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— **profile** —

## A league of her own

### Sharpnack coaches women to be leaders

BY KAREN RODRIGUEZ  
*Business Journal staff writer*

**R**ayona Sharpnack's favorite saying is "jump and invent water on the way down."

As a single mother, the sister of three older brothers and the child of divorced parents, Ms. Sharpnack sees possibility where others see limitation.

She came to realize her strength 10 years ago when invited by Sun Microsystems Inc.'s human resource director to discuss a program for women's leadership. She had no notion of a "glass ceiling" until then.

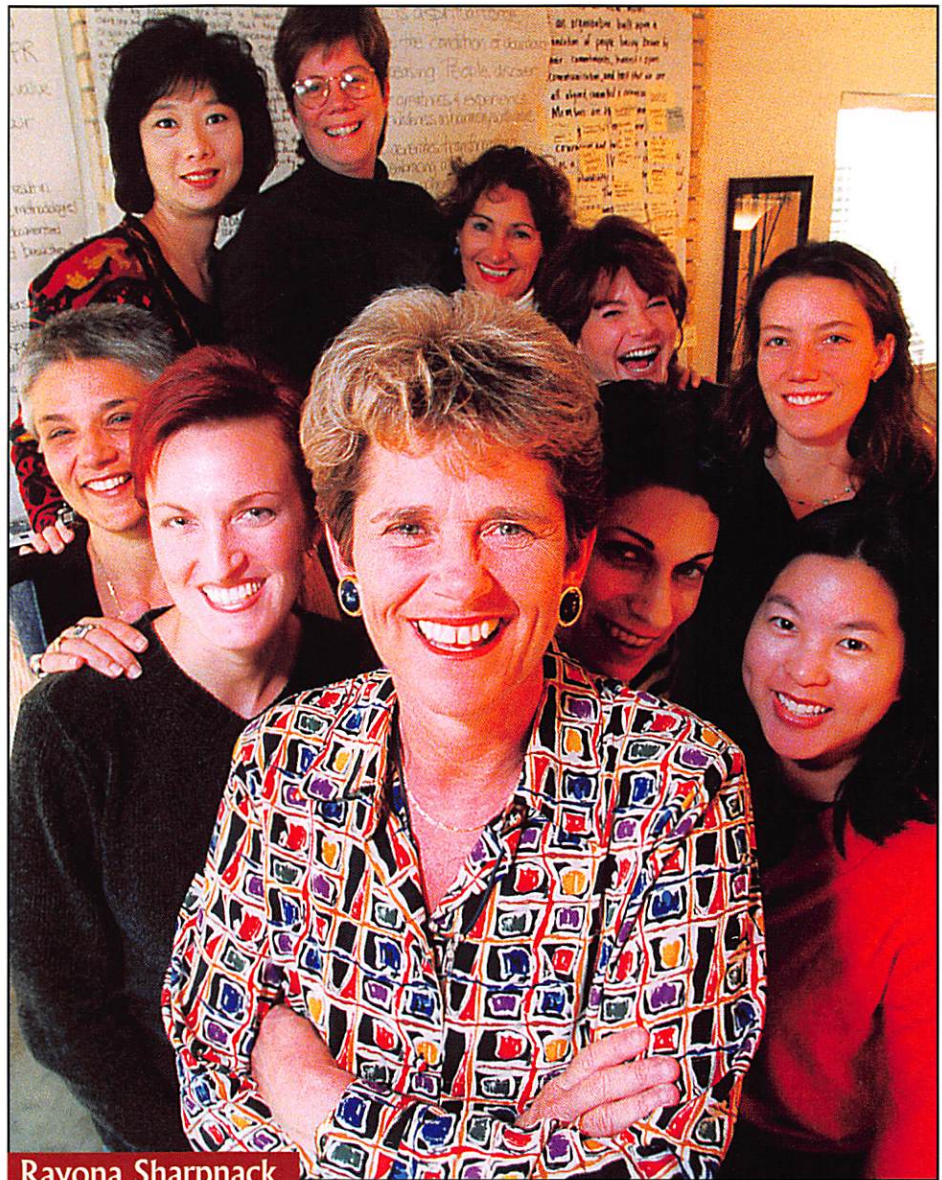
"It was an area I'd never experienced," confessed the energetic 48-year-old, as she simultaneously managed construction workers at her new home in Redwood City, confirmed details over the phone with client Women.com and finalized plans for a conference on Prince Edward Island. "I had never related to anything as a barrier."

Ms. Sharpnack is founder of the Institute for Women's Leadership, a consulting organization based in Redwood City. Her organization travels worldwide to help women identify goals they want to achieve in the workplace and gives them the necessary communication and leadership tools to get there.

Her winning approach was engineered during her youth.

At 11, Ms. Sharpnack was a national record holder in the Junior Olympics for the longest softball throw. At 16 she won the Nevada singles and doubles tennis championship.

Throughout high school and college she



**Rayona Sharpnack**

DENNIS G. HENDRICKS PHOTO

played sports, then ventured into semi-professional and professional softball.

In 1978, while playing professional softball for the International Women's Softball League, she led a strike against the owners of the San Jose franchise, questioning their business practices.

"It took a lot to put a lifelong dream at stake for moral principles," said the youthful Ms. Sharpnack.

Rather than accepting life as it is, Ms. Sharpnack has a way of carving out life as it should be.

In fourth grade she decided she wanted to



become a physical education teacher, long before such a position had been created for women in her school.

She left the teaching profession after seven years because she was fed up with the education system's resistance to innovation.

Naturally Ms. Sharpnack's idealism and fiery spirit has rubbed off on her teenage daughter. When Chelsea was just eight years old she told her mother: "If you die before you change the world, then I'll take over."

Ms. Sharpnack reserves a lot of time for her daughter. She moved her business into her home so she could be there in the afternoon and has coached her daughter's sports teams.

Tough-minded and self-directed, Ms. Sharpnack was able to take her skills in coaching into the lucrative corporate world in the late 1980s.

She met with female employees at Sun and other Bay Area companies, hearing about the inequities and the invisible and unrewarded contributions women were making in the workplace.

"We found no women in upper management, talked to women who had left because of insufficient opportunities, and others who lost multiple promotions to male counterparts that they had groomed," said Ms. Sharpnack. "It was a tragedy of lost human opportunity."

A self-proclaimed idealist, Ms. Sharpnack made it her personal battle to develop a program that would empower women and teach them how to partner with men. Drawing on her experience as a teacher, a coach and several years of graduate study in psychology and counseling, Ms. Sharpnack created a breakthrough program. The program led to her founding in 1991 the Institute for Women's Leadership.

"We knew we were 10 years ahead of our time," said Bonita Banducci, also a management consultant who worked with Ms. Sharpnack developing the women's leadership program. "The two of us were complete pioneers in this area."

"Rayona is the powerhouse; she's the designer of the work she is doing now — her emphasis is on breakthrough thinking

for women. She gets to what is at the heart of women and their passions about their work," Ms. Banducci said.

Her conferences take place six times a year in the United States, Australia, Brazil and Canada. Additionally, Ms. Sharpnack heads up global projects and consults with Fortune 500 companies, including Compaq Computer Corp. and Hewlett-Packard Co.

"I get a consistent response. Women say the individual tools Rayona has developed have improved their communication with managers because they are able to separate the facts from their interpretations" said Kay Fletcher, marketing specialist for Compaq, who after taking the course created a network of women leaders inside Compaq.

Ms. Sharpnack is now conducting a coed version of her leadership program for Charles Schwab, Inc. and the "guys rave about it," she said.

If businesses could leverage what women bring as opposed to fitting them into the male-created system, they would be more productive, more satisfied and ultimately better off, said Brian Flegg, a consultant with Generative Leadership Group in N.J.

"Rayona's game is we have 50 percent of the population with this massive potential unused, how do we tap into that potential without weakening the other 50 percent," said Mr. Flegg.

Women executives and managers at Compaq who have taken Ms. Sharpnack's course say they gain skill in choosing what's best for them personally in the work environment, instead of accepting something that's inappropriate and then getting stuck, said Ms. Fletcher, marketing specialist for Compaq who took the course before becoming close friends with Ms. Sharpnack.

"On personal issues when I call her it's like she gives me a place to start over. She has a way of speaking to me that makes everything clear — she doesn't give advice or tell me what to do," said Ms. Fletcher. "It's not a quality I see in very many people."

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## BIO

**Title:** Founder and President

**Company:** the Institute for Women's Leadership

**Age:** 48

**Birthplace:** Susanville

**Residence:** Redwood City

**Education:** Bachelor's degree in Physical Education, University of Nevada, Reno, 1973

**Family:** Daughter, Chelsea, 12

## UP CLOSE

**Essential business philosophy:**

Ready, fire, aim aim, aim.

**Best way to keep competitive edge:** Be an active and voracious learner about everything from your personal development to your customer's needs to innovative trends.

**Guiding principle:** Look for leverage and the ability to contribute to others in everything you do. Be interested, not interesting.

**Yardstick of success:** When I am able to visit Hillary Clinton simply by making the request of her gatekeepers.

**Goal yet to be achieved:** \$1 million in annual personal earnings is a monetary goal that has big implications for me and is especially motivational for my daughter.

**Word that best describes you:** Innovative risk taker.

**Best business decision:** Creating The Institute for Women's Leadership at a time when I didn't have the "necessary prerequisites" to take on such a bold initiative.

**Worst business decision:** Working alone for so many years not only didn't produce the future that I wanted but robbed me of many gifts that others could have contributed.

**First choice for a new career:** Global ambassador for women's empowerment. I don't think the job exists yet but that has never stopped me before.

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