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WOMEN *of* DISTINCTION



RAYONA SHARPNAK
CEO,
Institute for Women's
Leadership

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Rayona Sharpnack didn't have formal lessons or even a legitimate tennis outfit when she won Nevada's women's amateur tennis championships in both singles and doubles at the age of 15. She won because she had three older brothers to keep up with and a policy of never letting the ball bounce twice.

Thirty-nine years later as founder and chief executive officer of the Institute for Women's Leadership, she maintains that philosophy of creating your own context and she's still not dropping many balls. The former pro women's softball player has formed the for-profit Institute for Women's Leadership, where she gives seminars to the likes of Fortune 500 companies such as Cisco Systems Inc., Charles Schwab Corp. and Visa International; governments such as the Australian government; and start-up businesses, nonprofits and individuals.

Through training and consulting she aims to help both women and men break through perceived barriers to help them reach or set goals in their professional and personal lives. "The vision of the company is that a

One of the biggest catalysts that propelled her to form the institute was serving four years on the women's athletic board during college fighting for Title IX. She played volleyball, basketball and softball but wasn't eligible for any scholarships like her brothers and got into enormous debt trying to pay for her education at the University of Nevada in Reno where she earned a bachelor's of science degree in physical education in 1973. After college Ms. Sharpnack played short stop, pitched and was general manager for the San Jose franchise of the International Women's Professional Softball League from 1976 to 1979.

At her institute she uses a multidiscipline approach including psychology, linguistics, physics and sociology.

"These programs help people reconnect to what really is important to them. In business it's my experience that that's kind of unusual," says Sandy Caldwell, who started taking seminars at the institute when she was manager of OEM marketing for Milpitas tech company Adaptec Inc. The classes helped her remotivate a demoralized team within the company.

After 18 years in the tech world, Ms. Caldwell also gained the confidence through Ms. Sharpnack and her seminars to pursue her long-time dream of opening a birth center staffed by doulas. She has incorporated the business and is now working on getting nonprofit status.

"She's impacted the lives of so many people, and through the people, she's impacted the companies," Ms. Caldwell says.

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