

Striving Toward More Women at the Top

Start-ups and large organizations typically have some pretty different needs from their leadership, but there is one thing they seem to have in common: both need more women at the top. How to achieve that is an issue that has been plaguing companies of all sizes for years, with many studies and articles published that mention contributing factors, such as the wage gap between men's and women's salaries or the challenges of navigating maternity leave policies. Next year, the results of a new study on gender parity are set to be released, but this time the methodology centers on the women who have beaten the odds.

"We are identifying women in leadership positions and using a 360° assessment method to understand how their peers, bosses, and subordinates view the idea of female leadership," says Annie Combelles, director of research and studies for the Women Initiative Foundation, which is fielding the project. "This, of course, includes men. We are absolutely convinced that gender parity will only be possible if men have different viewpoints about women in leadership."

Launched mid-2016, the study runs across three countries in Europe, with the objective of identifying best practices for achieving parity in both large groups and entrepreneurial-run orga-

nizations. "We want the results to show how organizations can change and what practices they need to adopt to enable a real transformation," adds Combelles. "We would also like to provide recommendations to universities and schools because everything really starts there." While one year is an ambitious timeline for such a major study, partnerships with BNP Paribas, Engie, ESCP Europe Business School, and the Stanford Graduate School of Business are providing support and, in some cases, already had internal groups working on gender parity initiatives.

The organization that conceived this study, the Women Initiative Foundation (WIF), was created in January 2016 to serve as "a think-tank to stimulate and contribute to the reflection on subjects such as gender diversity, the access of women to top jobs in the workplace, equal pay, etc.," according to its website. The idea for WIF grew out of the success of the Women Business Mentoring Initiative (WBMI), a group of mentors set up in 2010 to help female entrepreneurs establish and grow their businesses.

Both groups were founded by Martine Liautaud, an entrepreneur who cites gratitude toward the mentor that helped her set up her consulting firm as a reason she felt it impor-

tant to build a support organization for others. A graduate of Stanford's business school, she partnered with several other alumni in launching WBMI, which is also supported by WIF study partners BNP Paribas and Engie. More recently, Liautaud published a book, *Breaking Through: Stories and Best Practices From Companies that Help Women Succeed*, that expands the reach of WBMI's mission through evidence-based narratives that show how mentoring of all types can benefit women in business and ultimately move all companies on a path toward gender equality.



Annie Combelles

So far, WBMI mentors have personally assisted over 100 entrepreneurs with business growth and international expansion. Additionally, the group and

its partners have conducted two separate one-week executive programs at Stanford for 40 women entrepreneurs that focuses on the theme "Women in Leadership." Mentoring services are open to any business where a woman is the majority shareholder, as long as it is at least three years old. Combelles explains that the three-year rule is due to the fact that, in France, a start-up in its first three years has access to a lot of assistance, including incubators and accelerators, but after the third year, those opportunities diminish.

"The other type of 'prerequisite' we evaluate is that the leader has the capacity and capability to listen," explains Combelles. "We won't make decisions for anyone's business, but we want the leadership to be open to what we are suggesting." This includes a leader's willingness to share a little bit of her power. "Most of the time the women who set up these businesses manage absolutely everything

and, in that situation, it's very difficult to take time to assess the environment and think about the future."

Though Combelles joked to Liautaud that she had no connection to Stanford, she opted to become a mentor with WBMI because the success she experienced in building her own business made her feel that it was time to give back to others. The founder and chief executive officer of Insparit, Combelles created an information technology consulting and advisory firm because she saw an opportunity to apply her technical training and experience to other industries.

"I'd been an early adopter; for example, I was one of the first CMMI lead

appraisers in Europe," Combelles says. "With my background in producing software-centric systems, the idea was to take what I'd learned in certain domains and apply those same methodologies to other industries, like insurance, utilities, and banking, which had much less structured ways of developing software."

A graduate of an aerospace engineering school in France, Combelles began her career as a project manager for the Airbus 310 at a critical time. "It's barely in service anymore, but the Airbus 310 was the first plane with embedded computers for controlling all different phases of the flight," she explains. "It was a ten-year project,

from the proof of concept up through certification of the plane for commercial use. We had to invent a lot of concepts and architecture for the systems, so I learned a lot and also made a lot of mistakes," she continues, laughing.

Best Practices

Combelles also experienced a taste of what is involved in circulating best practices, when it was requested that she produce a number of white papers on how to do this type of work well. After moving on to another defense company, during which she switched from aerospace to nuclear projects, she then worked for one of France's nuclear authorities to study nuclear reactors. "It was a very interesting environment, but I was spending more time with unions than doing technical work, so I decided to leave and set up my own business," she says.

"Technology is about being on the leading edge, and so the point...is to help other companies find ways to use technology."



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