

From the Pacific Business News:

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Special Report

PBN's Women Who Mean Business roundtable

PBN recently gathered five Hawaii businesswomen in the newsroom to talk about a range of issues that affect women in business today. Mary Benson, development and personnel director at Honolulu Ford and proprietor of Honolulu Insurance Specialists; Christine Camp, CEO of Avalon Development Co.; Terri Fujii, audit partner at CW Associates, CPAs; Nanci Kreidman, CEO of the Domestic Violence Action Center; and Shelley Wilson, CEO of Wilson Care Group, shared their thoughts on such topics as leadership, mentoring, work-life balance and family leave.



TINA YUEN/PBN

Read below what they had to say:

What do you think is one of the most significant barriers to getting more women into leadership roles?

Christine Camp: I see more dads being involved, but still it's women. Being a leader requires a lot more time and effort as a woman. It holds you back when you have to balance the importance of family with other leadership roles. That becomes the impediment for some women. As a societal expectation, what do you want in your life? Women choose to hold back for a little while so they can have things in life, like accomplishments outside of the home.

Terri Fujii: It's not just a leadership role for what you do. The extended leadership role in the community and all the nonprofit organizations that would be nice to become involved with — that takes more time on top of everything else.

Mary Benson: I agree with Christine. Unfortunately, that stereotype is still out there, that the woman is the primary caregiver for the children and unless you're a superwoman, and I think everyone is a superwoman, you have to find that balance between work and child. Now that my son has grown, I am finding time to contribute more to leadership roles as well, too, but unfortunately we're still back in the Dark Ages when it comes to that, that the women are the primary caregivers for the children.

Shelley Wilson: As a leader, I chose not to have children because I felt that I could not handle being a mom and running my business, so that's a choice I made. Women also have to make the sacrifice in order to choose one path or the other because doing both is so difficult and so challenging.

Nanci Kreidman: The marketplace still has many barriers in place that impede women. One of them is the expectation that women will give as much to their company and their work as their family. It's a formula. Everybody has their own formula. I happen to have three children, adult children. They are grown up, but it is still a very big responsibility to be a leader, a mother, a partner, a community spokesperson, which all of us are in a variety of ways. And the invitation by the marketplace is different for women than it is for men.

Is there still a lot of pressure to do it all?

Nanci Kreidman: I don't know if you are familiar with the book "The Second Shift"? That sort of tells the story of what the expectations are. It's a very high bar. Recently I saw a posting of one of the Olympic athletes, a woman Olympic athlete, and she was using Bounty paper towels to shine her own medal. And the commentary was, I wonder if they would feature a male athlete using paper towels to shine his medal.

Mary Benson: As much as I'd love to turn back the clock, I think you're right. I think women have these expectations that they're supposed to look a certain way, act a certain way, be a certain weight. So you have that added pressure along with following your career path, too. And I think you need to get to a point where you say, "Hey, screw it, this is what I'm good at, this is what I'm going to focus on and the rest is just going to have to go by the wayside." It's more of a self-acceptance of yourself, and as I've gotten older, that's what I'm focusing on more — what brings me joy, what does fulfill that need in my life as well, too.

Terri Fujii: It's like asking for help is still a sign of failure.

Mary Benson: I was going to say, don't be afraid to ask. I mean, I have no qualms about it anymore. When my son was younger, I'd say, "Hey, do you mind picking my son up? Can he hang at your house for the afternoon?" What's the worst thing they could say? "No, I'm busy." I think females support other females. Moms support other moms and business women. It definitely is a great support group out there.

Christine Camp: There are a lot of expectations, but those people who are succeeding out there, they aren't doing everything. Focus on what you can do. If you try to be perfect, it won't work. Hillary Clinton did a lot for me as a mom. What she made everyone aware of is that it takes a village to be a leader and raise a family. Whether it's in personal or public life and community, it takes a village.

Nanci Kreidman: I like that adage, but I don't think we have achieved it, I don't think we've realized it, which is what we were talking about at the outset. Which is how do you do it all. If we had a village it would be easier. I don't see the village stepping forward.

What about the next generation? What challenges do you see?

Terri Fujii: They're going to focus on work-life balance and family and what's important now, because the career can come later, right? In a way, I think they have more potential because as a generation, we've lived through it and been there and now we're starting to figure it out. We didn't figure it out yet, but we're starting to figure it out. So now they have more role models to look up to, because the generation before us — my mother didn't work until we all went off to college. So they have more role models and more of us in the workplace who understand where they're coming from and what they're looking for.

Shelley Wilson: I think that for some of our younger staff that work-life balance is so much more important than when I was starting my career ... It was just one track ... I was so passionate about it. I was so hungry for that one element in my life. I think as we've gotten older, we want to be able to stop and smell the roses. I think some of these younger nurses have this work-life balance thing down to a science and sometimes that's also a challenge on the career path. They are not hungry enough. It's just a different balance.

Mary Benson: I know 20 years ago, when I first started in the automobile business, I had a great mentor. And this is back in South Georgia, which, not only are you dealing in the automotive business, which is now, today, less than 15 percent are females, here I am in the deep South on top of that, too, and I got to the point where I would just ask her, “Hey, how do you do this? How do you do that?” I think the up-and-coming generation is more open to that, more open to communicating with mentors or [asking] their business owners, “Hey, how do I follow this path, too?” Whereas back 30-plus years ago, I was trying to figure it out on my own more or less. So I think they do have it somewhat easier than what we did.

Nanci Kreidman: Younger men and younger women have role models, but I don’t think the expectations have changed that much. And I don’t think social norms have changed that much, and I don’t think socialization has changed that much. Again we’re talking about women athletes being second to their athlete husbands, the Bounty paper towels, there’s all kinds of messaging and imagery that still perpetuates the idea that men are big and brave and in charge and women not so much. We’re still fighting that — to different degrees — and in different ways, that is still the foundation we are launching from. You know, I hear that we are in a different universe, but I don’t know if that’s true.

Do you make an effort to give women employees more of a hand up?

Mary Benson: My husband and I, we are a huge proponents of promoting within our dealership. We have guys and gals that started out as lot techs and now are service managers. To me, it’s more initiative versus gender. I want to see that spark in them. I want to see that, whether they’re male or female, it doesn’t make a difference to me. If they don’t have that willingness to learn or want to learn, then I’m like — and I hate to be callous — but I’m like, why waste my time? If I’m going to spend all my time and effort trying to help you, and then it doesn’t make a difference? So I look more for initiative than anything.

Shelley Wilson: In the younger generation, there are people who lack the confidence and the experience, both men and women. I don’t think it’s a male-female issue. I think the young women I meet are more confident than ever before. The programs they’re involved in, the different activities — my friends’ children have a voice and are confident from a very young age. The role models they have are changing.

Christine Camp: I want to lean in [to young women] and say, “you can do it and be better. Don’t be afraid. If you fail, at least you tried.” I identify people who need a little more confidence. I see myself in them. It’s not that I look for women to help. Those are the ones I want to help out. [Before I became a mother] I felt women didn’t need the help. I shied away from organizations that said women are different and needed help. I shunned that. I wanted people to think of me as a person, a professional. Then I became a mom. I realized the whole universe changed. They need to be recognized as a family person. Over the last eight years I became a different person with a different lens.

What about work-life balance?

Christine Camp: I encourage my women managers to take time off. I remind them, “you work to live, not live to work,” because my whole lens has changed, I realize what’s important in a community is that mom first, family first, then work. Then work will become much happier. I want to make sure that they don’t feel a level of guilt if they have to leave a little early or they have to take time off so they can be at the school event for the child, because it’s that once in a lifetime. As an employer, I see somebody who’s going to be with me much longer if I give them that freedom. Then I will build loyalty and I’ll build work ethic. They will want our company to be successful so they can maintain that lifestyle.

Mary Benson: Most retail stores are open seven days and we've opted to close on Sundays, because we feel "family first," that needs to be your top priority. You do get the loyalty and you get the long-term employees, because they realize that it's not all about the all-mighty dollar. It's about what really is important — that's your family and actually spending time with them. If someone needs to go early to go to their son's open house, I'm fine with that. I know it's going to come back to me tenfold, because they appreciate the fact that you don't nitpick about little issues like that.

Terri Fujii: We provide our staff flexibility. No one's tied to their desk 8 to 5 or eight hours a day. That goes for the men as well, because in Hawaii, the majority of the families, both parents are working. It seems, at least now with the younger generation, the fathers want that same flexibility, and it's partly, too, that their wives are working. So in that sharing of the responsibilities, they're asking for and they need that same flexibility. It's not just the women or the mothers.

Shelley Wilson: All employers really have to evolve with the current day and it's the culture in Hawaii: Supporting the ohana. All of our employees are really part of our families. We support them, we respect them. We get to know their children, we get to know their families and it's important that we help with that work-life balance as well.

Do you think that's unique to Hawaii?

Shelley Wilson: Probably we're more sensitive to it culturally than maybe a big thriving city like LA or Chicago. I think we're more sensitive to it and I want to support it for my staff for their success. I want to support it, so they don't miss those special moments with their families. It's important and that loyalty is built with the organization, and they feel like you're taking care of them, too. It's a two-way street.

Terri Fujii: In Hawaii, you do have more of that "village," because a lot of people here have family around them, whereas on the Mainland, your family is just scattered all over the place. But it is a cost-of-living differential, because at my prior firm, the partners on the Mainland, the women partners would say, "Well, hire a nanny." And my staff here would look at me and say, "We can't afford to hire a nanny. I'm already working to send my kid to school." And I had to tell the firm, "You have to stop giving that answer." That's not the answer for everybody. That may work for a partner. Yeah, we can afford to hire a nanny. But the staff person can't hire a nanny.

What about family leave?

Christine Camp: You should allow them leave but not have employers subsidize all of it. Hawaii is a difficult place for business. You need to subsidize it for the entire state if this is a state law. You can't put a burden on the company; the company is already hurting having someone out for three months. I allow people to be out for three months, I subsidize a month-and-a-half. That small business has to incur the expenses, hiring someone temporarily or offer overtime. It's really one of those things I feel strongly about, people having that leave, but they have to bear some of that cost.

Mary Benson: We had two of our service writers, brand-new dads, that did take family leave. And two of the weeks overlapped, too, but it was great because the team stepped up. They covered for them, and these guys came back so much more appreciative, willing to go the extra mile to help out their team as well, too.

Shelley Wilson: Speaking from long-term care, people are taking care of their parents while taking care of their children. Things happen, accidents happen and people need to leave immediately. As to Christine's point, it's a challenge for businesses. I'm very, very supportive of medical leave or family leave for those

individuals, but supporting it from a business perspective is really difficult. And I think with all of our businesses we are faced with a lot of new government mandates, and that makes it even more difficult to make it work.”

There was a WalletHub study that said Hawaii was the best state for women’s equality, and they were talking about pay equality, too.

Mary Benson: I wish that I could say that the reason why Hawaii ranks so high is because it’s such a progressive state, but I think it’s also due to our 2 percent unemployment rate as well, too. I find myself trying to lure in the good managers, and, of course, I have to pay them more. Whether they are male or female, I’m going to pay you what you want to keep you. So that has a lot [to do with] as far as the pay equality here in Hawaii.

Terri Fujii: Most of our businesses are small businesses, and in that situation, it’s a lot harder to hide any of those kinds of discrepancies. It’s a lot more obvious when someone is making the same.

Mary Benson: It costs a company three times more to replace a staff member versus keeping the one that you already have. So in the long run, it’s beneficial in the long run to keep them.

Christine Camp: Hawaii is a place where union membership is strong. That’s gender neutral and that helps a lot. We are a service industry and that’s gender neutral. We don’t know the stories behind that. Men might have been compensated more or bonuses are higher.

Do you mentor young women?

Christine Camp: It’s a lot more official these days. I have kids coming to me asking me to grab lunch and asking me to be a mentor. Mentors we had before were people we were working with. They saw something in us, maybe it was an encouraging word. They helped you become who you are. It was much more organic. It’s easier for kids to ask because it’s accepted to ask. I’m still having a hard time getting adjusted. I like the organic way better.

Shelley Wilson: You have to care about them. Mentoring is more about a relationship ... You work with somebody over time and you help them shape themselves. You have to have some sort of emotional connection. You have to care”

Were your mentors male or female or both? Did you learn different things from each if you had both?

Terri Fujii: Mine was and still is male, but in the accounting profession, most of the leaders were men. Fortunately, I found one that liked me and was willing to bring me up along. It taught me different things, though. It definitely toughened me up to then be able to deal with the other men. Most of my clients at the leader level were male as well. From that perspective, I think having a male mentor probably did me better than if I had a female mentor.

Mary Benson: When my son was growing up, he got a participation trophy. You know, that’s not real life. Real life is, you’re in the workplace, you see someone that inspires you or does help you out when you’re having a tough time, and at the moment, you didn’t even think twice about it, like, oh, gee, thanks, I appreciate that. But now, looking back, I think, wow, that person was a great role model, a great mentor and did see something in me to help me get to where I am today.

That sort of organic mentorship has changed a bit with technology in the office. When email came in, the phones stopped ringing, the conversations stopped.

Shelley Wilson: In health care, people are still having conversations. You can't text a patient. Having that conversation, that interaction, is lost in some industries. In health care, we still have to talk to each other.

Mary Benson: At 10 o'clock every day, we have a managers meeting. We talk face to face, no emails. I agree, I think that unfortunately, a lot of the communication is lost in the emails. The majority of our sales is done over the internet. About 90 percent of our sales. People already know what they want when they walk into the dealership. They've done their research and they've already made contact with one of our sales associates. They know who they're going to speak to.

Is that good or bad though?

Mary Benson: It's beneficial in a way. We want the consumer to be informed, because it is such a huge commitment purchasing a car. As far as managing, though, one to one, face to face, every day. Hands down. We're old school that way. We prefer face-to-face contact versus sending an email.

Terri Fujii: It gives people the alternative, because when we didn't have all of that and you had to go talk to your boss and you had a question, even though you were afraid to do it, you had to do it or you couldn't get the work done. Now, instead of walking in the door, I get an email with the question. They have an alternative way to communicate with you that isn't forcing that face-to-face conversation that we all had to have whether we wanted to or not.

Mary Benson: I think the up-and-coming female generations — I don't want to say they have it easier, but they're much more informed, they're much more self-assured, they're much more confident. Even when we joke about this mentoring bit, but the fact they're willing to come up and ask makes a huge difference. I never asked for a mentor when I started my career, so I think that makes a huge difference.

