



Highlights from Women in Leadership Seminar

January 20, 2017

**Elizabeth (Liz) Blake, former SVP – Advocacy,
Government Affairs & General Counsel of Habitat for Humanity
International - “What I’ve Learned about Leadership from the Public,
Private & Nonprofit Sectors”**

We were extremely fortunate to have Liz Blake as our kick-off speaker for 2017. She personifies intellect, compassion and leadership character in every aspect of her life – and that includes years of executive experience in the public, private and nonprofit sectors.



In her remarks, Liz shared many personal viewpoints as well as the following self-descriptions:

- A woman of faith who translates her faith into action and always tries to do the right thing.
- A child of God; a work in progress.
- A woman born in New York to parents who were activists and taught her to let her voice be heard.
- A wife and mother who puts family first – despite being a professional, working woman throughout her life (including two marriages and a blended family of 5 children.)
- A leader who understands the importance of listening and the necessity of constantly working to be a better listener.
- A relentless optimist.
- A problem-solver who looks for ways to make systemic change and find constructive alternatives to disputes and differences of perspectives.
- A person who uses a dynamic mosaic as her construct of leadership; adds value by providing the missing piece.
- A believer in volunteerism and the many opportunities to build relationships and skills that can be further developed and used in other settings.
- A lawyer by profession but one who sees litigation as the last resort not the first.
- A believer that the sum of the parts is greater than the whole.
- A leader who likes to empower people and then let them go.
- An expert in community engagement including issues like land rights and women’s rights.

Liz also shared many compelling insights re gender differences and how those play out in the workplace.

- One reference Liz mentioned was Dr. Pat Heim, a psychologist whose work and consulting includes gender-based language differences. In male dominated work environments, she suggests that women need to understand more about the male language. Men don’t understand when a woman changes direction or focus in the middle of a meeting etc. Men tend to think in a linear manner (bottom line, the end game etc.) whereas women like to consider a number of options, possibly tangential to the original plan.
- We know that women’s brains are wired differently. Women’s thinking processes have been compared to a “pinball machine” – anything but linear.

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- Liz suggests that as a leader with male direct reports, you should try to get people on board but if someone continues to resist the change or sabotage results, then you should be willing to “fire” and do so early.
- Women in general are about relationships much more so than men. Men on the other hand understand hierarchy.
- Liz says she learned that in seeking a promotion or a certain position she wanted, she needed to tell her boss. Men typically do this, but women tend to think that hard work pays off and they don’t always express their ambitions or advancement interests. Don’t be afraid to ask for training or development opportunities. Discuss your desire for more responsibility and upward mobility.
- It’s said that women are promoted based on performance whereas men are promoted based on their potential. If this is true, then women must look for ways to demonstrate their potential for the next level. Tom Peters says, “You have to manage your own career.” Can’t wait for others to do it for you.
- Be careful of getting “in someone else’s swim lane” – i.e., try not to directly step on a peer or your boss’s toes in terms of what you go after. Be aware, know the lay of the land. Try not to upset the geosystem but don’t give up.

Other insights from Liz:

- It is advantageous to have “pre-meetings.” Decisions are rarely made in a planned meeting. If you have a proposal or recommendation or action you want to get approved, do your homework prior to the planned / official meeting.
- Re volunteers, Liz pointed out something that a lot of us don’t acknowledge. That is, there is a definite cost to any organization to have volunteers (training, communication, scheduling and administrative time, follow-up and reporting, etc.) She suggests including them in the training process, i.e., let them be the trainers. It’s paramount that they have a positive experience, feel their time is well spent. It’s true that you don’t lead volunteers the same way that you lead people in the workplace, but volunteers typically respond well to structure, good organization and the opportunity to make suggestions.
- In any situation, you can’t make others change. They have to want to change. You can’t control them, you can only control yourself and your reactions.
- Do not be afraid. Tough times do make you stronger. She knows from her own life experiences that this is true.
- Leadership is NOT about you!

Two major takeaways:

1. When there is serious issue, and there are major differences of opinions and even emotional reactions, you need to think strategically. Gather the facts, prepare a white paper, include the societal (or other type) costs of NOT doing anything, propose alternatives, etc. Educate people on the issue – pros and cons. It may be the only way to get people on either side to come to the table if talking isn’t getting it done.
2. Liz has made over 60 volunteer trips to Haiti. Working to help the people of Haiti learn and make improvements themselves, she knows that “nothing is impossible.”