

Bridging the Gap in Business Culture

How Dr. Darlene Lee, chief executive officer of Darling Communications, is inspiring change by promoting male mentoring as a key strategy for advancing women in the workplace

Numerous studies have reported that many highly skilled women lag behind men in the workplace because they lack the proper professional support, connections and knowledge that men are more likely to have. Although some progress among women has been noted, the status and pay equity gaps between men and women in many business organizations remain. Dr. Lee brings a new perspective to this critical issue, as she believes that women can become more successful in their careers by seeking out male mentors and learning from them to help bridge the gap. In our interview, we talked to Dr. Lee about the significance of male mentoring relationships for women and what she is doing as a leadership strategist and consultant to close the professional gap.

VERGE: In your own words, tell our readers about what you do?

Dr. Darlene Lee: I am the CEO of Darling Communications, a strategic communications firm. I work to get executive men to assist professional women with career and leadership advancement opportunities.

So how do you go about doing that?

It happens in primarily three ways. The first two are conferences. The first conference is, “Women at the Helm™.” And although we have a few female executives who speak- because the conference is “women” at the helm- every time we do this conference, we also include a male executive. Everything I do includes a senior level male executive. Most recently, our senior male executive talked about how he groomed the female that was going to succeed him. And so, that was very good.

Our primary conference is “Women, Let’s Hear it from the Men! Key Strategies from the Business Men’s Playbook™.” That is a conference where we employ four senior level male executives to pretty much open up their playbooks and tell us how they do business. The premise behind that is to give women the opportunity to learn or to better understand how men think and operate in business.

What inspired you to create the “Women Let’s Hear



it from the Men!...” conferences?

I always had a male mentor from the beginning of my adult working life until now. And so, I thought: how could I turn this into a business and help other women in their careers? I thought it would be nice to tell women about having a male mentor, or male sponsor and how that helps...

A sponsor is someone who is directly responsible for your career success or career advancement. So, it's different than a mentor. A mentor helps you build your competence and your confidence. But the sponsor takes direct responsibility for helping you to advance in your career.

Men have more sponsors. They understand the value of sponsorship rather than mentorship. Although, your sponsor and your mentor can be the same person.

I had three male mentors. So, I pretty much live what I'm talking about and what I wanted other women to experience. So in our conferences, “Women Let's Hear it from the Men: Key Strategies from the Business Men's Playbook” That's what happens.

We have about two and half hours. The men generally have about 20 minutes to speak and there are four male speakers. They speak on various topics, like negotiating, self-promotion, networking, communicating effectively, thinking outside the box, and what might be the quickest way to leadership. Just different topics that would be helpful for women, while giving them something they could put into practice immediately, on the very next day at work.

So, during the conferences do you differentiate between having a sponsor vs. a mentor?

Oh yeah. Actually, at our first “Women at the Helm Conference” I spoke about what women can do to help themselves and that was one of the things that I recommended – think sponsorship not so much mentorship.