networking. Topics stressed were business and financial acumen, network building and risk taking. And as always, strategic thinking is encouraged. More than 200 people attended; last year’s event in Chicago drew 165.

Mary Dillon, executive vice president and Global CMO for McDonald’s summed up the changes in the marketplace since the WFF was born 20 years ago. Dillon’s husband is the stay-at-home parent. She told a story about coming home from work a couple

of years ago and sharing with the family over dinner that she had met her new boss that day. Her son, Jack, who was 10 at the time, asked, “What’s she like?”

“That took me aback,” she told the group. “I said, ‘Well Jack, actually it’s a man.’” Her husband whispered to her in mock seriousness, “We need to take Jack aside and tell him, ‘Some day you, too, can be a CEO.’” The women in the room laughed, albeit bittersweetly. Women may make 83 percent of consumer decisions, but are still underrepresented when it comes to making decisions in boardrooms and C-suites. This executive summit offers not only leadership education, but also board readiness.

Risky business

Because as young girls, women are encouraged to play safe, risk-taking doesn’t come as naturally to them as to men, said Margaret Heffernan, author and entrepreneur. “But you always take risks,” she told the audience. “You took a risk to come here—many of you left your kids home with their dads.”

But while the worst that can happen when kids are left in their father’s charge is that their homework may not be completed or they have ice cream for dinner, in the job market risk can take the guise of “glass cliffs.” Worse than a glass ceiling, these slippery slopes make a woman’s fall from power visible for all to see. Heffernan’s example of a “glass cliff” is when a company is in trouble and they hire a woman to lead them out of it. Sometimes neither side does their due diligence and either the fit isn’t right or the task is too great to accomplish

in such a short amount of time. “The woman is hired to be the Messiah and she’ll fail,” she said.

While risk-taking is encouraged, it needs to be strategic. There are six things women want from work, according to Heffernan: autonomy, wealth, stretch, community, fairness and values congruence. Women want the same values they practice at home to be in the workplace. While men are often able to compartmentalize their lives—loving father at home, hard-charging boss at work—being two different people is harder for women. (These are generalizations, and not true in every case, of course.)

“On average everyone changes jobs one year too late,” she said. “That year is expensive ... you get angry and in the process could burn a lot of bridges.” Before taking a new position ask yourself: Is it real? Is it worth it? Can I win?

Meg Crofton, president of Walt Disney World Resorts, shared her recipe for leadership: “listening, learning, leading and legacy—spiced with energy and optimism.” A leader doesn’t have to know everything, she said, but she does have to know how to listen and learn from her employees’ expertise. It’s also a leader’s responsibility to “create a culture where going the extra mile becomes the norm.” Something Disney is known for executing day-in and day-out.

Follow the money talk

WFF’s program is always valuable because it applies personal growth to professional competency, so attendees are armed with specific ways to apply the knowledge in their workplaces. Since the summit is designed for executive women, information is geared to help these women be promotable. And financial acumen is always in demand. This year’s



1. Attendees at the Women's Foodservice Forum's Executive Women's Summit

2. Chair Mary O'Broin awards Disney's Meg Crofton the silver WFF pin as a thank you for being a speaker

3. Marian Powers, adjunct associate professor of accounting at Kellogg

4. Debi Benedetti, Mary O'Brion, Maureen Hurley, Fritzi Woods and Meg Crofton

program included a warning we felt was particularly relevant to today's landscape: Your company shouldn't worry about itself right now. What about your vendors?

One of the points Marian Powers, adjunct associate professor of accounting at the Kellogg School of Management, broached during the financial segment was to be aware of both the health of your supply chain and your customers. For instance, if China is the main source of your outsourced good, you may want to note that more than 70,000 Chinese companies went bankrupt in 2008. Some equally frightening statistics from PWC found that of the 600 firms it analyzed with supply chain interruptions, within one day of reporting those problems the stock price declined an average of

9 percent and financial performance suffered afterward for about two years. The observable signs she gave that "your customer is tanking" included: a change in payment patterns; shifting buying habits (over-stocking inventory could mean they are building their supply before declaring bankruptcy); management changes and persistent rumors of their demise that don't seem exaggerated. Another bad sign is a customer who previously shared financials, but now refuses to do so, she added. Powers suggests going back two levels: Investigate your suppliers and their suppliers. To minimize the impact of supply chain interruptions, diversify the location of your suppliers to ward off the results of an angry Mother Nature and other not-so-natural disasters.

Understand that distressed suppliers may cut corners on quality or materials—and act accordingly.

To learn if your credit policy is in line with industry practice, go to CFROnline.org. "If you put data in, you'll get data back," Powers said. Your data is confidential, and you'll be able to view a sample report before you have to show your hand. Another source for both the financially literate and those trying to become more so is CFO.com.

Wrapping up the second day was information on high-performance leadership teams, advancing careers through board readiness and leveraging social media. [FT](#)