



WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT

## WOMEN: OWN YOUR SUCCESS

by Robin Merle, CFRE

*It was another world last February when Robin led a panel discussion with global leaders called “Women: Own Your Success.” The pandemic interrupted the posting of her article. Now, it’s time to bring it back. It’s more important than ever to remember we’re not alone but part of a community.*

Three women from very different backgrounds and with different stories about how they succeeded inspired a special gathering hosted by Women In Development, New York. The speakers had achieved global prominence in the corporate sector, the non-profit world, and the entrepreneurial space. Their journeys differed, but their collective wisdom empowered the audience to clear the hurdles that most women face at some point in their careers. As the leader and moderator, I had a front-row seat to this remarkable conversation. From this vantage point, I will share some of the insights and tips to ensure they reach women beyond the audience that was in the room.

McKinsey partner Gayatri Shenai began her career as one woman among many men in the Information Technology (IT) field. Gayatri was deliberate about designing her ascendancy. For example, she would mark her calendar to meet with someone every six weeks who could teach her about leadership or a certain skill set. Today, she serves both public and private sector organizations with deep expertise in digital, technology, and analytics, helping her clients improve business operations. She is also the cofounder of the McKinsey Women in Technology & Operations Conference which brings together the most influential female chief technology executives in North America.

Lindauer CEO Deb Taft believes in shattering one’s comfort zone to seize opportunities. She took her first jump from banking to fundraising early in her career. She cultivated friends and colleagues in many sectors, moving often to collect experience as a managing director for Grenzebach Glier and Associates, CDO of Girl Scouts, USA, and Chair of the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, to name just a few of her roles. When someone called with a new opportunity, Deb weighed the risk with her wife, clear-eyed about the potential fallout should she fail. Then she jumped, again and again, in a seemingly Swiss cheese plan of calculated risk that landed her in her current global leadership role.



Global Talent Leader for the Dupont Corporation and certified professional coach Crystal Chavis directs all the core talent management processes for Dupont in North and South America, Asia Pacific, and Europe. Crystal drove more than five hours with a broken foot from Baltimore to New York for this event to speak the truth that she felt needed to be shared with a group of women she had never met. A self-described professional humanitarian, Crystal's aphorisms lifted the room in spirit, imparting the courage and naked truths that come from years of experience. Crystal has a calling, which she exercises with humble acceptance and fierce resolve.

Their collective message was simple: This is who we are. Know yourself, respect yourself, and move forward. As you rise, help other women do the same. Here are some of the insights:

### **Take Calculated Risks to Advance your Career**

- Risk-taking is part and parcel of being on this earth to make an impact.
- Advancement doesn't come through incremental change. It comes from leaping forward.
- A calculated risk means you take stock of what could happen if you fail and if you're willing to endure those circumstances. It also means being realistic about your reasons for jumping forward.
- Having the right sponsor and mentor base can help women take risks. Others may see you in a role before you do and give you the confidence to change.
- Don't focus on negativity, but do the opposite. Reflect on what makes your resume stronger and what makes you stronger than you were a month ago. It will help you move forward.

### **Get Yourself a Set of Sponsors and Mentors**

- A sponsor is someone who advocates for you when you're not in the (virtual) room. Talent discussions are held all the time by members who are at the top of the house, senior leaders. If your sponsor is invited into that circle, she can say, "Have you had a conversation with her? She should be someone on your watch list." A mentor on the other hand can give you wise counsel, perspective that you hadn't thought of. It's someone who has been where you want to go.
- Sponsoring can occur at many levels in an organization—in a smaller way in an informal organization or in a structured way in a larger organization. Work within your organization's culture to build a relationship with a sponsor.
- A sponsor creates opportunities for you and believes in you and sees your strengths that you do not. A mentor helps you when you need a supporting shoulder. At work, we need both. Sponsorship is an organic relationship, not a buddy-up approach. We are much better off finding a sponsor with common roots. Sometimes, we can treat each other as data sources. Get to know one another. Be curious and you will find the right sponsor for you.



## Support the Journeys of Other Women

- Women should always be asking themselves, “Who am I bringing along?”
- How far do we think we’re going to get without supporting each other? Competition is contextual. Even if a woman loses a promotion to another woman, she’s better off because the woman who made it can turn around and help when the time comes.
- Women can actively build the skills of other women. Give women opportunities to have executive training, run a (Zoom) meeting, or develop presentation skills.
- Everyone needs help at some point. Honest feedback is a gift and we should share this gift with each other.

Please share and repost this article. The insights about taking calculated risks, finding and using mentors and sponsors, and bringing others along is possible, even necessary, in our virtual world. And remember, during these tough times for our profession, we’re a community.

*You can find Robin on LinkedIn, where you can read additional articles and contact her with your questions or comments.*