Nurturing Women Leaders
By Carolyn Schuk

Last week you didn’t have to look very far to see the diversity of events hosted by the Convention Center. You just had to hang around the first floor atrium.

During the AjaxWorld technology show early in the week it was home to solitary guys silently tapping on laptops and Blackberries. On Thursday it was full of groups of women from the Women's Leadership Exchange (WLE), noisily sharing advice and business cards — not a laptop in sight.

"I loved everything," bubbles Amelia Ceja, owner of 10 year-old Ceja Vineyards. The first Mexican-American winery president in the industry's history, Ceja got her start in winemaking as a child, helping her father pick Napa Valley grapes.

"It was exactly what I was seeking, especially because we're launching an Internet wine and food show. I met incredible women who are carving their own path."

The conference drew about 500 women from around the Bay, established businesswomen and entrepreneurs alike, from for-profit and non-profit enterprises as diverse in age, style and background as the participants themselves.

"A lot of women are doing phenomenal things," says WLE co-founder Leslie Grossman, "[These are] women who are shifting the paradigm for women."

Networking and education are the twin goals of WLE conferences. But unlike other networking events, the organization's founders -- Grossman and partner Andrea March -- assist the networking in a very creative way called "Dots and Stars."

On their badges, participants indicate two areas where they're looking for guidance (dots) -- for example, finance or marketing -- and two other areas where they can coach (stars). Then they simply match up the dots and stars.

Circulating around, you might hear a freelance journalist advising an international finance specialist considering going out on her own. Or the owner of a consulting company advising a recent divorcee on handling business tax and debt problems with business-partner ex-husband.

Over lunch, you might catch up with patent lawyer advising a technology specialist on intellectual property laws in California. In turn, the tech specialist advised the lawyer on setting up IT infrastructure.

And to unwind at the end of the day, you could enjoy some quality time with Tootsie Wootsie, an affectionate three year-old Labrador mix, known for "bringing out smiles in people’s hearts," according to Hansa who calls herself Tootsie's caregiver because, "you can never own her spirit."

In addition to networking opportunities, there were sessions on business challenges like converting website visitors to paying customers and financial strategies for business growth. The Interactive Information Center offered 'speed coaching' the WLE's experts as well as showcasing innovative woman-owned businesses.

"At most conferences, everyone has something they want to ask the speaker," explains Grossman. "So we decided to bring the speakers here [Interactive Information Center] three times during the day and give everyone who wants to ask a question a chance. It's five minutes of one-on-one coaching."

Rounding out the day was a morning keynote addresses by former HP Chair and CEO Carly Fiorina, a luncheon fashion show (plus five minute fashion consults and the opportunity to buy the clothes shown) with Jones New York stylist Lloyd Boston, and a closing address by futurist and author Edie Weiner.

Five year-old WLE has evolved its mission of providing business knowledge and connections for women...
running established businesses.

"When we started there was a lot for entrepreneurs, but we found there was almost nothing for women who wanted to grow their businesses," explains Grossman. "Most programs were very basic. We wanted to raise the bar, we wanted women to reach. We started the [new] membership program because women were asking ‘How do I join WLE?’"

This is the 25th national WLE conference, but the first in Northern California. Santa Clara offered a venue that could comfortably accommodate a large group while keeping an intimate feel, explains Grossman.

"This was WLE’s first time in Silicon Valley. We were looking for a space that would be comfortable and not gargantuan. We liked the feel of a ‘small’ convention center, which is what Santa Clara has, rather than a ‘large’ convention center.

"Another major factor [was], we really liked the people we met at the Santa Clara Convention Center," she says, adding, "They took a personal interest in WLE and our vision to create more women leaders in the world and our mission: to ensure women's success in business."

Silicon Valley Icon Defines Leadership

Regardless of your view of her tenure at HP, Carly Fiorina is an engaging and thoughtful speaker. In her morning WLE keynote talk she shared her thoughts on leadership and how it’s fundamentally different than management.

"Management is about producing acceptable results within known constraints and conditions," she explained. "A leader changes conditions because a leader sees and seizes possibilities.

"Most people pay attention to lagging indicators – balance sheet, income statements, stock price – things that represent decisions already made," continued Fiorina. "Leaders pay attention to leading indicators – a leader's job is to fulfill the potential of the business."

Fiorina’s leading indicators are customer satisfaction -- "Dell's customer satisfaction was declining meanwhile HP's customer satisfaction was increasing...Dell lost their number one position" -- rate of innovation -- "Cost-cutting only increases [short term] profit, innovation produces new customers" -- diversity -- "If you have people who all look the same...you have groupthink. Diversity is about success, not fairness, it’s about winning" -- and ethics -- "If you see a business cutting ethical corners bad things are going to happen sooner or later."

The bottom line isn’t about title or position, Fiorina said. "Leadership is about changing things for the better, seeing and seizing possibilities. Success has nothing to do with title, wealth or position. It’s about living a life that makes you happy and proud because you have made a positive difference."

Futurist Teaches Lessons Learned in Brooklyn

Lessons learned growing up in one of the Brooklyn's grittiest neighborhoods were the heart of WLE conference speaker Edie Weiner's humorous and down-to-earth analysis of where we are, where we're going, and what we need to do to get there – a talk she titles "Real Lessons Learned from Brooklyn and the Bronx."

One of those lessons is about the importance of play. "Growing up, we didn't have scheduled or programmed or organized play," said Weiner. "We had the street, the empty lots and the stoops." And, it goes without saying, no adult referees or coaches.

As a result, kids organized their own games, their own rules, and worked out their own disputes. In today's dynamic world, these are essential skills.

"Today the only barriers to entry [in any business] are onerous regulation which favors large companies," she said. Getting the customer is the easy part. "The business issue for then 21st century is: how do you keep the customer. Relationship marketing is not about sending a birthday card. It's about keeping your customers."

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