

## EXECUTIVE Roundtable Series

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### THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



Photos: Rob Cuni Photography

Standing, left to right: Yvonne Lembi-Detert, Personality Hotels/Engage Hospitality; Amanda Hite, STR, Inc.; Eileen Moore, Caesars Entertainment, Inc.; Lindsey Ueberroth, Preferred Hotel Group; Sarah Lourdes Chivi, New York University Preston Robert Tisch Center For Hotel, Tourism and Sports Management; Carrie S. McIntyre, Interstate Hotels & Resorts; Deanne L. Ayers-Howard, Esq., Howard Hospitality of Cascades, LLC; and Julie M. Cary, La Quinta. Seated, left to right: Niki Leondakis, Commune Hotels & Resorts; Angela Landgraf, Red Lion Hotels Corp.; Stephanie Sonnabend, 2020 Women on Boards; Michelle Tomlinson, Esq., Hilton Worldwide, Inc./Hilton Grand Vacations; Leigh Hitz, Stout Street Hospitality/Magnolia Hotels; and Valerie Ferguson, Denihan Hospitality Group



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## A View from the Top

### The Woman's Perspective

BY NICOLE CARLINO

What's it like being a female CEO? That's a question that wasn't asked at *Hotel Business*'s recent Executive Roundtable titled "A View from the Top: The Woman's Perspective," a decision that was met with approval from participants. Sponsored by *The Wall Street Journal* and held at the headquarters of Dow Jones & Company, Stefani C. O'Connor, executive news editor, *Hotel Business*, and managing editor, Roundtables, *Hotel Business*, moderated.

"I get asked all the time, 'What's it like being a female CEO?' which I think is such a weird question because I would assume it's just the same as being a male CEO," said Lindsey Ueberroth, president/CEO, Preferred Hotel Group, to a chorus of knowing laughter and groans around the table. "We've got the same responsibilities, and what I hope is

changing is when you're in a leadership position, you should be judged on your experience, your skills and getting the job done."

Amanda Hite, president/COO, STR, Inc. agreed. "For me, it's not about being a woman. It's that I was motivated," she said. "It doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman as long as you have that motivation and willingness to roll up your sleeves and solve problems; then you can achieve whatever goal you set for yourself."

Sarah Lourdes Chivi, a senior at New York University's Preston Robert Tisch Center For Hotel, Tourism and Sports Management, spoke to Ueberroth's point regarding change, noting that she grew up in a household where both parents worked full time. "My mother owns a company, so I grew up surrounded by women who were motivated—that's just how I was raised," she said, noting that she does see that more men hold executive positions, but

pointed out that she was currently sitting at a table surrounded by women in roles she would love to mirror someday. "I don't really see barriers for myself because I am motivated and I want things, and I will try my hardest to get them," she said.

While the women all agreed that executives should be judged on their individual traits and accomplishments and not gender, they did acknowledge there are general differences. "When I started my career, I thought I had to be like a man. I had read an article that said be cutthroat and ruthless. Boy, did I learn that was a mistake," said Yvonne Lembi-Detert, president/CEO, Personality Hotels/Engage Hospitality. "It backfired. I said why do I want to pretend to be something I'm not?"

Niki Leondakis, CEO, Commune Hotels & Resorts, stressed the importance of being your authentic self while still remaining aware of the fact that

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the business world is still very male dominated. "Someone said to me once, 'When in Rome,' and I was troubled by that because I interpreted that to mean I have to abandon myself. I actually don't think that you do," she said, noting that the business world is still one that was created by men and adheres to male social norms of behavior. "As we continue to advance, we're changing that, but... it's important to understand the landscape. I think the trick to being successful in a world that may not be your world is to be true to who you are, but recognize the differences... and if we can learn from each other and create a more balanced environment, that's where we get the best of both worlds."

Balance was certainly a word that caused a great deal of discussion amongst participants. "I still think there are too many times when the question being asked is 'How do you balance?'" said Valerie Ferguson, VP/operations, Denihan Hospitality Group. "These are questions that we don't ask of men. You make it happen if you want it to happen."

Deanne L. Ayers-Howard, Esq., managing member, Howard Hospitality of Cascades, LLC, said, "I probably killed myself the first 15 years of my professional career trying to achieve that elusive [work/life balance] goal. Really, I think the word balance needs to get knocked out of the ballpark. You cannot keep all the balls in the air at all times. There are going to be choices."

Stephanie Sonnabend, co-founder/chair, 2020 Women on Boards and former CEO/president of Sonesta International Hotels Corp., noted that the goal of 2020 Women on Boards is to raise the percentage of women on corporate boards in the U.S. to 20% or greater by the year 2020. "It is pretty much pervasive throughout all industries that there are not enough women on boards. In the *Fortune* 1000, it's 16.6% on boards," she reported. "The smaller the company, the worse gender diversity they have on their boards."

"It's been shown that companies with women on their boards are more profitable," Sonnabend continued. "It also sends a huge message throughout the whole organization that that company values diversity. It's not just diversity of gender—it's diversity of background as well, yet women still struggle to get a seat at the table."

"Think about why that is," said Julie M. Cary, EVP/chief marketing officer, La Quinta. "The board process is typically networking based." She brought the discussion back to balance, noting that, oftentimes, if a woman has to choose between going to a networking event or going to her child's hockey game, she chooses family. "Given the old way that these boards work, that is a barrier for women because we choose to put our time somewhere else, and those networks are very tight and very closed," she said.

Leigh Hitz, president, Stout Street Hospitality/Magnolia Hotels, added, "When kids leave, now women start to network at age 45-50. Well, men are way ahead of us. They've been doing it for 25 years before we even get to that point, so I think you see more CEOs and presidents that are women later in age perhaps."

Hite argued that it's possible for a woman to raise children and gain success at the same time. "I have two small children at home and I am oftentimes the only person in the room with small children at home," she said. "But this is also because I make sacrifices for the family... There are certain things that you just have to do if you have that motivation and you want to succeed."

Eileen Moore, regional president, Caesars Entertainment, Inc., added to that, noting that she often merges her work and personal life and brings her son to events. "Three things happen: My customers love it because they want to know more about me; my employees get to see me as a mom and you're role modeling for people on your leadership team that family is important; lastly, my son gets to see what I do everyday, so if I can't make the little league game, he understands why."

Ayers-Howard stressed that visibility should go beyond women's

personal lives. "I think it's very important and incumbent on each and every one of us to be active in whatever the applicable industry organizations are that you're involved with, and not just be passive members but be active members," she said, noting that she's very active in the National Association of Black Hotel Owners, Operators and Developers (NABHOOD).

While the executives discussed the challenges within the workplace, they also noted that the industry is changing. Angela Landgraf, SVP/corporate development, Red Lion Hotels Corp., recalled meeting a client at her first ALIS conference in 2005. "He said, 'How will I know who you are?' I said, 'I'll be the one in the skirt,'" she recounted. "Fortunately, today, I don't get to say that as often."

The executives also discussed changing workplace culture, which could allow for a chance at the aforementioned elusive goal of work/life balance. "I do think that we have the opportunity to change the culture in the organization, and as women leaders, it's important to do that," said Sonnabend.

Leondakis agreed. "While I don't have children, it's been a mission for quite some time to make it easier for women in the workplace who do have children to be able to take other time off to put family first when they need to and to put that out into the public," she said, noting that the flexibility absolutely extends to men too. "This is the way we're going to attract and retain the best talent in the workforce." She noted that her employees' priorities should be self, family and work, in that order. "Now you get the highest and best productivity of your people because they know it's OK... and they're fully committed and engaged to you."

"When we get to places of leadership, we have the opportunity to recognize that the men created the rules one way, but if we create that shift in the culture, men applaud it as much as women do," Sonnabend agreed. Ueberroth added, "You're seeing a lot more men, when their wife has a baby, want to stay home for a month and help raise that child. You're seeing this cultural shift, and I believe as women leaders, we're helping to do that."

Many of the executives noted that, with technology changing the way we work, flexibility of time and culture is critical to a company. Christina Komporlis, head of circulation, Dow Jones, said, "We have to allow the people who work for us to have the time they need during the day sometimes because we're taking their time when they're home."

The panelists discussed whether there even could be a separation between work life and home life anymore. "I think the horse is out of the gate with technology, quite frankly," said Michelle Tomlinson, Esq., senior counsel, Hilton Worldwide, Inc./Hilton Grand Vacations. "There's no way that we can keep up and be competitive. I do think you have to carve out time, but being completely disconnected is unrealistic."

Moore, however, noted that sometimes it's important to disconnect so your employees can grow. "They grow from that experience and you instill a trust in them. And, let's be honest, as leaders, if you could make every single decision, your delegates will allow you to. So you have to put that back on them and role model that as well," she said.

Carrie S. McIntyre, CFO, Interstate Hotels & Resorts, noted that how much disconnect is necessary is based on the individual. "It's all about your personal definition of happiness and your personal definition of success," she said.

The executives also weighed in on changes in the industry. Landgraf returned to the idea of technology, noting that it's changing the landscape. "Technology is key in our industry, which I think is ironic because when I got on board, technology was vapor—we couldn't understand it, we didn't want it," she said, noting that it's so important to Millennials.

Ueberroth noted that even the generation younger than



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- 1 Deanne L. Ayers-Howard, Esq., Howard Hospitality of Cascades, LLC (left) and Stephanie Sonnabend, 2020 Women on Boards
- 2 Christina Komporis, Dow Jones
- 3 Representatives from *The Wall Street Journal*, the exclusive host and sponsor
- 4 Carrie S. McIntyre, Interstate Hotels & Resorts
- 5 Left to Right: Eileen Moore, Caesars Entertainment, Inc.; Lindsey Ueberroth, Preferred Hotel Group; Sarah Lourdes Chivi, senior at NYU's Preston Robert Tisch Center for Hotel, Tourism and Sports Management; Valerie Ferguson, Denihan Hospitality Group; and Yvonne Lemb-Detert, Personality Hotels/Engage Hospitality
- 6 Michelle Tomlinson, Esq., Hilton Worldwide, Inc./Hilton Grand Vacations (left) and Eileen Moore, Caesars Entertainment, Inc.
- 7 Lindsey Ueberroth, Preferred Hotel Group
- 8 Eileen Moore, Caesars Entertainment, Inc.
- 9 Niki Leondakis, Commune Hotels & Resorts (left) and Angela Landgraf, Red Lion Hotels Corp.
- 10 Left to right: Stephanie Sonnabend, 2020 Women on Boards; Julie M. Cary, La Quinta; and Leigh Hitz, Stout Street Hospitality/Magnolia Hotels
- 11 Interns at *The Wall Street Journal*
- 12 Amanda Hite, STR, Inc.

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Millennials have to be looked at. "One of the major trends is multi-gen travel," she said. "We're actually doing a study on it and the statistics are amazing about how much children influence the decisions parents are making. Up to 62% would say that children influence their decision."

McIntyre noted that hotel owners face a big dilemma. "Brand loyalty is going away, yet the brands are in a dilemma themselves on how to keep up. When they make decisions to shift what the brand will be and look like, it's a capital investment for the owners. If they can't show that they're getting loyalty out of it, what do we do and what do they do?" she asked.

From the brand side, Cary noted that La Quinta has been focused on leveraging technology to improve the experience but still balancing capital. "There's one bucket of capital: Where's it going to go? We all have these decisions to make everyday, so what are we focused on?" she mused. "You can come up with all of these great ideas, but can you find the ROI? You always have to keep that in mind."

"I think all these trends, with technology, with Airbnb coming in, are opportunities that we can take advantage of," said Leondakis. "What I mean by that is people will be loyal to those experiences that they love. I think sometimes, in our industry, we get so caught up in the latest fad, that the art of hospitality falls down the priority list. The way we will continue to retain loyalty is through people. They might check in through technology, they might get into their room through their iPhone, but if we can remember it's all about people, we'll be able to compete in this marketplace that's changing." HB

## Support, consensus—and a smile—can go a long way

NEW YORK—At the *Hotel Business* Executive Roundtable "A View from the Top: The Woman's Perspective," sponsored by *The Wall Street Journal* and held at the headquarters of Dow Jones & Company, executives discussed the importance of fostering the next generation of leaders and gave their advice for rising to the top.

"We still need to foster growth of more women in this industry," said Valerie Ferguson, VP/operations, Denihan Hospitality Group. "You can only achieve goals with support, effective networking and being purposeful with what you want."

"A part of achieving goals as a woman is being willing and able to express what you want," noted Deanne L. Ayers-Howard, Esq., managing member, Howard Hospitality of Cascades, LLC, adding that when being direct, she always ends it with a smile. Michelle Tomlinson, Esq., senior counsel, Hilton Worldwide, Inc./Hilton Grand Vacations, highlighted the importance of being pleasant when being direct. "When women express what they want very directly, they're often seen as too aggressive or assertive, and it could backfire," she said. "We have to express what [we] want, but we also have to temper it with the reaction that we may get—that is something we just can't control."

Eileen Moore, regional president, Caesars Entertainment, Inc., said that when she reflects on her career choices, she's "taken a lot of zigs where most people would zag. I got a great piece of career advice: If it makes you uncomfortable, go for it. I work with a lot of young women and tell them: Don't feel you have to be the expert in everything. For about a decade, I was the expert and I really liked it. But once I pushed outside the comfort zone is when I really had true breakthroughs as a leader."

"You have to be able to take some calculated risks in your career and you have to be willing to take some assignments where you may not know what the heck



Valerie Ferguson, Denihan Hospitality Group

you're doing, and jump in and have confidence in yourself that you're going to figure it out. Look for people who can support you in that and help you," added Julie M. Cary, EVP/chief marketing officer, La Quinta.

The panelists also agreed that while taking risks is important, having support is just as essential. Christina Komporlis, head of circulation, Dow Jones, added that she's seen people lose their jobs because they went out on limbs without the support of others. "Make sure you get people on your side, and that way, you're not out on that limb by yourself," she said. "I think it's something that, as women, we're good at: getting consensus."

Moore added that another way for young professionals to get ahead is to make lateral moves and take different types of assignments. "They may turn out to be those things that have you leapfrog over other folks," she said. "Diverse experiences and not being pigeonholed into one track [are] what makes a great leader of the future."  
—Nicole Carlino