Women Leaders on ‘Getting it Done’ in Male-Dominated Industries

Author: Cristi Kempf

Joyce Leveston, general manager of the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority (from left), and Martha Sherk, president and CEO of the Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau, speak at a recent Fireside Chat in Boston, hosted by the PCMA New England Chapter. (David Fox, Photographer)

“Getting it done.” It’s something everyone needs to figure out when it comes to their job. But those words take on particular resonance for many women as they juggle work-life balance, and especially if they chart a leadership path in industries dominated by men.

“For me, ‘getting it done’ means doing whatever it takes to get it done and making yourself a part of that process, no matter what level that is at,” said Martha Sheridan, president and CEO of the Greater Boston Convention and Visitors Bureau (https://www.bostonusa.com/about-gbcbv/) (GBCVB), speaking at a recent Fireside Chat hosted by the PCMA New England Chapter (https://newengland.pcma.org/) and moderated by Carrie Campbell (https://www.mlb.com/redsox/team/front-office/carrie-campbell), senior vice president of Fenway Park Events.

The discussion, at Boston’s Hampshire House, marked International Women’s Day and centered on such topics as leadership, mentorship, diversity and inclusion, and navigating change. It drew about 100 attendees. Sheridan, who is new to her role but not to the destination marketing industry, was joined by Joyce Leveston, general manager of the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority (https://www.massconvention.com/) (MCCA).

Both Sheridan and Leveston are accomplished leaders with more than 30 years of industry experience. They know how to get things done, said Campbell, who then asked that they share what that means to them.

“I’m surrounded by a group of women, DMO leaders who are very much like me in that we have succeeded in what was once a man’s world,” Sheridan said. “And we have this group among ourselves — SWWGSD (Smart Women Who Get S— Done). We wear pink ribbons at our events that say ‘Smart Women Who Get S— Done.’ There are probably 70 people in [the group] right now and we support each other all the time.

“We do recognize and value our male counterparts and their friendship,” she added, “so we also have blue ribbons that say ‘Friends of Smart Women Who Get S— Done.’”

Leveston echoed Sheridan’s view that getting a job done often means doing whatever it takes.
"There's nothing that I haven't done and I'm not willing to do," she said. "You know, I can say that one of the interesting things about me is that I come from the operation side of the business. And, as all the operating leaders in here know, you might have a title, but the reality is that I can fix that projector right now, I can go right there and run that sound board."

Sheridan, who began her career at a regional tourism council in Rhode Island, and Leveston, who got her start as a telephone operator at the San Diego Convention Center, also shared the best advice they've gotten.

For Leveston it was: "Joyce you have a voice. Use it!"

"Don't be afraid to be your authentic self," she said. "Sometimes you feel a little uncomfortable, [since] as women we are told that certain roles are not made for us, we don't belong here. .. But when you are yourself and you can stand in your own truth, you know where you belong and that's your power."

Sheridan's best advice? "Never burn a bridge."

"The fact is that you never know where your circumstances are going to lead you someday and the way you treat people will always define you no matter what.

"I'm not saying you always have to be nice, you have to react appropriately and be your own authentic self, but I think you can respond to situations and still be respectful. .. You don't want to burn that bridge because you may need to go back there someday."

Campbell also addressed mentorship, saying "so many of us .. have hitched our wagons to a mentor to find our way professionally" and asking who has helped pave the way for Sheridan and Leveston.

"This may sound a bit trivial, but the first person that influenced me to succeed was actually my Dad," said Sheridan. "I'm saying that because my Dad owned his business and worked very hard, he never missed a day of work, as far as I can remember. .. I used to be able to go back to my Dad with any question I had in my career and he would guide me, he'd always give me the best advice.

"So, I'll start with that, but then come two women that I consider to be my mentors and my partners in crime," she said, naming Maura Gast, executive director of the Irving [Texas] Convention and Visitors Bureau and Tammy Blount, president and CEO of the Monterey County [Californian] Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"We were like this Three Musketeers group who support each other and lift each other up whenever we needed," Sheridan said.

"I was the chair of [Destinations International], I was the fourth female chair in 100 years, Maura was the third female chair in about 95 years, and Tammy was the fifth in 100 years, so the odds aren't getting much better, but the fact is that the three of us all served a role in an organization that was heavily male-dominated.

"There was so much mansplaining going on at every single board meeting that we attended or that we ran," she said, "that we've had to rely on each other literally every single day for advice, guidance, and, of course, wine and laughs."

Leveston also had a less traditional path when it came to mentors.

"When we talk about mentors, I don't have a lot of formal mentors, but I've been blessed enough to have the right people in my life at the right time, people who have always found a way to prop a door open and give me the opportunity.

"I think they've realized," she said, "that if they give me an opportunity, I get things done."

Cristi Kempf (mailto:ckempf@pcma.org) is Convene's executive editor.
Joyce Leveston (from left), Martha Sheridan, and moderator Carrie Campbell laugh during a recent Fireside Chat Boston hosted by PCMA’s New England Chapter. (David Fox, Photographer)

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