

RSOG Women in Leadership Workshop: “Women in Government – Changing the Paradigm”

with

Anne Abraham & Dr. Asma Abdullah

When : 17 May 2013
Where : Razak School of Government
Who : Anne Abraham & Dr. Asma Abdullah

About The Workshop

Women start their careers with the same level of intelligence, education, and commitment as men. Yet comparatively, few reach the top echelons in both public and private sectors. By developing, promoting, and retaining women talent in the government, this could help in shaping the national economies and societies. This interactive knowledge sharing session was designed to help women understand what it takes to be more self-confident and effective leaders.

The workshop was centered on:

1. Listing some hard facts on leadership for women in the public service.
2. Identifying blocks, and barriers in holding women back.
3. Selecting suitable women leaders as role models.
4. Describing some future possibilities given the right structure, system and support.

Summary

Dr. According to the World Bank Report 2010, higher rates of female participation in government are associated with lower levels of corruption. The Obama Administration 2010 released the following statement: “experience showed that a country is more peaceful and prosperous where women are accorded full and equal opportunities”.

In view of the above, it is important to acknowledge the need for women leaders in government, recognizing their potential role as agents of change who can contribute tremendously to a nation by strengthening democracy and creating a more equitable society.

Yet, women are still significantly outnumbered in decision-making positions in the government. Participants were asked to suggest some external and internal challenges and barriers that were identified as deterring women in leadership roles. Below are the external factors raised by the participants.

- Hierarchical and patriarchal government
- Family commitment
- Cultural and religious conditioning and perceived gender expectations
- Negative perceptions towards women leaders
- No women-friendly working environment
- Leaking pipeline – potential women leaders decide to leave work after marriage
- Gender bias and male-bonding
- Inhibition (Internal struggle)

As for Internal factors, women tend to exemplify self-sabotaging behaviors (fear, inhibition, worry, isolating themselves, misunderstanding needs of society, and lack of self-reflection), which, in turn, have a tendency of undervaluing their potential.

To overcome these barriers, the balanced leadership model was presented, consisting of the following: Reflect, Context, Network, Engage and Energy:

- **Reflect:** Women are encouraged to reflect on their strengths and passion and put them to work in the service of an inspiring purpose. Reflection is important for women to achieve greater job satisfaction, higher productivity, lower turnover,

increased loyalty, deriving greater meaning from their jobs to ultimately, inspire colleagues, touch hearts and minds and ignite happiness.

- **Context:** Women need to view challenges in a positive manner. Positive thinking and positive context make critical differences to professional outcomes even during the most challenging times.
- **Network:** Women need to view challenges in a positive manner. Positive thinking and positive context make critical differences to professional outcomes even during the most challenging times.
- **Engage:** Women need to be visible, to speak and ask for what is right, become more self-reliant, increase confidence by accepting opportunities, be more willing to take risks and move out of their comfort zones.
- **Energy:** Women need to know what energizes them and how they can manage this. Managing energy is important because many women come home from work only to sign onto a “second shift”— 92% of them still manage all household tasks, such as meal preparation and child care. Women need to balance energy flows and to prioritize activities that energize them. Gratitude and appreciation are the rewards that re-energize women and elevate them to greater heights.

A report by Ernst & Young highlighted some significant principles for future public sector women leaders. They need to actively make their points of view heard. Women leaders should build their legacy in the workplace and develop ways to make departments better able to accommodate future generations of women. Women leaders need to take on a stewardship role on behalf of other women and act as role model.

Issues Raised

- Male masculinity in Malaysia is a confounding issue that needs to be addressed meticulously, since women are still not viewed as equal to men.
- Role of mothers in raising children are extremely crucial as mothers hold the power to mould the next generation of men and women to create an equitable society.
- The influence of Malaysian-Malay culture in management which is anchored by men, *akar, ilmu, rasa, akal* and *amal*, have influence on the way the women Leaders behave.

- Women have a tendency to conform to male behavior when they arrive at the decision-making posts. Instead, women leaders need to be empowered and comfortable to play to their own strengths.
- The conditioning of shame is prevalent in our culture, with the continual dilemma of *“what others will say”* in both positive and negative contexts.
- Generation Y women operate differently in the workplace. This generation rejects the hierarchy-based society as prefer an egalitarian society. This generation requires feedback from their peers and superiors. Where there is a lack of understanding on the concept of feedback, this is can be construed as a weak leadership styles because. This is why “poison letters” emerge – a way to confront (offer generally negative feedback) without having to do it face to face.
- Women need to be more assertive to push, empower and challenge themselves in the public sector and the private sector alike.

About the Speakers

Anne Abraham’s executive management expertise is the result of over 25 years in enterprise software and systems sales, marketing and operations. As CEO of LeadWomen, Anne plays a pivotal role in guiding the company’s vision and mission towards developing leadership talents and advancing women and diversity in the workplace across the ASEAN Region. Prior to LeadWomen, she was the head of SAP and Cisco Malaysia. She was successful at building high-performance executive teams and leading technology and service organizations with P&L responsibility of US\$100+ million.

Dr. Asma Abdullah specializes on topics related to human resource development, organization development and corporate cultures her work experience includes 22 years in an American multinational as a human resource development practitioner. She has designed, developed, and implemented courses on teambuilding, supervisory development and negotiation skills for both Malaysian and foreign managers. She has written and published more than 40 articles on culture, women, training and development and authored 5 books.