"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change." – Charles Darwin

LEADERSHIP IN THE FACE OF CHANGE

People, like businesses, are multidimensional. It's part of the human condition to struggle with goals and priorities that conflict with each other, both personally and on the job. When circumstances arise that involve compromise and tradeoffs, people—and the businesses they serve—are challenged to sort out the right course of action.

Some manage to successfully balance the scales, time and again, even as they face pressures that pit profit, ethics, family, community, and politics against each other. These are the individuals and organizations we often look up to as our leaders—the trailblazers who will usher us into new social, business, and technology realms that most of us can hardly imagine today.

Adapt and Prevail

True leaders have learned how to continually adapt to the changing influences and forces around them, observes Nutanix board member Sue Bostrom. "Being adaptable is not being weak," she asserts. "It's being responsive. And you can stay true to yourself while adapting."

Bostrom unequivocally falls in the category of "leader." And she's done a lot of adapting during her illustrious 35-year career in business and technology.

A first-generation college graduate, Bostrom went on to earn an MBA from Stanford University. There, she says she initially felt like a "fish out of water," because unlike many of her peers, she hadn't attended an Ivy League college and was married. However, the experience helped her realize that she could compete and contribute with the best of them.

She did indeed. Bostrom rose to a variety of high-powered positions, including executive vice president and chief marketing officer of the world's largest networking company, Cisco Systems. She worked at Cisco for 14 years and, among her many roles there, created "The Human Network" campaign and served as the executive sponsor of the company's Women's Initiative. During her tenure,

Cisco revenues grew from $7 billion to $40 billion, and the company expanded from 10,000 to 70,000 employees. So to say that Bostrom, who is also a wife and mother, has had a lot on her plate would be an understatement. But it was during her stint as a consultant at McKinsey and Co. in the mid-80s that Bostrom experienced a major "aha!" moment that helped make what followed possible.

Transformative Moments

When Bostrom joined McKinsey out of grad school, she "needed to gain credibility with people who had 20 more years of business experience than me." So when her manager on her first project in Dallas, Texas, told her, "You can't be a cheerleader all the time. Sometimes we have bad news to deliver to clients," Bostrom took the advice seriously.

"Although the feedback surprised me, I got the message that I needed to become adaptable," Bostrom admits. Growing up as a Midwesterner in the suburbs of Chicago, it was culturally the norm to be friendly and people-pleasing. Bostrom knew she needed to learn to become more of a straight shooter.

Bostrom next started a project for a high-tech services client. "All the executives were men, most with military experience. I decided I'd adapt. I wanted to be viewed as a peer in business. Not just as a woman in business. And not just as a woman."

It has all paid off with a laundry list of accolades that describe Bostrom, who today sits on a number of tech company boards, as a visionary and one of the most influential women of her generation.

The Long Road to Workplace Diversity

Still, there is more work to do to bring diversity to the workplace, particularly when it comes to women in technology. Women hold a mere 11 percent of executive positions in Silicon Valley, according to the Observer, and just 25 percent of computing jobs in general[1].

What's Going On?

First of all, many women opt out once they've reached a certain level in the tech biz. Notes Bostrom: "It's hard not to. There are so many work and family pressures. What I always encourage women to do is write down what would allow them to stay engaged at work. Would it be working three days a week? Having weekends free? It pays to see if your company is willing to be flexible."

She points out that many women simply don't feel comfortable asking for what they need. "I completely respect women and men that make the decision to opt out for whatever reason. My hope is that they explore all of the available options with their employer first."

Her observations are backed by a recent Reuters study reported by Forbes, in which 30 percent of 450 technology executives said that their groups had no women in leadership positions. The survey concluded that just 25 percent of IT jobs in the US are filled by women and more than half of these women—56 percent—leave IT at the peak of their careers[2].

Bostrom adds that there is a "funnel issue" in that there simply aren't enough girls going into science, technology, engineering, and math, or STEM curricula. The Observer, citing the Girls Who Code initiative as its source, says that 74 percent of girls express interest in these fields, but the statistics show that they obviously get deterred somewhere along the way.

Getting the Best and the Brightest

Women aside, there's a notorious IT talent shortage that some estimates predict could produce a deficit of one million jobs by 2020 in the U.S. alone. Bostrom says actively encouraging more diversity in general in IT could help bridge that gap.

For that to happen, "Companies have to understand that focusing on diversity is a way to attract and keep the best and the brightest," says Bostrom. "I put the onus on the top of the corporation to create an environment where all people feel comfortable and where their ideas will be embraced."

She points out that the tech buyer is changing, too, and the corporate makeup of technology firms should reflect this. "There are small businesses run by women.

Tech is now intertwined with consumers and, therefore, more diverse ethnic groups. We need to mirror these perspectives in the makeup of technology firms."

And part of the answer to making that happen is exposing students to STEM earlier in the education process. "We have to get coding proliferated across elementary and middle schools," says Bostrom. She notes that the younger people are when they learn a new skill, the less intimidated they will be by it and the less likely they will be to reject that course of study and career.

Leaders Who Make IT Happen

At the end of the day, what defines a leader who can precipitate such change? There's that ever-important ability to adapt, of course. Bostrom has a few other thoughts about the qualities that yield leadership:

The ability to define success. Leaders have a vision for success and continue to redefine it over and over again, she says. "And then you need the ability to communicate the vision as it changes."

Accountability. That means being accountable for the results you achieve and don't achieve, focusing on what you can control to continue to improve.

The ability to prioritize. "I've always put the company first, the team next, and then myself," says Bostrom. "I've tried not to think about what impact a strategic decision is going to have on my career."

Humility. Bostrom says that as an industry, "we have to always keep humility in mind. We're here to serve the needs of our customers. We need to ensure that we don't lose that connection."

Bostrom also believes that "if you have a lot of success, then you need to give back." She says that currently, her most fulfilling activity is her board work with the Lucile Packard Children's Hospital at Stanford, a nonprofit.

Bostrom stresses her belief in trying to leave a legacy that makes things better for people. "We have a good history of philanthropy in this industry, but it could be even better. I hope folks see that as part of their portfolio."

[1]Observer, June 5, 2017: "12 Stats about Women in Tech That Show How Big the Gender Gap Truly Is"
[2].Forbes, February 26, 2018: "It Is Time For Women In Technology To Lead The Way In Gender Equality"