A low-tech take on a high-tech award

EDITOR’S NOTEBOOK  By Lucy Chabot

The night started innocently. I walked onto the ballroom terrace at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel (a lovely spot on this cool evening) and spotted Matt Becker, last summer’s winner of the Jeanne Bellamy Award for being a great boss for women. Naturally, I wanted to say hello. Crossing through the crowd, another man bumped me from behind.

“Pardon me, hon,” he said, not looking me in the eye when I turned to say excuse me, but at my butt. Uh-oh. It had started. The patronizing, the condescension. The exchange left me feeling as though he’d patted me on the head.

The crowd of mostly women on that terrace was sprinkled with men who had been nominated (or came to support the nominees) for WITI’s “first annual” Man of the Year award. WITI, pronounced “witty,” is Women in Technology International, and the South Florida chapter turned 1 year old in January. Victoria Usherenko founded the group with eight women. It now has 80 members.

These are smart, professional women. When they announced in August they would honor a Man of the Year, I cringed. Why? Why not honor a woman? Why thank a man for designing to use his power to help scoot a few women up?

To me, the idea for the award seemed to keep women in their secondary business role, almost saying that without the help of a big, strong man, they wouldn’t be able to succeed. Yuck.

Then I met nominee Paul Mueller, COO of VirtualCom, a B2B communications Internet protocol provider in Miami. He was “honored” to be nominated, felt “they [meaning the women on his staff] deserve more credit” than he did, and said he “liked to be a mentor.” He sounded rehearsed and my thoughts about this award went from bad to worse.

But then I met Dr. Joyce Slam, dean of the college of business at FIU. What a relief. We chit-chatted about her college’s plan to put together an e-commerce curriculum and the globalization of education. She was also a judge for this award and defended it to my criticism.

“Most of the CEOs [in technology] are men,” she said plainly. “If you want to highlight the programs that promote and mentor women, you’re going to have to honor a man.”

And for a few moments, I accepted that. Attitudes flow downhill. Mentoring and diversity programs start at the top and have to be embraced there if they are to be successful.

The truth is, men are in a position of power in most of America’s businesses, technology based or otherwise, and they do have to make the decision to promote a woman or not.

WITI chose Don Atkins as its Man of the Year. Atkins is IBM’s general manager of Latin America and has mentored more than 200 women in his career with Big Blue, which also happened to be a “giga-byte” sponsor for the event. Atkins created the Women Leadership Advisory Team to promote women in IBM’s Latin American bases. In fact, in his first 18 months in his latest job, he promoted 24 women, according to Sabrina Crow, CEO of Freedom Magazines International, who introduced him.

Making those promotions was not an easy task in Latin America’s “macho society,” as Atkins called it.

No doubt Atkins has done great things for women in a male-dominated industry trying to succeed in a male-dominated part of the world. He deserves kudos. Of some sort.

But Man of the Year from a woman’s group? Any warm fuzzy feelings I had began to fade, remembering some other comments and sights from the evening.

WITI didn’t provide a list of nominees or finalists, which seemed unnecessarily secretive for such an award. Wandering around asking people revealed that there were 10, and that Becker, Mueller and Atkins were in the running. When Atkins’ name was called, he didn’t seem surprised. He shook the hands of the two male judges and kissed the cheeks of the four female judges before pulling out a prepared acceptance speech.

Then Luis Navarro, CEO of Innerhost, gave a little sponsor speech pointing out three high-tech women who have made it — Hewlett Packard’s Carly Fiorina, Miami’s Diane Sanchez of Terremark subsidiary TerreNAP Data Centers, and Liz Saracheck, general manager of global solutions for StarMedia Network.

He ended his speech noting that “woody’s Man of the Year” was a great thing. He meant WITI, of course, but the flub was not lost on the audience.

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