



Key Learnings from MyPhy's Women Leadership Conference 2019 (WLC19)

On November 5th 2019, just over 50 professional women gathered in Geneva to talk about leadership. With a good number of Swiss and Geneva residents present, others flew in from the United States, England, France, Slovenia, Israel, Kazakhstan, Pakistan and India. It was truly an international gathering and a sharing of strategies, ideas and opinions. Everyone had the opportunity to participate in the discussions and 22 of the delegates appeared in hour-long panels that provoked thoughtful questions, comments and responses. The keynote speaker, Diane Shoemaker of Philadelphia, who has spent the past 30 years choosing women leaders, gave valuable pointers on what she looked for in a rising leader and where some of those leaders are now.

The programme covered Women's Voices as Catalysts for Change, Global Challenges (Migration and Sustainability), the Intersection of Family and Work, Women on Boards, Difficult Conversations: Gender-Fair behavior, and Mentoring. Key learnings came from all the panelists and from the floor. It was clear that women who lead by example inspire countless others.

From each panel, certain messages and ideas stood out. The panels were prepared independently of each other but the discussions wove a cohesive thread throughout the programme. The narrative went something like this...

Changing the way we and others think about women's leadership requires disruption. To disrupt, one needs the courage of one's convictions that this is the right thing to do. Being courageous enough to disrupt the status quo, requires persistence, passion and innovation. It was beautifully summed up in the words of Eleanor Roosevelt – "I try to do one thing every day that scares me".



Continuing from the need to do things differently, was the need to be agile – women are great at this, though they may not always acknowledge it themselves. What we're also great at being is guilty; guilty that we focus on work when we should be focusing on the family or vice versa. It was put across as the paradox of choice.

The more choices we have as women, the more we seem to feel guilty about the choices we make professionally, given that most are driven by a desire to be perfect at everything. We simply set for ourselves standards that we would never set for others and then beat ourselves up when we don't reach those lofty heights.

(This reminded me of an event decades before ... I remember sitting next to the author of "Superwoman", Shirley Conran, at a professional women's lunch in the South of France and I told her that I had faithfully followed her advice but in my case Superwoman was all worn out. I was shocked when she agreed and then proceeded to tell me about her new book, Lace, quite a racy read at the time. She too was tired trying to do everything perfectly and had moved on to writing sexy best-selling novels. I was unsure what the message was for me but I certainly spent more time on leisure after that encounter...).

The focus on women who desire to be in a constant state of learning (rather than being impossibly perfect) can only be a good thing, as it sparks a virtuous circle of greater knowledge, greater potential to disrupt, more likelihood of creating more opportunities professionally or starting new businesses, which of course ultimately means more successful women. But it also means that women should make time for themselves and leisure.



For this process to come full-circle, women need to develop an abundance of strength and self-confidence, both key attributes that stop us limiting ourselves.

One of the ways we can keep on track is by having one or more mentors, sponsors or advisors who are successful women (or men!) leaders. They can be a sounding board as we uncover the answers ourselves and can offer wise words. The road ahead is never straight and we all need someone to help us navigate curves and to see crossroads not as obstacles but as opportunities. In short, they keep us moving (and growing) when we are unsure about the next step.



Women's leadership history tells us how some women have stepped up to the challenge and made an impact for the good of humanity through the leadership of others. The truth is that each one of us can be more, and do more for the common good with enhanced leadership skills and a strong supportive network. It is with this in mind that MyPhy's WLC20 is already being planned and with a new network created by MyPhy for this year's participants, women are already starting to believe that 'Of course I *can* do it!'

Authors: Susan Baragwanath and Cassandre Burgess, Co-Chairs of MyPhy's Women Leadership Conference 2019 (WLC19). Visit www.mypHY.com/event/womens-leadership-conference/ to register your interest to attend or be a sponsor of WLC20.