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Institute  
for  
Women's  
Leadership

natural

# leader

Rayona Sharpnack is a teacher and a mentor to some of the most powerful women (and a number of men) in some of the most important companies around, including Boeing, Charles Schwab, Compaq, and Hewlett-Packard. Her message: To become a breakthrough leader, don't worry so much about what you need to know. Instead, figure out who you need to be. By Cheryl Dahle Photographs by Angela Wyant



## For Rayona Sharpnack, sports was always a second language



that her body spoke fluently. She grew up pitching and batting against three older brothers in rural Susanville, California. "There weren't many other kids around, and there were hardly any girls," she explains. "So if I wanted to play with the guys, I had to be good." And she was *incredibly* good. As a sinewy 11-year-old with stubbornly curly hair, she set a Junior Olympic record by throwing a softball 189 feet. Five years later, the driven teenager won her state's tennis championship in both doubles and singles. In college, she earned a physical-education degree at a time when few women entered the field, and in the early 1980s, she became the first player-manager of the most profitable franchise of the International Women's Professional Softball League. Today, still a muscular and graceful athlete at age 49, she is a shortstop for the California Express, a women's professional softball team that took second place in the league's 1999 world championships.

Sharpnack describes her athletic talent as a meld of instinct and preparedness—both mental and physical. "When people watch me play, they might think, 'How did she know to go there?'" she says. "It's almost as if I'm moving to the ball before I see where it's headed. Some of that is the dance of the body coupled with experience and working on instinct. But more than that, it is a state of being—a complete focus and presence of attention that I have to maintain every moment that I'm out on the field."

That insight is precisely what Sharpnack applies to her other career—teaching leadership to businesspeople (mainly women) inside some of the most powerful companies in the world. Leadership isn't about doing, Sharpnack insists. It's about *being*. You are more likely to succeed if you concentrate on transforming your mental framework, rather than on memorizing mechanics. Her approach revolves around self-discovery, and her personal history in sports is merely a reference point. For the real lessons, she sends participants into their own psyches to explore their views of the world, their companies, and themselves—and how those perceptions shape their behaviors and opinions.

That philosophy has become the core curriculum behind the Institute for Women's Leadership, which Sharpnack founded in 1991. Most of each three-day seminar on "breakthrough change" involves conversation. Drawing on her academic background in linguistics, business, and psychology, Sharpnack guides participants through a process of unlearning what they assume to be true about what they can (and can't) accomplish. All of this talk, participants agree, changes how they walk the walk of leadership.

"Quite simply, it was a life-changing experience," says Vivian

Groman, 43, a senior VP of finance and corporate administrative technology at Charles Schwab Corp., who took Sharpnack's course in 1997. "You walk in with a challenge, some mountain that you don't think you can climb. When you walk out, you've built a *higher* mountain that you know you *can* climb."

Sharpnack primarily targets women simply because she thinks that they have a natural affinity for her leadership methods. And she has a big-picture theory as well: The more women that she trains to lead critical, business-changing projects, the more women will get promoted, and the more the balance of power inside companies will shift. So far, her model has produced compelling business results. Women at Schwab felt that the training was making such a difference in the company's competitiveness that they asked Sharpnack to share the class with *male* colleagues too. The feedback from the coed course was so positive that Schwab added the class to its regular HR-training offerings.

Between the company-specific sessions and the open courses that she has led over the years, Sharpnack has amassed an alumnae base of several hundred women from such companies as Apple Computer, Boeing, Compaq, the Gillette Company, Hewlett-Packard, Levi Strauss & Co., and Wells Fargo. Her alums are some of the most impressive and successful change agents in business today. (See "Leadership Moments.") Some women even admit to carrying Sharpnack's softball card in their wallets like a sort of leadership talisman.

In a series of interviews with *FAST COMPANY*, Sharpnack shared her insights about the dynamics of leadership and change—from how to build a "cathedral of change" to how to have a "conversation for action."

### [HOW TO "BE" A LEADER]

#### **What is different about your approach to leadership?**

For most people, leadership is about "what you need to know" and "what you need to do." But Amazon.com sells more than 1,000 books that will tell you what you need to know and what you need to do. We work on *who you need to be*, which we call the "context." It's the *being* aspect of leadership that enables breakthroughs in what people do and what they learn. In my classes, I'm going for those "aha" moments, which are really the ignition and illumination of the genius of the participants themselves. That experience is much more meaningful and relevant than trying to learn someone else's shtick or methodology for leadership.



## WHAT IF I DIDN'T SEE THE GLASS CEILING?

**Oceana Lott**  
Manager, training  
and development  
Levi Strauss & Co.  
Personal breakthrough:  
Beat the "glass ceiling"  
mentality  
Attended Sharpnack's  
Session: Spring 1999  
Age: 38

**Herstory:** "The program gave me a blueprint for how to pull off breakthrough projects. But more than that, the program gave me back my soul—that essential part of me that had always been out on the edge, vital and enthusiastic. I learned how to be that person more often, whereas before the program, it was a fluke when the real me showed up.

"When I took the seminar, I had just relocated to a part of Hewlett-Packard that was particularly challenging to me as a black female. [Lott recently left HP to join Levi Strauss.] And while I was able to do the kind of work that I love there, it seemed to me that the ceiling was really, really low. I felt squished. It seemed as if everything I was doing that was compelling to me had a really high personal cost. I found myself adapting to what I thought the environment was like—basically adapting myself out of my authentic self.

"During the course, a discussion emerged about the story that we have collectively created around the glass ceiling. I was able to see that it is a story about context that somebody made up. And when I looked at it on a different scale, things actually changed. The glass ceiling surrounding gender issues was not as absolute as I had always thought it was. Once the ceiling began to crack, so did my belief system about what was true and absolute. I had felt that I was personally experiencing the glass ceiling because of several different bad encounters. But I had actually *chosen* that disempowering story as the explanation.

That is not to say that the statistics are not true. But the question of whether or not you're experiencing the glass ceiling as an individual is up in the air. If you believe that you are, and you string together lots of events in support of that story, then that's the story you get to carry around with you—living every day believing that you're limited in what you can accomplish. And I had to ask myself, To what degree is this true solely because I think it is? Are there times when I don't take risks or when I approach someone suspiciously? How does this belief lead to behavior that proves the belief? I realized that to overcome obstacles and remain true to myself, my story had to be about possibilities, not about limitations.

"I asked myself, What if I lived my life as though I didn't believe in the glass ceiling? What if we all operated as if it were a nonissue? How would that influence our ability to move forward in the system? Of course discrimination exists. But what Rayona teaches is that it's up to you to interpret that discrimination and put it in context in your life. Individuals are in control of their contexts. You get to write the story that you're living."

### What do you mean by "context"?

Context can be an individual's mind-set or the organizational culture. It includes all of the assumptions and norms that are brought to the table. Context is perception, as opposed to facts or data. People don't go off and design their context—they just inherit it. So take anything from racism to sexism to what you think you can and can't do: It's all pretty much inheritance. It's conversations, oral tradition, all that kind of stuff. When you slow down enough to examine those ideas, you might realize, Oh my gosh! I've been operating as though everyone else knew more than I did, just because back in grade school I was put in the bluebird reading group, instead of in the faster robin group. So it might be that kind of a deep individual insight that allows you to see that your whole context has been that you're a second-rate player.

Most change programs inside of companies don't work because they address content (the knowledge, structure, and data in a company) or process (the activities and behaviors), but they never address the context in which both of those elements reside. The source of people's action isn't what they *know* but how they perceive the world around them. And that's a very different thing to work on than knowledge or information.

### How do you change the way that people perceive the world?

I'll give you an example from my life, something personal rather than professional. When my daughter Chelsea was eight, I coached her softball team. On one of the first days of practice, I have everyone try to do some batting. I take a really soft, spongy ball, and I toss it to the first girl. She's standing maybe 10 feet away, I'm throwing baby tosses, and she screams and hides her head. So I say, "Hey, no problem, Suzy. Go to the back of the line. That's fine. Betsy, you step up." Next girl in line. She does the same thing—buries her head and screams. So I'm realizing that this is going to be a really long practice if we don't do something different.

I go out to my car where I have my handy whiteboard markers in my briefcase. I take the bag of practice balls and draw four smiley faces—red, black, blue, and green—on each ball. When you look at a ball, all you see is one smiley face. I go back out and call the girls back over: "Okay. We're going to play a different game this time," I say. "This time, your job is to name the color of the smiley face. That's all you have to do."

So little Suzy stands up, and I toss a ball by her. She watches it all the way and goes, "Red." Next girl, Betsy, gets up there. Betsy goes, "Green." They're all just chirping with excitement because





they can identify the color of the smiley face, so I say, "Okay. Now I want you to do the same thing, only this time I want you to hold the bat on your shoulder when the ball goes by." Same level of success. Excitement builds. The third time through, I ask them to touch the smiley face with the bat.

We beat our opponents 27 to 1 in the first game. I can't tell you how many Little League baseball games I have been to where parents and coaches are yelling at the boys, "Stand up straight. Hold up that bat elbow. Dig in that back foot. Rotate those hips." They're giving all kinds of detailed *instructions* to get the kids to change their actions—instead of doing what I did, which was to work hard on shifting the kids' perceptions. When you shift people's perceptions, their actions follow.

#### **How would that approach play out in a business setting?**

A few years ago, one of my students, a marketing director at a high-tech company, applied this concept in a really powerful way. She worked for a software developer, and it was company practice to send out documentation with all of the company's new software releases. She and her team were brainstorming ways to cut their budget. They looked at every way they could think of to reduce costs: Switch to a lower grade of paper, use soy-based ink, choose a smaller font, do more with graphics, cut down on words. She realized that the context for the conversation included the assumption that they had to have documentation. So they came up with the idea to send postcards to their customers. These cards had four options. The first one was, "Don't send documentation. We don't read it anyway." The second one was, "Don't send documentation. We'll use tech support." The third one was, "Don't send documentation. Save a tree." And the fourth one was, "Please send documentation." Only 5% of their customers wanted documentation, and the company saved \$400,000 that quarter. Now, that's an example of hearing context and shifting people's perceptions of how to move forward—and then linking it to the bottom line.

[CATHEDRALS OF CHANGE, CONVERSATIONS FOR ACTION]

#### **Having a breakthrough idea is a great start. How do you turn that idea into action?**

Relationships are absolutely critical. And typically, a relationship is viewed from a personality context: Do I like you or do I not like you? Are you my type of person? Is your style a good fit? We don't go there in our program. I mean, it's always a bonus if you can get

personalities to mesh, but it's not a prerequisite to being able to lead profound change. What *is* a prerequisite is having a relationship with a foundation that is strong enough to build what I call a "cathedral of change." And a lot of people are trying to build cathedrals on these puny little foundations that won't support the structure.

The basic point: Trust is absolutely fundamental to getting anything done. And in organizations, it's one of the biggest issues that people don't talk about but that impedes progress. For most of us, trust is like money in a bank account—units in, units out. If you meet my expectations over time, then I'll put some coins in the bank. Clunk, clunk, clunk, clunk—and now you've earned my trust. And if you don't, or if you upset me, then I'll take some coins out.

That's one whole dimension of trust, but it's not the only one. Another dimension of trust comes in when you give trust to people before they've earned it. Now, that's a heroic moment. To give trust before a person has earned it is a very risky deal. And most organizations would tell you not to do that because your reputation is on the line. Your credibility is on the line. You're gonna trust somebody who you don't even know? Well, we do it all the time. We just don't notice it.

#### **Are there things that a leader needs to know?**

You have to know how to have what I call "conversations for action." Everybody spends time in meetings where there's a lot of talk and not a lot of action. That's because we don't identify which kinds of conversations result in performance. For instance, in a football game, you have a conversation going on in the huddle. The quarterback says something like, "Okay, drop back, pass protection, sprint out right, pass on two." That's a set of instructions. He's asking that the front line form a V-shape protective shield around him so that the other team doesn't crush him. He's requesting that the two folks on the end go down the field, cut across it, and wait for him to throw them the ball, and he's promising that he's going to drop back, kind of veer off to the right, and throw a pass to one of those two people. That's a conversation for action.

There are other conversations going on at the same time. There are people in the press box who are saying, "Well, there's Steve Young again. The last time he was in this situation, blah, blah, blah, blah." Nothing that they say has any effect on the game at all. Then there are the people in the stands who are saying, "Gee, I really don't like these hot dogs. The ones at Price Club are so much better." Not a bit of influence on the game. Well, the same thing happens in organizations. People are having conversations for

## HOW DO I DESIGN A BREAKTHROUGH PRODUCT?

**Diane Rooney**  
**Founder, Rooney**  
**Consulting Group**  
**Product breakthrough:**  
**The Oral-B CrossAction**  
**Toothbrush**  
**Attended Sharpnack's**  
**session: Winter 1997**  
**Age: 51**



**Herstory:** "Several years ago, I was working for Oral-B, a dental-products division of the Gillette Company. I was in charge of a team that had been assembled to create a breakthrough product. No one knew what it would be, or how my team would do it, but the 11 of us took on the assignment. Out of the then 250 employees in Oral-B's California offices, 41 had taken Rayona's class, and more than half of the breakthrough team had taken it.

"At that point, the toothbrush category was pretty mundane. Most improvements were incremental changes in color, packaging, or features. We knew that we wanted to invent something that would be a leap ahead in design and effectiveness. One of the questions that we started with was, 'What if we designed a toothbrush based on the way that most people *actually* brush their teeth (in a back-and-forth motion), instead of on the way that dentists recommend people brush their teeth (in a circular motion)?"

"That led to the conclusion that the best way to arrange the bristles was to have tufts of varying lengths at opposing angles. Of course, that idea was hugely unpopular with the manufacturing group. Toothbrushes had been manufactured the same way for years: Pour the mold for the handle, drill holes in the head for the bristles, insert the bristles up and down. What we were asking for would require new solutions.

"Although the company leaders in Boston supported our project, they were hesitant to apply the same kinds of revolutionary thinking and tactics to the rest of the corporation. Gillette is a huge, multinational company, and there was a tremendous sense of 'this is not the way we do things.' But we just kept directing people back to the clinical tests and showing them what the benefits could be for consumers.

"In the end, the brush was a huge success. Through rapid prototyping, we cut the time that it took to create a working test toothbrush from three months to five days. As a result, we tested 56 different prototypes. Through our clinical studies, we were able to show that the new brush cleaned better. We also filed 23 patents on the CrossAction Toothbrush, more than for any other Oral-B product. In its launch year, the brush generated \$53.4 million in sales, despite the fact that we didn't initially introduce the brush to many international markets.

"The project ended my career in big companies. I left Oral-B to go to a startup and then later became a free agent with my own company. I keep coming back to the fact that Rayona's course gave me a sense of my own voice and the confidence to use that voice."

action. They are attempting to move the organization into the future, or to move the product into the marketplace. And then there are the other people who are sitting in the stands or sitting in the press box who are talking about what could or should or would have happened.

In the same way, there are conversations that happen on an individual level that head somewhere, and then there are those that just spiral downward. A couple of years ago, I was talking to a colleague, and I was kind of whining about somebody I worked with who was being an ogre. And my colleague listened and then said, "Okay, I just have one question. What are you building a case for?" And I said, "Well, he's domineering, and I'm getting screwed over." And she asked, "Is that what you're committed to?" I said, "Uh, that would be no." And she didn't say another word.

I took out my Post-its and wrote this question: What are you building a case for? I stuck it to my computer. I was so quiet the next week. Whenever I went to open my mouth, I noticed that I was preparing to build a case for something. Now, if I were building a case for the transformation of gender equality on the planet, then okay, that's a conversation I want to have. If it were a conversation to whine or complain about traffic (about which I can do nothing), then I could either have that one or not have that one. If it were a conversation based on gossip or a rumor, then I wouldn't have that one. I became hyperaware that everything coming out of my mouth was building a case for something—often, for something that I wasn't really committed to.

### **You talk about breakthroughs on a personal level as well as on a company level. How does that happen?**

You start out with a commitment to acquire a competency. You want to be good at something, so you kind of existentially declare your commitment by saying, "I want to be something. I want to achieve something." Then you go into learning mode. As soon as you learn, you've got to practice. Only two things can come from practice—failure and success—and they both have to come before any real learning can happen. But we have a love-hate relationship with success and failure—that is, we love success and we hate failure.

That's more of an adult phenomenon, by the way. When little kids are first starting to walk and to pick up and drop things, they're fine. There's no judgment associated with those things. Everything's an experiment to them. But by the time people get to be adults, they have almost no tolerance for failure. And that is a very, very

dangerous context to have if you want to be a lifelong learner, because the only way to learn is through failure. That's another one of those "aha" moments: when you realize that people work in organizations that religiously try to reduce the risk of failure, when the only way to grow is through experimentation, practice, and risk.

**[CONFIDENCE AND COMPETENCE]**

**Risk is uncomfortable, of course. How do you persuade participants to face that discomfort head-on?**

Women in particular tend to have confidence issues. So I'll go around the room and ask people how many of them would like to have more confidence as a result of being in the class. Almost all of the hands go up. I say, "Okay, I'm going to make you a deal. I'm going to make you a counteroffer. I'm not going to promise to give you more confidence. I'm going to promise to give you more *competence*. And I'm going to ask you to look and see where confidence comes from." Then I ask how many of them think of confidence as a prerequisite—how many of them will do something if they feel confident enough to attempt it. All of the hands go up. Then I ask them what they are confident about in their lives and how they got to be confident about those things. Whether it's horseback riding or shipping products or developing software code, they all got confidence by doing something over and over again. Oh, so then confidence is an *aftermath*, not a prerequisite? Bing, bing, bing, bing!

Then it hits them: They've been spending their whole lives waiting to be confident before trying something new, when they couldn't possibly be confident until they're competent. That's transformational, because it suddenly sheds light on whole arenas of restriction and impediment that have nothing to do with anything other than the context from which they're viewing the situation or their lives or themselves.

We're in the organizational- and community-leadership business. We want to enable people to lead change, but you can't lead change unless you've got a profound sense of appreciation and respect for learning. And you need to have something to aspire to that's bigger and more compelling than what you've got.

**Pulling off change is one thing. But how do you make sure that your amazing work gets noticed?**

Women often find themselves working in organizations where they deliver an enormous amount of value that doesn't get registered.

In sports, of course, you have a very handy object called a "scoreboard." And what it does is register? It shows progress being made and value being delivered. So if you get a hit or score a run or make an out, it's registered. Organizations don't have scoreboards—they have financial statements. And those are a very narrow picture of what's happening. So we work with women to create registers, to create scoreboards. They could be in the form of butcher paper. They could be in the form of a report. They could be in the form of an audio tape.

One participant I worked with sent out a voice mail asking her direct reports to get back to her with results that they had produced the previous month on a new product launch and what those results allowed for: What do those results make possible now in terms of the product? What can we do better or more easily? What will this product contribute to our customers? She put all of the responses on a cassette tape and gave it to the CEO. She asked him to listen to it on his way to work. He was touched by the quality of his people and by the good work that they were doing. But he also appreciated that level of insight into strategy. And he registered the accomplishments of her entire team. It only cost 99 cents for a blank audio tape—and took five minutes. So registers can take any form. But if you don't have a register, there's no place for your work to show up. That's a big part of the disconnect with women: Their value isn't registered, so they're not moving up in the food chain.

**What are some other relatively easy-to-change practices that perpetuate gender inequity?**

Well, in the case of the advancement of women, a lot of organizations have unconsciously perpetuated a military model of command and control. If you actually look at how those organizations are set up and how they get work done, they look a lot like the 12th infantry in Vietnam. A lot of metaphors and a lot of strategies are based on beating down the other guy and on channeling information very carefully to a small number of people.

These are the kinds of things that affect women's advancement. The criteria that companies use for selecting board members or senior executives are often based on traditional, military models: How many years has this person been in the field? Has she made her way up the ranks? They're not always looking for the most innovative thinker, or for the most provocative-but-reliable manager in terms of developing people while delivering the goods. Those kinds of criteria don't necessarily arise, so it begs the question, "Where are you looking to recruit for your board or your executive team?" And



## HOW DO I TAKE THE NEXT STEP?

**Robin Selden**  
VP and general manager,  
Core Technology Group,  
FaceTime  
Communications  
Marketing  
breakthrough: Led her  
company to dive into a  
new product category  
Attended Sharpnack's  
session: Spring 1995  
Age: 39



**Herstory:** "When I took Rayona's class, I was a marketing manager of technology at Adaptec, a company that makes storage interfaces for computers. I knew that my long-term goal was to be COO and president of a high-tech company, but I wasn't sure what I had to do to get there. Rayona's class is all about believing that no goal is too wild to achieve. So I mapped out where I wanted to be and worked backward to figure out what kinds of projects I needed to work on in order to get there.

"One opportunity that I could take advantage of at Adaptec was to take the lead on a product launch, which I hadn't done before. At the time, the company didn't produce any multimedia products, and I was convinced that that was where the market was going to go. There was a technology protocol called FireWire that I was particularly interested in. It allowed you to stream video and audio from a digital camera to your computer. The protocol wasn't being used very widely then, because not many consumers had camcorders. But I was willing to bet that if prices dropped, people would want to hook up their cameras to their computers.

"I spent a lot of time researching the market to build a case for our senior management team. That was probably the toughest part of the project: the pressure to stay on top of the market and make accurate predictions. Once I had won the confidence of my team and the rest of the company, I didn't want to make a mistake and lose that. I was asking my team to trust me to expand the company's brand, and that took a lot of relationship building.

"We created video cards that fit into the PC slot, and we also wrote the compression software. We developed the physical cards and the code itself, both of which were new processes for the company. I had to find distributors and suppliers outside of our network, and I had to sell the idea of the market potential at each level.

"The business was started in 1996, and we launched our product the following year. Adaptec was the first in the market to provide a complete hardware and software solution for FireWire. When the camcorder market took off and prices dropped below \$1,000, we were well positioned to take advantage of it. Revenue-wise, that product didn't represent a huge share of Adaptec, but it did allow a new successful business to grow within the company.

"The best lesson for me was that, because I'd taken Rayona's class, I knew that it was time to leave Adaptec after the project was completed. I'd gotten the experience that I needed, and I was ready to take the next step."

generally, I don't take issue with the fact that companies are looking for good, solid business performers. I just think that they define strong business performers through very small lenses.

### How much progress has been made toward creating a more equitable workplace for women?

We've been heating up the water for a long time, and the glacier is finally moving. I would like to see us doing much more to celebrate the accomplishments of women leaders, rather than continuing to focus on the obstacles that women face. It's not that we should ignore the deficits, it's just that there's an enormous amount of great stuff happening that doesn't get any airtime. Going back to my sports background, I compare it to the 1950s, when it was an unequivocal "medical certainty" that a human being could not run a mile in less than 4 minutes. But Roger Bannister didn't believe that, so he ran it in 3:59:40. There was all this fanfare about it, and it was the best thing that could have happened. Another guy did it about a month later, and a few more a couple of months later. I think of women's accomplishments in terms of the sub-four-minute mile. We have to publicize the breakthroughs so that we can change perceptions about what can be done.

That's why the Institute for Women's Leadership has started a consortium for breakthroughs in women's leadership. I was so sick and tired of reading analytical reports and overwhelmingly negative statistical evidence and not reading much of anything about people getting out there and putting ideas into play. We're recruiting 6 to 10 companies to commit the next two years to causing a breakthrough in the advancement of women in their organizations. They will share best practices with one another and leverage resources, so that if one group of women is great at mentoring and the other group of women is great at recruiting, then each company will benefit from the other's expertise.

At the end of two years, I want to publish the progress results using a breakthrough strategy, which is what all of our work is based on—breakthrough change, rather than incremental change. We can't just crawl person by person up the ladder and say, "Well, we got one more off." Give me a break. We've got millions of transistors on a little piece of silicon that you can barely even see. We've got people walking on a space station up in the sky. There's no reason that we can't achieve breakthroughs in the work of advancing women. ★

CHERYL DAHLE (CDAHLE@FASTCOMPANY.COM), A FAST COMPANY SENIOR WRITER, IS BASED IN SILICON VALLEY. CONTACT RAYONA SHARPBACK BY EMAIL (RAYONA@WOMENSLIADERSHIP.COM), OR LEARN MORE ABOUT HER WORK ON THE WEB (WWW.WOMENSLIADERSHIP.COM). OR CALL (650) 366-7350.