Studies show that companies benefit from diversity in the boardroom and on the leadership team. But there are still barriers for women who seek to rise to the top. A group of dynamic women leaders from the Puget Sound region came together for a discussion recently on women in leadership, what’s changed, what still needs to change and what the future will look like as more companies diversify their ranks. Participants were Phyllis Campbell, the chairwoman of the Pacific Northwest for JPMorgan Chase; Adriane Brown, senior advisor and retired president and COO of Intellectual Ventures; Susan Vosper, chief of staff for World Wide Operations at Microsoft and Marilyn Gist, Ph.D. and associate dean and professor of management at the Albers School of Business and Economics at Seattle University. The panel was moderated by PSBJ Publisher Emily Parkhurst.

What have you observed as the differences in leadership approach or style between men and women in the boardroom and how do you think those differences affect a company’s culture?

**Campbell:** I think there are many differences and many similarities. Women tend to be more collaborative. They are able to capture what’s going on in the room, synthesize it and pull things together. But it has to be a critical mass of women to make a difference. If 30 percent of the people in the room are women, that can make the difference.

**Vosper:** I see a wide breadth for men and a wide breadth for women. Within that, some of the stereotypical things we think of about men and women in power emerge. With men, there can be a sense of exuding confidence and taking charge. With women, it tends to be thoughtfulness, intuition, and high EQ; the ability to scale and adapt. I’ve seen women take on a more aggressive stance, what would be perhaps normal for a man, but when a woman uses a similar approach, the feedback she gets is that she’s aggressive and it is seen as negative. With that said, there are shifts happening where both men and women are understanding what it means to hold a broader range of qualities.
Campbell: I’ve seen mostly men going for a more linear choice or decision—this is the problem; here’s the solution—where women are more likely to see both sides and can navigate the left and right brain. Women get to the decision but in my experience, in a bit more deliberative way.

How do you think that affects workplace culture? We’re talking about the board room here, but that is obviously going to trickle down.

Campbell: Modeling this style and talking about it empowers women to move into leadership roles. People watch you as a leader—how you handle confrontation, how you manage difficult situations, how you engage the room. People take cues from you and I think that empowers people to speak up, be more collaborative and learn different ways of solving problems. I think it gives people a bigger repertoire in the workplace.

I think you will often see, although not always, that when women are in leadership roles, there is a little more cohesion in the work group and often some tolerance of truth even if it’s 100 percent of the time, but maybe 50 percent.

Can you talk about anything specific to your industry that makes it more or less difficult for women to move into leadership roles within the organization?

Brown: Prior to coming to the Pacific Northwest, I spent time in the electronics, automotive, aerospace and tourism industries. I used to go to auto trade shows where the women were laid out over the cars. It took me, in my role, to tell my team this wasn’t OK. Why would that be an acceptable approach?

In all cases where there have been institutional systems of power, there is always resistance to giving it up. Some industries have institutionalized that power structure around women. As women slowly begin to penetrate these structures, we are able to influence the organization to make it more open and inclusive.

I have some experience where the Pacific Northwest has been tech-oriented and while there are definitely nuances in behavior within the industry, you see that people just want the best talent, whether it’s a man or a woman.

Susan, while Adriane was talking I was thinking about the tech industry. Is that something you can speak to?

Vosper: One of the reasons I went back to Microsoft was to take part in the evolution the company has been going through that’s long overdue. Since I returned, I’ve seen a lot more women in leadership positions, not only at the top of the company, but at all levels of senior leadership. Is there still work to be done? Absolutely. It’s not just gender because we face race, disabilities, abilities. The more we can do to be inclusive, the farther we will go.

We all have to be more inclusive and take the role of being assertive to get to some new positions and change the dynamic of diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

Can you talk about anything specific to your industry that makes it more or less difficult for women to move into leadership roles within the organization?

Gist: I have two wonderful mentors in the first twenty years of my career and they were both white males. I want to underscore that because mentoring can work across demographic differences. These were individuals who believed in me, encouraged me, and helped me feel confident about risk-taking. It really set the course in many ways for my success over time.

Vosper: I, too, was fortunate to have men as managers who said, “You’ve got it and don’t let anybody tell you that you don’t.”

And to have people who went ahead of me who said, “Don’t worry about what everybody thinks about you or what you think you look like, just do what you do.”

Adriane, you define the difference between mentors and sponsors?

Brown: To me, sponsors are people behind the scenes. They may not have as much direct engagement with you, but they’re supporting you to others and you may not even realize it. Mentors are personally talking to you, letting you know they are accessible.

What accounts for the lack of gender diversity?

Vosper: In some cases, it’s unconscious bias. I think part of it has to do with what I’ve heard called the “comfortability factor.” I think many women are not in the network. I confess to you, “I don’t know her and I don’t know how she’ll be at the board table.” That means, “I’m not necessarily comfortable with her.” I don’t think this is a judgment on her ability to do business; it speaks more to the comfort that comes with familiarity. I say to people, meet as many women as you can. Serve on non-profit boards. It all helps.

Brown: I have three thoughts. First, there’s the institution and what they’re comfortable with. The second is attitude. You have to believe there is a reason to have women on the board, whether it’s a compliance issue, or because someone’s advised you that it’s a good idea or because you see it as valuable. And third, there’s the comfort zone. Phyllis, you called it “comfortability factor,” and that is so important.

If you think about a board that is all men, you may ask why it is that way. And then many people will say, “If we have a diverse board, we will do a better job.” But it’s the informal system that will help or hurt a woman’s successful engagement.

Campbell: Regarding corporate boards, institutional investors are finally pushing and saying there’s a clear case for diversity and inclusion.

There’s a linkage—particularly if you have two, three or more women on, say, a ten-person board—there’s a definite correlation between gender diversity and high performance in a company. Institutional investors who own most of the companies are saying, “You need to have at least two women on the board, probably three, and if you don’t, we’re going to vote against you.” All these things are in play and are going to help.

Susan, were you nodding as Adriane and Phyllis were talking? Do you think that diversity impacts board performance?

Vosper: Absolutely. I’m thinking of Seattle Children’s Hospital. When I joined the board there, it was not very diverse. We made a concerted effort to look at alumni and Philanthropists and then create a board that reflected and was more representative of our alumni. It was the same when I served on the board of the Progressive Animal Welfare Society.

You will go farther if you have a diverse mix of people who are coming to the table and helping you understand how to run a board. People that represent the organization. There is data confirming that phenomenon.

Marilyn, have you seen a similar thing?

Gist: Yes, I have. I think as Phyllis and diversity on boards? Is part of it that there’s not enough sponsorship to get women into those roles?

Campbell: That’s very complex; I think part of it has to do with what I’ve heard called the “comfortability factor.” I think many women are not in the network. I confess to you, “I don’t know her and I don’t know how she’ll be at the board table.”

That means, “I’m not necessarily comfortable with her.” I don’t think this is a judgment on her ability to do business; it speaks more to the comfort that comes with familiarity. I say to people, meet as many women as you can. Serve on non-profit boards. It all helps.

Brown: I have three thoughts. First, there’s the institution and what they’re comfortable with. The second is attitude. You have to believe there is a reason to have women on the board, whether it’s a compliance issue, or because someone’s advised you that it’s a good idea or because you see it as valuable. And third, there’s the comfort zone. Phyllis, you called it “comfortability factor,” and that is so important.

If you think about a board that is all men, you may ask why it is that way. And then many people will say, “If we have a diverse board, we will do a better job.” But it’s the informal system that will help or hurt a woman’s successful engagement.

Campbell: Regarding corporate boards, institutional investors are finally pushing and saying there’s a clear case for diversity and inclusion.

There’s a linkage—particularly if you have two, three or more women on, say, a ten-person board—there’s a definite correlation between gender diversity and high performance in a company. Institutional investors who own most of the companies are saying, “You need to have at least two women on the board, probably three, and if you don’t, we’re going to vote against you.” All these things are in play and are going to help.

Susan, were you nodding as Adriane and Phyllis were talking? Do you think that diversity impacts board performance?

Vosper: Absolutely. I’m thinking of Seattle Children’s Hospital. When I joined the board there, it was not very diverse. We made a concerted effort to look at alumni and Philanthropists and then create a board that reflected and was more representative of our alumni. It was the same when I served on the board of the Progressive Animal Welfare Society.

You will go farther if you have a diverse mix of people who are coming to the table and helping you understand how to run a board. People that represent the organization. There is data confirming that phenomenon.

Marilyn, have you seen a similar thing?

Gist: Yes, I have. I think as Phyllis and
Susan said, the evidence is very solid that diverse boards do better. I think a part of that explanation can also be traced to industries being more and more focused on clients and consumers, and consumers having more power. If your consumer base is diverse, you need that diversity all the way through management and at the board level to be able to represent and understand how your clients and consumers will be affected.

Campbell: The Alaska Airlines board is a good example. The strategy to be more diverse has been a purposeful one because of the customer base. We have a native Hawaiian male and a native Alaskan female. We have 50 percent gender diversity, and forty percent of us are ethnically diverse and there’s also good representation of folks from different markets that Alaska serves. That’s just smart business.

Alaska is obviously an exception, because when you look at the stats nationally, it’s still not good. Why aren’t we seeing that change and when will people buy into what we are seeing in the results?

Campbell: It’s a good question because we keep saying the business case is clear. You’re right, it’s not yet driving the results? It’s a good question because we keep saying the business case is clear. You’re right, it’s not yet driving the results? It’s a good question because we keep saying the business case is clear. You’re right, it’s not yet driving the results?

Gist: It’s harder for women, I think, to be clear about our value proposition. I could talk about myself, but I’ve also done my homework; I know why and how I want to serve; there’s the impact I can have because I have these skills.”

Gist: It’s harder for women, I think, to be clear about our value proposition. I could talk about myself, but I’ve also done my homework; I know why and how I want to serve; there’s the impact I can have because I have these skills.”

Campbell: I think the MeToo movement is the conversation changing around diversity and what is expected of the corporate world?

Brown: I think it’s changing. Witness what we’re seeing in the press about how companies and their boards are dealing with these dilemmas. That’s an opportunity to consider — is your company prepared to handle situations like this? Start by requiring that any settlement must come before the audit committee so there can be no handling of it in the shadows.

Campbell: I think the MeToo movement and other movements have really caused boards to sit up and take notice. I do think it’s caused different conversations in the board room.

Vosper: I think it’s changing. I think right now it’s around managing risk more, but I hope it goes beyond that to being proactive and understanding what is necessary to change the culture.

Gist: I think the MeToo movement is having an impact. I think we still have a long way to go. As someone with a long backwards view, I do feel there has been significant progress and it’s nice to see these levers nudging the system. But more is needed, or we wouldn’t be having the news we’re having and the MeToo movement.

Vosper: There’s obviously resistance to change. It’s a reality. However, there are more opportunities for people to come forward and say no, we can do better. We can be different. I think it’s happening in different industries.

Gist: I would say it’s resistance to loss. Resistance on the part of those in power to losing what they’re familiar with, whether it’s the comfortability factor or the way the institutions have been set up. It’s an opportunity we all have individually and collectively, and not just as progressive women, but also as men who are partners to help refame that narrative.

Vosper: Exactly. I see women being more open to building a network of allies; I would say that’s one of the benefits of including women and a role that we can play. I’ve seen that in some of the work we’ve been doing at Microsoft. Each of the women’s organizations in our teams are looking for their allies and at how we can build a community. It’s really refreshing to see.

Brown: Now it’s the woman as the ally, the one who now says, “How can I help others because I have been helped?” It’s so wonderful when women make it their purpose to help other women get on boards. They’re coaching, they’re mentoring; they’re introducing, they’re helping other women navigate this informal system that puts people in the position to be placed.

Instead of calling the boss from twenty years ago, maybe we’ll start getting the calls because we know who those women are. I see that starting to have an influence on the volume of women available and accessible, removing those barriers.

Well that seems like a fantastic place to stop. Ladies, thank you so much for this.
CONGRATULATIONS
2018 WOMEN OF INFLUENCE

TO ALL THE EXCEPTIONAL, INFLUENTIAL WOMEN WHO IMPACT OUR LIVES EVERY DAY
THANK YOU

Our Executive Education programs have been helping women accelerate their careers since 1998.

seattleu.edu/business/educational/206-296-2529

SEATTLE U ALBERT SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

INVESTING IN WOMEN
JPMorgan Chase is investing in women, at our company and in the communities we serve, through our Women on the Move initiative. We aim to create a more equitable world by expanding women-run businesses, improving women’s financial health and empowering women’s career growth.

JPMorgan Chase & Co.

Remembering Ginger Ackerley, Director Emerita, and Dottie Simpson, long-time supporter of Pacific Science Center.
We celebrate the lifetime achievement of these remarkable women and are grateful for their enduring contributions.

Microsoft
you.at.microsoft.com

Influence is about impact.
Real influence comes from the ability to empathize, inspire, encourage, and energize people at all levels to achieve results.
Microsoft honors the women of influence who empower us all.