Inspiring the next generation of female business leaders

As we continue to build and develop programs within the Abell H. Chapman Jr. Graduate School of Business, I can proudly report that one of our goals was realized recently when we hosted its first "for women, by women initiative entitled "Women in Business – Tapping the Power Within." Part of the Westheimer Lecture Series in Business Leadership, the networking reception and panel discussion was attended by female students and alumni of the Chapman School.

As enrollment in the school’s graduate programs increase, so does the number of women in our classes. We initiated this annual lecture series to further encourage and inspire these women. We wanted to provide a vehicle to help them learn what it takes to succeed in the ever-changing business world from women who have done so - particularly in fields not traditionally populated by women, such as technology.

We were fortunate to have three prominent local businesswomen lead our panel discussion: Reeta S. Atkins, CEO of Baja Corp; Shari Frischke, VP of industrial engineering for Latin America and the Caribbean at United Parcel Service (UPS); and Marta C. Villar, VP of e-business transformation planning and strategic alliances at IBM. Each woman shared valuable insights about their business experiences and talked about the challenges they faced along the way.

According to a recent survey sponsored by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, today’s typical business school dean is a 54-year-old male. That makes me an exception. Even before I became dean, I was a professor in management information systems, another male-oriented field. So much of what these women shared with the group sounded familiar to me.

As I see it, education has been a powerful tool for improving the status of women. More women entering graduate business programs provides better representation in the talent pool for businesses, which, in turn, should translate into greater economic empowerment and influence for women themselves. Moreover, leadership today is not as much about gender as it is about being able to motivate others about inspiring excellence and excelling in business development.

Our panelists understand and possess these qualities, but they also are women who have had their share of challenges. As each of them shared their personal stories, they also offered some good advice. Villar, the top Hispanic female executive at IBM, told the audience to be resilient. While setbacks are inevitable, she said, it is how you deal with them that makes the difference between defeat and success. Her formula: use setbacks as triggers for stretching personal boundaries. For tackling new challenges. That takes courage. Villar also remarked that she was fortunate to have had mentors who recognized her potential and encouraged her to take on the tough projects. She encouraged women in the audience to seek businesswomen they admire in their firms, as mentors as they pursue their career goals.

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According to a report from the Center for Women’s Business Research, the number of women-owned businesses continues to grow at twice the rate of all U.S. firms and currently stands at 5.5 million. The study, titled “Women-Owned Businesses in 2003: Trends in the U.S. and 50 States,” also reported that from 1997 to 2002, sales generated by women-owned firms increased by 99 percent nationally, nearing $1.1 trillion. In fact, a growing number of comprehensive management studies conducted by consultants across the country for companies ranging from high-tech to manufacturing to consumer services show that women executives score higher than their male counterparts on a variety of measures — from producing high-quality work to setting goals to motivating employees.

Yet despite this new generation of female business leaders and entrepreneurs, many continue to struggle to achieve a work-life balance. Many young women in the audience raised questions about this issue. Is it in the interest of sacrifices must be made if women want to achieve harmony or balance within their physical, spiritual, and family lives. However, as the women on the panel attest, each woman must determine what trade-offs are acceptable for her to attain fulfillment in both her personal and business lives.

Like our panelists on the program, I also recommend that female business students — tomorrow’s business leaders — set goals and develop strategies for reaching them. The more they focus on results, the more successful they are likely to be.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent.” The basic message was — and still is — believe in yourself and your talents. Anything is possible.

JOYCE J. ELAM is executive dean of the Abell H. Chapman Jr. Graduate School of Business and the College of Business Administration at Florida International University in Miami. Contact her at elam@fiu.edu or (305) 348-2754.