

# WOMEN IN WORKPLACE POWER: A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Edited by Barbara Christiansen

Women's work has always been multifaceted and applied across all aspects of human experience. Women have filled many roles: queen, mother, inventor, artist, healer, politician, caretaker, prophet. Women's voices have been loud and quiet, sometimes invisible but always present, on the vanguard or on the margins, leading, pushing, making change. Today more women have the opportunity to fill prominent leadership roles, many in spaces and with titles that until recently were occupied only by men. What follows is an interview with five women in roles that carry organizational power who fill them with hard-won confidence and ownership. They reflect on their own journeys to accept this power while honoring the roles that all women play in their individual spheres of influence.

**Anja Shafer:** Deputy Chief Development Officer, Accion International.

Anja leads the development team and oversees fundraising and sustainability efforts for a global nonprofit organization focused on financial inclusion.

**Debbie Theobald:** CEO, Vecna Technologies. Debbie leads daily operational oversight of the executive team, closing key deals, establishing business partnerships, and making final decisions on product roadmaps and strategic priorities.

**Mehrsa Baradan:** Professor of Law, UC Irvine School of Law. Mehrsa teaches, researches, and writes about banking law, financial inclusion, inequality, and the racial wealth gap.

**Pandora Brewer:** Senior Director of Store Operations, Crate and Barrel. Pandora's team is the interface between the corporate office and stores. She oversees project management, resource development, cross-functional partnership, and escalated store support.

**Erienne Weight:** Associate Professor, University of North Carolina; Director, Center for Research in Intercollegiate Athletics. Erienne serves on executive committees of university and national governing bodies to direct policy and growth. She leads grants, consultancies, and research projects to facilitate data-driven decision-making in intercollegiate athletics.

**Were you ever uncomfortable with the power you have in your workplace? If so, how did you overcome this and start “owning” your power?**

ERIANNE: Owning my power has come with time, work, sacrifice, and the slow realization that my voice is actually really valuable. For years I felt that those in positions of power above and beside me were better, more qualified, and their words carried more weight than mine. I felt lucky to have my position and felt a continual need to learn and grow in order to justify my worth and tackle my insecurities. Through the journey, I’ve been fortunate to always have an internal compass that has empowered me to speak up even in moments when my position was weak and speaking up was risky. These moments have defined my career and have opened doors that I felt were inaccessible. As I’ve worked more and more with executive teams, I’ve finally realized that people in positions of power are just regular people who have been in the game a little longer. These leaders are fallible and can handle being challenged, and good leaders—the type of people I want to work for—embrace feedback and appreciate diverse perspectives. They want me to speak up. The day I embraced my worth and realized I didn’t need to defer to the most powerful person in the room was the day I finally felt whole. I no longer had to pretend to be something or someone I thought I was supposed to be, but rather I had the confidence to be me and trust that my knowledge and perspectives were needed and that I could make a difference.

DEBBIE: Sometimes when I am having a hard time owning my power, feeling it’s too hard and too much responsibility, I find it helpful to step away and look at it as if I was a bystander. I say to myself, “If I was in

charge and coming in fresh, what would I do?” Inevitably, I am able to think of at least a few things that make sense and that I am not doing. Then I try to face the reason I’m not addressing the problems I see. Am I afraid? Am I blocked by something or someone? Do I need more information or help? By stepping outside that power, I have been able to admit when I am intimidated, undecided, or just plain scared of a reasonable action and I can come up with a plan or at least a step that helps me get closer to that integrity of knowing and doing.

PANDORA: In my first leadership position, I equated power with control and vertical authority, and I was resistant. I realized over time that if language creates reality, I was framing power incorrectly and to the detriment of my team. Power is both a positional responsibility and having the confidence within that role to empower others in their positional roles. In my current role, I have the power to make change, move work forward, create opportunities that support contribution, remove roadblocks, help others feel valued, develop new leaders, and drive results I have helped define. Once I named my organizational power in a positive way, the motivation to perform to these expectations increased, as did my commitment to develop my own leadership skills. When I rally the team around meaningful work, every person should go home and feel like, “Thank goodness I showed up today, something would not have happened in the same way if I had not been there!” I own my power when I know each person on my team is saying this to themselves on their drive home.

**Have you had situations in which others are uncomfortable with your workplace power? Will you share an example and how you handled it?**

MEHRSA: Earlier in my career, when I looked much younger and I was teaching large classrooms full of first-year law students, I felt that they did not respect me. They were pretty obvious about it. I had to develop strategies to deal with this, which included smiling less and being more

formal in the classroom. Over time, this has become easier, but it was really a battle to get students to treat me as a professor. There is this mom/girlfriend trope for female law professors where students treat you as either their mom (expect you to nurture them) or their girlfriend (expect you to be fun and cool, etc.). If female professors do either, they can't have the authority to also teach or mentor. It's been hard to push back against these expectations while also being kind.

DEBBIE: I too experienced more difficulty as a younger woman working in a technology field with a majority of men. I also had to develop a different persona for business interactions that included less playfulness, laughing, smiling, or even socializing, as these were often seen as invitations to not be taken seriously. I found myself being a very different person and I don't think I was wrong to do so. It is appropriate to set boundaries and present a professional front. As I've gotten older, it's actually become easier as I have the confidence to let more of myself come through without sacrificing my credibility. More women have also entered the tech field, which is wonderful, so there are more of us to emulate.

In addition, there are women who also feel threatened by power, which proves difficult when exercising power. I find it is more acceptable to be more straightforward with male members of my team when I ask them to take on a task or when I give feedback than to use the same frank manner with women. Men are just as emotional as women, but the upfront cost of emotional caution just seems higher for women.

**Have you experienced any double standards because you're a woman in power—like being considered “bossy” or fielding negative comments about your commitment to family? Will you share an example and how you handled it?**

ANJA: I wish I could say no, but even in the most well-intentioned organizations, I think there are some attitudes that are hard to shake

off. I had been counseled that I needed to be more aggressive if I wanted to be seen as a leader. Our COO (a man) adopted me as an informal mentee. He suggested I get some executive coaching to focus on not being seen as so accommodating and collaborative (female qualities). I did not have a great coaching experience with the coach he selected for me to work with. I felt like I was being asked to change my personality to conform to being more like the senior leadership team (more male). It was in discussing my frustration with a peer and colleague that I learned that her experience was completely the reverse. She was in a similar leadership position and was being asked to be less assertive so she would come across as less bossy and easier to work with. It was then that I realized that these were both excuses to keep us at arm's length from the true power.

ERIANNE: I've been very fortunate to have a lot of strong women leaders in my life, but interestingly, very few of these women had children. Because of this, I have always been really cautious about being too open about being a mother. Male colleagues often talk about their children and they are seen as great dads, but when women share anecdotes, we are often viewed as overly sentimental or distracted by our responsibilities at home. I love my children with all of my heart, but when I am at work, I rarely mention them. Being pregnant was difficult to hide, of course, and the years following pregnancies were when I received the comments that were frustrating and demoralizing—that I wouldn't possibly be able to keep up with motherhood and my workload, that I'm less than the men in my department who don't have the same responsibilities, that I was doing surprisingly well for being a wife and mother. I believe it is really important to model a workplace culture that is family-friendly, and I bring my children to my office or to appropriate events so my students, colleagues, and children know the importance of finding work-life harmony and integrating our most important assets into our work. However, when it comes to small talk, I generally focus on what is most important to the people I'm talking with and I shy away from family-centric topics.

As your career roles have increased in responsibility and prestige, has your relationship to religion and/or your religious community changed? If so, how?

MEHRSA: Yes, it's hard to shift from a position of leadership all week to a place where women cannot be top leaders no matter how competent. And I think many members of my community believe that you are not doing it right if you're working. I have felt a lot of judgment by the church community for being a working mom, but I was not surprised by it. I knew when I decided to do both that I was going against what I had been told to do (or not to do), but I had an equally powerful force on the other side—my family culture—telling me that I should have a career.

DEBBIE: I was very lucky that I moved to Cambridge from the DC area about four years into my career. I had three kids already and was finding no solace or direction in the gospel library regarding my innate ambition and professional potential. I was in a mental and spiritual death spiral focused on the anger of disparity between me and my husband in our roles and the betrayal of dreams that had been planted in my girlhood to be ripped away when I became a mother. The women of Cambridge First Ward gave me so many examples of accomplished Mormon women in the workplace, with their families, and in their partnerships that I was able to unwind the conundrums, cling to my positive experiences, and find my own path. It is critical to nurture and uphold this variety so that we can each find joy. I am sometimes disappointed with the power distribution at the higher levels of the Church, but I have found many ways to create, to start something new, pull people together, and do good with my religious community at my local level. And *Exponent II* does a good job of challenging my perspective so I don't get lazy with platitudes I construct and are comfortable to me.

ERIANNE: I believe the power I feel through my career has empowered me to care less about the traditional cultural pressures or perceptions

of judgement that are often so detrimental. I very intentionally embrace the elements of the gospel and Church that I love and do my best to ignore or proactively change the elements that I am frustrated by, and if that's not socially acceptable, I've found myself caring less and less about what others might think and more and more about how to be love-centric in all of my decisions and actions.

**Did you have any mentors—especially female mentors—who have helped you progress in your career? How did they help you?**

ANJA: I've never had any formal female mentors, but I've definitely looked for women role models wherever I could find them. I am drawn to women who can combine compassion with power and have been fortunate to find many of them in the *Exponent II* community. In the workplace I have found many women who have been able to have a little more of everything (not "have it all") as they balance home and work and personal interests. They don't tend to have the most senior roles, but they do seem to be the most content and fulfilled in their significant roles. I think that has been the key that has sustained me through difficult career moments; when I'm not the managing director at thirty-five and beating myself up for not being as ambitious as I could be, I remember I also have three amazing kids, I love spending time with my husband, and I have hobbies and interests that are just as important or more so than my title or work responsibilities.

ERIANNE: Having strong female mentors has also been really wonderful for me. There are so many women who have paved the way for my generation, and I am grateful for them every day. Our chancellor shared once that she has been told she's too short, she smiles too much, her hair is too short, her hair is too long, her voice is too high, her voice isn't loud enough, etc., and it was so comforting to hear because she is now likely the boss's boss of anyone who might have doubted her ability, appearance, or delivery.

PANDORA: I believe watching and learning from other leaders is critical. I have had many female bosses in my career, but I am particularly grateful for two who have had a tremendous influence on my development and confidence. The first has strong convictions and taught me to speak up but do it in a way that is clear, to the point, and focused on results. She gives feedback that promotes accountability and ensures you feel valued in your contribution. The other is a true feminist who invites discussion around work–life balance and women’s experience. She pushes me to own my longevity as power, leveraging institutional knowledge with the immediacy and relevance of analytics, market, and trend. We also have a very inspirational female CEO. She is brilliant, has a clear vision, and is very direct and open in her interactions. She commands respect in who she is and how she leads. It is exhilarating to see her in action.

**At this point in your career, what are you doing to help or mentor other women who are earlier in their careers?**

ANJA: So often I still wonder, “What am I doing?” or “What do I want to be when I grow up?” The more I learn and experience, the more I recognize what I don’t know and how much more I still need to grow. I have, however, been told by junior staff that my example of leadership and family commitment has helped them see a path for themselves. I recognize that being more vocal as a potential supporter or advisor would be broadly helpful. Fortunately, my organization has a formal mentorship program and I often get asked to participate. That has allowed me to see myself as having some valuable experience to share and has encouraged me to offer more.

PANDORA: This is a role I have always taken seriously, and I try to engage in supportive conversations any chance I have. Certainly as a leader, one of my focuses is to grow new leaders and I prioritize developmental



activities and discussions. But these have to be backed up by day-to-day feedback, which I give immediately and specifically. It is especially important to help people see and own their strengths and personal power. Knowing what you do well is foundational to true confidence. I do this in and out of my team. I watch others very carefully and when I notice a peer who seems to be struggling, I will engage them with questions. This generally leads to an opportunity for them to talk and space to find their own resolution. I try to apply my own experience only to reinforce or to line up in solidarity; most people don't need answers as much as reassurance that they have the answer after all. I also try to give perspective but am careful to not diminish the unique weight of their current reality. I make time for conversations and interactions with others. When someone says, "But you are so busy . . .," I will assure them that helping them be successful in the organization is the most important work I can do.

MEHRSA: I think this is the most important part of my job right now—to mentor my students and younger scholars. Many come to me to ask for advice and often I take my students aside and try to help them out. I try to help them out in the ways I wish someone had helped me. It's so wonderful to see junior scholars and students thrive. It's much better now than ten or twenty years ago, and I think the more of us who are involved in mentoring, the better it gets for the next group.

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