

Currents

WFF tees up C-suite issues

By Mary Jo Larson

It was a practical question: “Do I really need to know how to play golf?” And while the query drew laughs from the audience of women executives, the woman asking the question of the speaker was, indeed, quite serious.

And while it may seem to be a simple question, that was the atmosphere the Women in Foodservice Forum’s annual Executive Women’s Summit inspired: An opportunity for women to gather and discuss the smaller questions, and the larger ones, as well.

Gathering at the sumptuous Four Seasons Hotel in Chicago last month, Summit presenters discussed how not to get derailed on the way to the C-suite (CEO, COO, CFO), how to up your amps when it comes to risk-taking and what it means to be an active member of a company’s board of directors—although you have to get there first.

That’s one of the stated goals of the WFF: to have three women on all corporate boards in the foodservice industry by 2010. And the Summit can help this along—its charge is to give executive women leaders more knowledge to continue their advancement into top leadership positions, including the C-suite and company boards.

Elaine Eisenman, dean of executive education at Babson College, led the session on risk taking, and how gender influences risk. Surprising fact: There are no consistent gender differences when it comes to taking risks. Translation: Men don’t necessarily take

more risks than women. But, when surveyed, 67 percent of women believe men are better risk takers.

According to Eisenman, when faced with risk, men ask, “Will I succeed?” However, women ask, “What are the consequences if I fail?” And men care less about approval than women do, which leads them to take risks without the same worry. In fact, 40 percent of women equate risk with danger rather than opportunity.

Interesting was the fact that different people take risks in different situations, although some are more risk-averse than others. And, risk takers are perceived as better managers. Good to know if you are going up for that next promotion.

And although there were high-level executives in the room who are no strangers to risk, it was nice to be reminded of how to take risk without gathering more gray hairs: Avoid being blindsided by it, said Eisenman. Know your starting point, know your upside or your goal, and ask yourself, “what does failure look like?”

“Envision the risk as the next move in your game strategy” to make it less frightening, she told the group. And remember that it’s not forever. “Put it into context and it feels less scary.”

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Robyn Jeannette Bailey, CMO of Huddle House listens to a speaker at the WFF summit.



Carin Stutz, executive vice president of operations for Applebee's.

All sessions were interactive, allowing for attendees to gather in groups to discuss questions and situations put forth by the speakers. An all-morning session titled “How to Become the Smartest Woman at the Table,” included a real-life case study which showed what could happen to a restaurant company with a board run amok, or more accurately, just plain absent.

When you get a board seat, what is your responsibility? asked Suzanne Hopwood, session leader and president and CEO of The Hopwood Group, a business and workout consulting firm. It’s more than just sitting in on the conference call or the meeting and voting “yes” to the CEO’s strategic plan. It takes an understanding of the numbers, the industry the company operates within, and the company’s operations. And that may take raising your hand and saying “I don’t understand.” That is uncomfortable, said Hopwood, but if you vote “yes” without understanding the plan, you’ve just bought into it.

The Summit also included a visit from cooking maven and TV personality Paula Deen, whose hard-won success was the topic of her talk and eventually Q&A from attendees over a Deen-inspired lunch on the 95th floor of the John Hancock Building.

All in all, the Summit answered many of the questions that senior executives ask. Even that golf question received some solutions from audience members. One woman recalled what she had read that Donald Trump told his daughter when she joined his business: “Learn to golf. Pretend you have an invisible 3x5 card with your discussion points on it. You now have six to eight hours of your golf partner’s time to make those points. It’s your time to bond with that other person.” If it’s good enough for The Donald’s daughter, well, I guess its good enough for women in foodservice.

As one woman at my table leaned over and said to me, “I say, if you’re asking, then the answer is probably ‘yes.’” [FT](#)



Celebrity chef Paula Deen provided some glitz and glamour to the event with her high energy and Southern appeal.