



WOMEN'S
LEADERSHIP
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The pipeline is leaky

Insights gained from VBOT's full-day event, *B.C. Economic Forum: Women as a Catalyst for Growth*

BY LOUISE WATSON

On Oct. 24, *The Vancouver Board of Trade* partnered with *The WEB Alliance of Women's Business Networks* and the *Premier's Women's Economic Council* to present a forum aimed at advancing the conversation about women in leadership into action strategies for economic growth. Below are some insights from Louise Watson, Principal of Adura Strategy, who co-facilitated one of the day's group discussions.

"When a woman you respect doesn't step up to the plate, or steps away from the plate, ask her why." This golden piece of advice from **Carolyn Cross**, CEO of **OnDine BioMedical**, was one of many poignant takeaways I gleaned while being one of four master facilitators for the recent *B.C. Economic Forum: Women as a Catalyst for Growth*.

Though no one explicitly said so, the forum felt in some ways like a celebration. Despite



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the abysmal record of women moving along the pipeline from university graduation to the highest ranks of business leadership and board membership, we still have made some progress.

Women have a voice and a choice like never before. In an unprecedented show of collaboration, 25 separate women's groups came together to make this event happen, catching

the eye of the federal government and thereby allowing us to hear from the Honourable **Kellie Leitch**, Canada's Minister of Labour and Minister for the Status of Women.

In her address, Dr. Leitch put strong emphasis on women entrepreneurs as an economic engine for our country, as did two other provincial ministers who spoke — the Honourable **Shirley Bond**, B.C.'s Minister of Jobs, Tourism and Skills Training, and the Honourable **Naomi Yamamoto**, B.C.'s Minister of State for Tourism and Small Business.

As the first woman Premier of British Columbia, the Honourable **Christy Clark** is another shining example of what we have to celebrate. In her keynote address at the forum, she stated that we have to stop ignoring that women have children — and she couldn't be more right. The Premier's statement seems at first so obvious, but is too often buried in politically

correct banter, and is likely a root cause for much of the pipeline's "leakiness."

Alex Johnston, the Executive Director of **Catalyst Canada**, built on this sentiment in her remarks, stating, "In the absence of flexibility, women with children will downsize their aspirations." And she forcefully added, "This has nothing to do with their confidence."

Another show of solidarity was how quickly the 400-plus participants moved past the topic of barriers to energetically discuss solutions.

Visible and invisible barriers are so well documented, researched and graphed that the overwhelming sentiment was to start doing something now to reduce the pipeline's "leakiness." And as part of the solutions discussion, the room echoed with "Men need to part of this conversation, so they can be part of the change." The theme emerged that we need to move the conversation of

women's success in the workforce from being a gender issue, to being an economic issue where men are engaged.

At the end of an exhilarating day where table groups shared clear recommendations for industry and government, each forum participant was asked to privately write his or her personal commitment.

As a fitting end to my reflection on this tremendous event, I will share my personal commitment with you. To draw a circle from the opening quote in this article: I will try to raise my now-teenage sons in a way that when they are in the workplace and see someone not stepping up to the plate or stepping away from the plate, they will ask why.

Louise Watson is Principal of Adura Strategy, a member of The Vancouver Board of Trade's Women's Leadership Circle (WLC), and a parent. She co-facilitated Track 1: Women in Leadership with Lisa Martin, a fellow member of the WLC.

Who said it's lonely at the top? It's lonely along the way

BY ANJA LANZ

I have a long-standing background in the technical field spanning two countries, Canada and Germany. No matter where I've been, it's been a challenge to find women in my field.

At 16 years of age, I was the only female in my cohort in a four-year technical drafting apprenticeship in Germany. Of those four years, I spent two years in the machine shop alone with the male mechanics, welders, lathe operators, sheet metal workers, and machine fitters, amongst others. At age 20, I graduated and worked in the technical field in Germany. When I entered a technical high school to complete grade 12, I was again the only woman in my class.

Upon immigrating to Canada, I completed an electronics technician program at **Vancouver Community College**, and found myself the only woman in my

program. It was only when I entered **Langara College** for an engineering transfer program that I met other women pursuing and interested in my field for the first time. However, I learned pretty quickly, this was not the norm. When I started studying engineering physics at **UBC**, I found out only six per cent of students in my enrolment year were women. The trend continued. In my first Canadian engineering job, I was the only female engineer in our Vancouver office.

Currently, only 11 per cent of the registered professional engineers in B.C. are women. Many of them are the only female engineers on their team, in their department, at their plant, or even in their organization. The Division for the Advancement of Women in Engineering and Geoscience, a division of The Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of B.C., is a good resource for male

or female engineers in B.C. on these issues.

Even fewer are in high-level leadership roles, despite doing exceptional work.

In 2013, the **Minerva Foundation** released a report called "The Face of Leadership in B.C." which examined the gender of the leadership in large B.C. companies. According to the report, less than 10 per cent of some of the largest companies in the province — including resource-based industries, law firms, and crown corporations — are led by female leaders. In engineering, female leaders make up an alarming *zero per cent* of leaders.

If your organization would like to have female leaders, there is a pool of highly qualified potential candidates. I mentor many female engineers who are new to Canada and are trying to continue their careers in a new country. Many struggle to enter the workforce and adhere



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to the regulations of engineering in Canada. I also mentor accomplished female engineers who have become stay-at-home mothers or are re-entering the work force after a long absence often due to child rearing.

In B.C., there are many efforts put into educating and encouraging young girls to consider

technical careers. The enrolment numbers of female engineering students at local universities are increasing slowly.

What we need to do is to continue to assist new female engineering graduates with the transition into industry and ultimately, retain those women in the profession so they can go on to become leaders, mentors, and role models

Anja Lanz is an Intermediate Engineer, EIT, at Autopro Automation Consultants and is the chair of the Division for the Advancement of Women in Engineering and Geoscience (DAWEG) at APEGBC. She is the BC/Yukon Representative on the Women in Engineering committee at Engineers Canada. She sits on the board of the Canadian Coalition for Women in Engineering, Science, Trade, and Technology and is a member of The Vancouver Board of Trade's Women's Leadership Circle Advisory Committee.