

Strides made, but the walk is far from over

Institute for Women's Leadership works to further the advancements made by women in business

The Institute for Women's Leadership is a consulting organization that runs "Women Leading Change," a \$2,500 three-day program that promises to be a defining career moment. The program is held bimonthly, both with open enrollment and in-house at companies worldwide.

Reporter Christina Bellantoni sat down with the Institute's founder and president Rayona Sharpnack in IWL's Redwood City headquarters to talk about the strides women have made in Silicon Valley and the challenges still ahead.

What is IWL's philosophy?

Once you remove the barriers to what is possible — and once you enable women to reclaim their power, passion and vision — then oftentimes it leaves them wanting to make the world a better place.

Rather than work from the bottom of the heap, IWL wants to be sure there is a woman's voice at every decision-making table when it comes to architecting the future.

We chose women as our business focus because women are one of the highest points of leverage for changing the future. They have an ability to build communities and lead change in organizations.

Do men play a role in "Women Leading Change"?

We get male visitors on occasion, but we've never had a man here the whole time. We were asked by Charles Schwab to design a co-ed version of the program, and we've done that successfully.

What are some of the program's long-term benefits?

We promise that every one of our customers is within two phone calls of any resource they need.

How would you describe the gender divide?

A massive unconscious enculturation whereby men and women are raised in different environments with different messages about who, how



RAYONA SHARPNAK Work-life balance is the biggest issue for working women, says Sharpnack (standing).

and what they can be.

For instance, men are taught from an early age to size up where others are in the power chain. Women are taught from an early age to disseminate power, equalize it. Uncreative initiatives or suppressive environments aren't a result of malintent but rather a function of an unconsciousness — certain things we are doing or not doing.

What evidence supports its existence?

You can't question the statistics of how many women are sitting at board tables, in CEO seats or are at director levels and above positions in organizations. It is like a scoreboard in a softball game. It doesn't matter if you feel good playing the game — if you have less points than the other team, you are losing.

What types of scoreboards?

Some of the ones we have can be amplified. IWL spearheaded a consortium for breakthroughs in women's leadership. This was a commitment to have companies — serious about advancement of women — get together over two years to share best practices, brainstorm, forge alliances, share resources in a way that will dramatically advance women. In the same way the sub-four minute mile opened up new opportunities in track and field, the same way a consortium will open a new flood for the advancement of women ... we want to start an epidemic.

Where do you see women going in the next two years?

The 21st century is a unique window of opportunity. With the power of technology and mass media distribution — and particularly with the innovation of the Internet — women are synergizing in ways beyond anything we ever had access to before, mobilizing those who were voiceless and suddenly have a collective voice. With more women in leadership positions, we will change things.

I saw film footage of a glacier breaking free in Alaska. Well, how many years was that glacier slowly moving? The advancement of women is already under way, it's more a question of when are you going to take the snapshot?

What companies are setting this standard?

Charles Schwab has the highest number of women in their senior management, at the board level, at the executive management level [companywide]. Throughout the organization, gender, for the most part, isn't an issue.

What have you done to practice what you preach?

I limited how much travel I would do when my daughter was young to demonstrate that having children and being very successful in business don't have to be mutually exclusive.

What is the biggest issue for women in the workplace today?

You can't avoid the issue of work-life balance.

On any given day, a typical Institute client would be a woman who is in a committed relationship, has children,

has parents she takes care of, has management accountability, has a body she has to take care of, and in all that can't find enough hours in the day to do it all well.

Who are the most powerful women in the valley, and who are the up and comers?

Unequivocally Carly Fiorina of HP. She is such an exemplary leader, has taken on one of the largest corporations in the world and is doing a stellar job of shifting the culture and producing business results. Meg Whitman of eBay, Carol Bartz of AutoDesk, Marion Sandler of Golden West Financial, Emily Duncan of HP, Aida Sabo of Agilent Technologies. These women are, in their own way, leading massive change.

Up and comers wouldn't be individuals that people would recognize. They are the women in the trenches, banging out organizational objectives, forging new alliances — they are the unsung heroes of Silicon Valley.

What is a lesson you've learned?

To collect failures. If you're not failing, you aren't setting the bar high enough.

Anything else?

I would love to see the media be more responsible for their role in the discrepancy between the acknowledgment of women's contributions and men's contributions.

TV and advertising media need to quit reducing women to what they wear and how they look. I wish, in our lifetime, the kinds of images we grew up would be placed in a museum as a reminder, like old World War II army helmets.

You can reach Rayona Sharpnack at rayona@womensleadership.com and Christina Bellantoni at cbellantoni@svbizink.com.