

## Lehigh Valley C-Suite Executives and Gender Balance

AUTHOR: Diane Donaher, Executive Director of IronPigs Charities, Athena Leadership Award Recipient

According to a study by the Network of Executive Women, "...the female executive population is projected to decline by more than 50% over the next decade. If the status quo remains, women will comprise 15% of executive ranks by 2027, compared to 35% today - a trend moving in the wrong direction" (Network of Executive Women 2018). Women in the Lehigh Valley must make a concerted effort to prevent that trend from being replicated here.

The 2019 State of the Lehigh Valley report's focus on women provides an opportunity to consider Lehigh Valley women's representation in the C-suite, which refers to the collection of "Chief" positions such as Chief Executive Officer or Chief Financial Officer. Issues regarding whether the number of women in C-suite positions in the Lehigh Valley is increasing and about efforts to include women in the C-suite is a specific focus. The Lehigh Valley Women's Leadership Survey, hereafter known as the "Survey," was created to help answer relevant questions. The Survey was completed by recipients of The ATHENA Leadership Award, which has been sponsored by the Women's Business Council of the Greater Lehigh Valley Chamber of Commerce since 1985. This national award program, hosted by Athena International, honors individuals who have achieved the highest level of professional excellence, contribute time and energy to improve the quality of life for others in the community, and actively assist others, particularly women, in realizing their full leadership potentials. Recipients have come from a variety of professions in the for-profit and non-profit sectors.

These individuals have helped to advance the positions of women in the workplace, including increasing the number of women in the C-suite. However, in recent years, they have identified a number of C-suite leadership positions that were previously held by women being returned to men and identified fewer that have been held by men and now have female leadership. The question of whether these changes are simply perception or reality deserves attention. Is retention and advancement of women important to Lehigh Valley companies and major non-profit organizations?

The survey presented to Athena Leadership Award winners<sup>1</sup> addressed these issues. While certainly not a scientific study, 50% of the respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that the number of women in C-suite positions in the Lehigh Valley is increasing.<sup>2</sup> Among the remainder, 35% strongly agreed or agreed, 15% neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. The perception of half of the respondents that the number of women in C-Suite positions in the Lehigh Valley is not increasing warrants further study.

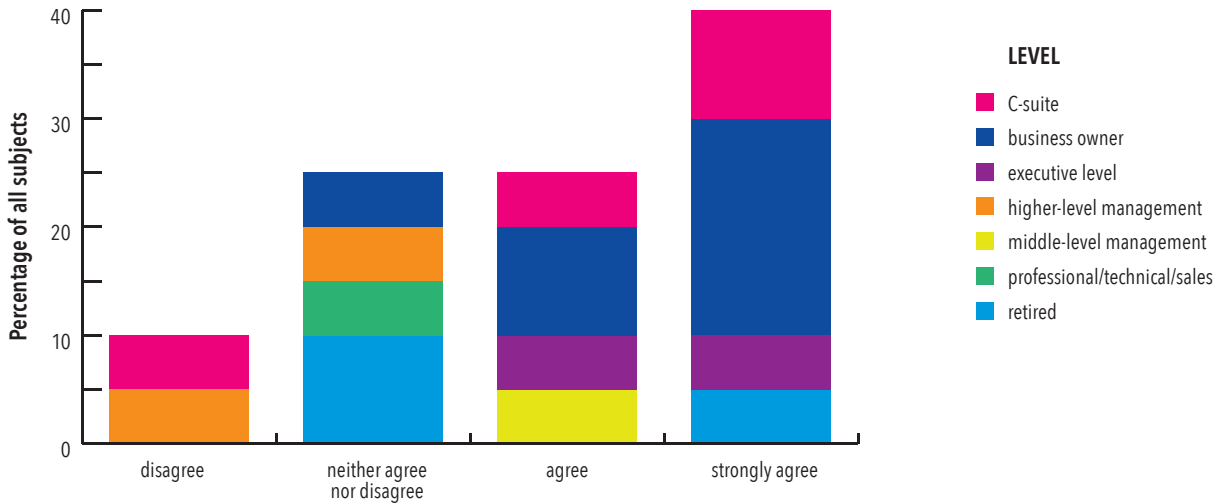
Among other questions, the Survey asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following statement: "The retention and advancement of women is important to your company or organization." Table 1 summarizes responses. Female business owners or women already holding C-suite positions were inclined to strongly agree or agree with this statement; women in executive level positions and below tended to strongly disagree or disagree with the statement.

When asked if metrics are in place to track the retention and advancement of women in their companies or organizations, 45% of the respondents were not sure, 30% agreed and 25% disagreed.

An obvious disconnect exists between the data presented in Tables 1 and 2. Although 65% of respondents said it was important for the retention and advancement of women, only 30% have metrics to track the retention and advancement of women in the company or organization. A number of questions about female leadership in the Lehigh Valley, therefore, arise. What does the female leadership candidate pool in the Lehigh Valley look like? What actions are companies and organizations taking to improve the retention and advancement of women? What is the business case for advancing women in the workplace and what is the corporate and organizational culture in the Lehigh Valley for doing so? How do Lehigh Valley companies and organizations operationalize the business case for women in C-suite positions? Is there gender imbalance at the C-suite level in the Lehigh Valley and why does this even matter?

<sup>1</sup> The survey respondents included 23% C-suite, 35% Business Owners, 11% Executive level, 5% Higher level managers, 5% Mid-Level managers, 11% Professional/Technical employees and 11% retired employees. 47% have a Bachelor's Degree, 29% a Master's degree, 11% an associate's degree, 11% a high school diploma, 5% a PHD/EdD/JD/MD, and 23% had additional certifications.

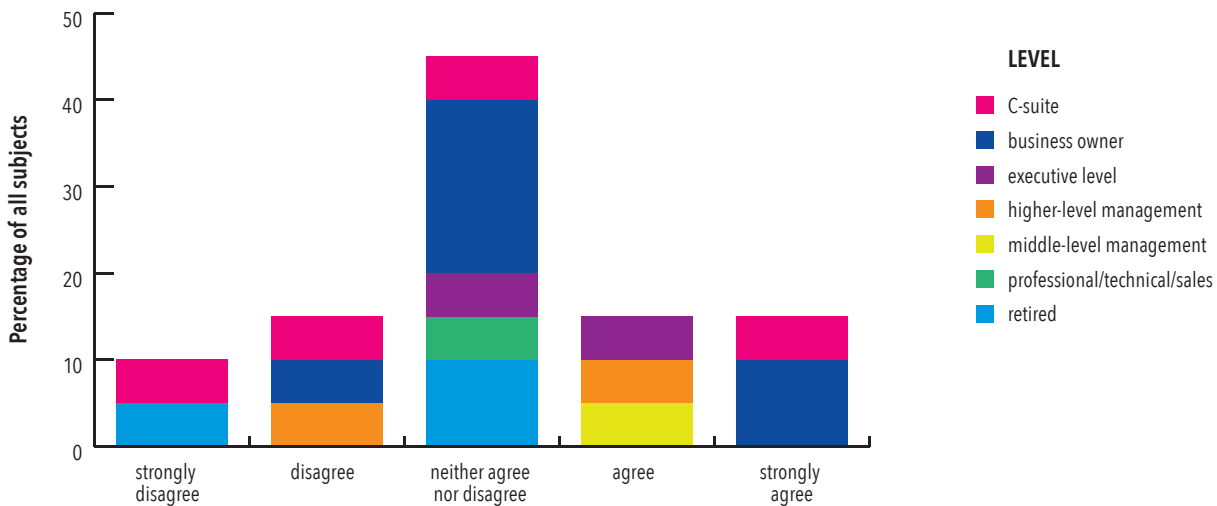
**RESPONSE TO “RETENTION AND ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN IS IMPORTANT”**



**TABLE 1 - IMPORTANCE OF RETENTION AND ADVANCEMENT**

Bars represent percentages of subjects who provided each response to the statement, “The retention and advancement of women is important to your company / organization.” The colors in each bar indicate the job levels of those who provided the indicated response.

**RESPONSE TO “METRICS TO MEASURE WOMEN’S ROLES IN MY COMPANY ARE IN PLACE”**



**TABLE 2 - EXISTENCE OF METRICS**

Bars represent percentages of subjects who provided each response to the statement, “Metrics to measure women’s roles in my company are in place.” The colors in each bar indicate the job levels of those who provided the indicated response.

General answers to some of these questions can be found in previously-published works. For example, in “Is Your Women’s Leadership Strategy Sitting on a One-Legged Stool?” Jeffrey Halter discusses the idea of operationalizing the business case as treating women’s leadership advancement as a leadership imperative. This means total enterprise engagement. Women’s leadership advancement must be owned by operations, sales and marketing (Halter 2018) There are three

compelling business reasons to implement an integrated women’s leadership strategy: To Grow Revenue, Improve Operating Profit and Enhance Your Corporate Reputation. Everything one does must link to one of these key drivers for business leaders to be held accountable (Halter 2019)

According to Dr. Ines Wichert at the IBM Smarter Workforce Institute, resolving gender imbalance should be a key strategic business priority as it impacts not only the performance of the organization, but also its reputation as

a world class employer. The scarcity of female CEOs does not appear surprising, especially after considering the rest of the members of the C-suite, who often comprise the primary candidates in line for succession to the top job. These roles include the Chief Operating Officer, the Chief Financial Officer and the Head of Sales, among others. Only 9% of top executive positions in the Russell 3000 are filled by women, which means that companies have a long way to go towards building gender equity within their top ranks. Certain sectors lag considerably behind others, with real estate, telecommunications and energy having the lowest rates of female executive officers. For example, studies by McKinsey (2012) and others show that companies with higher proportions of women in executive roles achieve stronger financial results, on average, than other companies do. This is particularly the case when organizations face turbulence or the need to innovate (Rost and Osterloh, 2010; Deszo and Ross, 2011).

However, there is also a powerful indirect effect that comes from promoting more women and supporting their career progression. Tapping into their talents can potentially be a substantial opportunity for every organization. The key factors that often influence women's career progression relate to

- the individual herself and her career management behaviors. These actions can help a woman to increase her visibility, become better known in senior management circles and build a strong reputation.
- her immediate work environment and her access to important career resources such as mentors and sponsors, a supportive supervisor, and critical job assignments.
- the wider organizational context and the predominant organizational culture such as work-life balance and flexible working practices, supportive work-life culture, objective Human Resources processes, and bias and gender stereotyping-free environment (Wichert 2014)

The extent to which these ideals pertain to the Lehigh Valley was addressed by particular Athena Award recipients. They provided examples of how the key factors that often influence women's career progression can create business leadership opportunities in the Lehigh Valley.

### LAURA AZZALINA

With a successful 40-year career in financial services, Laura Azzalina was recently named Director of Community Banking for Firsttrust's 18-branch retail

network. In April of 2016, the YMCA honored Laura as a Women of the Year; in May of 2015, she received the Lehigh Valley Business Journal Women of Distinction Award; and in 2009, she was recognized with the prestigious Athena Award.

Among the leadership lessons Laura has learned are being authentic, genuine, honest and passionate and accepting that the path to one's dreams often doesn't go as planned. Laura believes the top leadership challenges for women include "earning a seat at the table" and having the confidence to speak up and have a voice regardless of the outcome. The best leadership advice she received is "talk less, listen more, ask questions" and "cooler heads prevail." Laura states, "I learned early on in my career that the biggest challenge to overcome was being a female in a male-dominated industry. I took that challenge as an opportunity to build strong relationships in order to earn the trust of clients, colleagues and executives. I was once told that I was a woman in a man's world."

### ELAINE PIVINSKI

Owner of Franklin Hill Vineyards, Elaine Pivinski, believes that, "As a leader, it is not so much what I did; it's how I made my staff feel that has been the foundation of the Franklin Hill Culture that is so successful. As a strong supporter of women and families, I feel the greatest impact that I have made has been nurturing my staff to take ownership of their work, giving them the tools to complete their responsibilities and allowing them to put family first." An important leadership lesson Elaine learned is that honesty is fundamental, "Honesty creates trust and, without trust, there is no growth." Elaine believes that, "beliefs drive behaviors, so by instilling positive thoughts and attainable goals and reinforcing these beliefs, one is creating a workplace culture that is successful."

In recognition of her successes, Elaine has received the Woman of Merit recognition from Scranton University, the prestigious Athena Award, the Nike Award, and been named one of the Top 50 Women in Business in the State of Pennsylvania. She has also been recognized as a Lehigh Valley Business Woman of Influence and received the YWCA Breaking the Glass Ceiling award for Non-Traditional Women in Business as well as the Trailblazer Award. Most recently, Elaine was inducted into the Lehigh Valley Business Hall of Fame.

### NANCY CONRAD

Nancy Conrad practices employment law and litigation as a partner in the Commercial Litigation Department and is also Chair of the Labor and Employment Practice Group

and Managing Partner of the Lehigh Valley office of White and Williams LLP. Attorney Conrad has been named a Pennsylvania Super Lawyer by her peers and as a Lehigh Valley Business as Woman of Influence by Lehigh Valley Business. Awards that she has received include Girl Scouts of Eastern Pennsylvania Take the Lead Award and the Pennsylvania Bar Association's Commission on Women in the Profession's Anne X. Alpern Award

Attorney Conrad explains, "I continue to find ways to respond with the right words and establish a presence to distinguish myself in a way that commands respect and the proper place and voice at the table." She considers it essential to find "the right balance between being a strong, assertive leader and an inclusive, collaborative leader; and the right balance in my professional and personal life." Leadership advice that she received and incorporated into her practice is to listen to and value the work of others as well as to provide recognition and appreciation when their effort contributes to the final work product.

## PAMELA VARKONY

Pamela Varkony is best known as Founder of Power Of Women (POW), an organization that provides women with opportunities to network and mentor each other as well as to showcase their businesses. Evidencing her success, POW "is now a keystone of the Women's Leadership Institute at Cedar Crest College in Allentown." In addition, she has served as a gubernatorial appointee to the Pennsylvania State Commission for Women and received numerous awards, including the 2008 the Pennsylvania Women's Press Association's Excellence in

Journalism award, the Business Council for Peace VERA, the American Association of University Women's Gateway Award, the Girl Scouts' Woman of Distinction award and the Nike Award for championing women's causes.

The best leadership advice Pamela ever received is, "Be gracious in both victory and defeat." She stated, "I like to believe I have made an impact through leading by example. I have also tried to reach beyond my world to help women in developing countries. I subscribe to the adage: "Don't tell me, show me." Another leadership lesson Pamela stresses is, "The importance of not allowing others to define us. As women we are often raised, through our families and the culture, to 'please' everyone, to be the 'peacemakers', to meet the expectations of our parents, coaches, and society. We must insist on being our 'authentic self', traveling our own path."

## CONCLUSION

Those interviewed for this project provide inspiration for women who hope to become successful business leaders. While we celebrate the accomplishments of women through the Athena Award, the Take The Lead event and other recognitions for women, we must also acknowledge the data suggesting a gender imbalance at the C-suite Level. Further study is needed to fully investigate this issue. If there is significant imbalance, it is necessary for us, as a community, to address it beyond supporting women's leadership initiatives and resource groups. Operationalizing the business case and strengthening organizational cultures are the bases for creating lasting change.

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