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Creating a circle of leaders

The Vancouver Board of Trade's new program launches to standing-room only crowds

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Vancouver Board of Trade directors realized in late 2006 that despite being one of the fastest-growing boards of trade in North America and feted by other organizations for its stellar programming, the organization had at least one flaw.

It had trouble engaging women members.

"That's something that could probably be said of many organizations," said board of trade vice-chair Sue Paish, chief executive of Pharmasave Drugs.

"Our community of other female leaders didn't seem to be as aware of, or as engaged in, the board of trade as males. So, we said, 'What's going on here?'"

Paish said the organization's willingness to confront this issue arose, ironically, in part because the BOT's board of directors had started to include more women.

Active board of trade directors such as Wendy Lisogar-Cocchia and Carol Lee and committee chair Evi Mustel joined Paish in urging the board as a whole to consider innovative ways to attract women, she said.

The result of this lobbying is the Women's Leadership Circle. The WLC is the board's name for programming that is specifically targeted to women. The first WLC event took place in November.

Men and women can attend WLC events and can be on the WLC's advisory board. Indeed, four men (Pacific Newspaper Group president Kevin Bent, Tom Lee Music president Henry Lee, biotechnology industry luminary Don Rix and Varshney Capital Corp. partner Praveen Varshney) join 15 women on the WLC advisory board.

WLC events are more likely to start early in the morning and to include female speakers. Sometimes, mainstream board of trade events will include a separate WLC reception or roundtable shortly afterward, Paish said. Approximately 1,800 female board of trade members have so far opted to receive regular WLC newsletters.

The first WLC event was part of the board of trade's popular Power Within speaker series, which has included a visit from former U.S. president Bill Clinton and some other of the most sought-after speakers in the world. The event saw 180 people cram into a standing room only venue at the Westin Bayshore to hear stress management expert, comedian and author Loretta Laroche.

A similar sized crowd greeted Tara Cree last month when she spoke at the Coast Plaza Hotel and Suites near Denman Street. "Whether you like it or not, you are a brand," Cree told the 180 women and three men who attended the event.

Cree emphasized that developing a leadership brand is especially important to women in business. In Canada, a recent survey of Fortune 500 companies showed that 15.1% of corporate officers are women. Fewer than half that percentage carry titles such as president, CEO or COO.

"We're here to find out about what we can do to bring about change," Cree said. To that end, Cree then listed what she considers the seven deadly sins of branding:

- refraining to give justified, negative feedback because of wanting to be liked;
- settling for recognition versus the reward of a salary hike;
- being uncomfortable with conflict;
- failing to advocate oneself by always wanting to appear as a team player (women are more likely to say "we" than "I");
- unwillingness to take risks early and often in a career;
- being unskilled in "bragging" about achievements and capabilities; and
- lack of career ownership by not setting clear goals and career planning. •

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