

ROUNDTABLE SERIES

Women in hospitality talk leadership, cooperation

As the #MeToo era enters its second year, a number of women leaders in the industry gather to talk about how far they have come—and how far they still have to go

BY JENA TESSE FOX

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For the second year in a row, a number of industry leaders participated in Hotel Management's Women in Hospitality Roundtable, sponsored by The Wall Street Journal and held in November at the Westin New York at Times Square. Topics discussed during the event ranged from collaboration and support to #MeToo, bullying and cracking the glass ceiling.

Pictured at the roundtable [standing, from left]: Sarah Dinger, SVP of brand management, My Place Hotels of America; Rachel Humphrey, COO and VP of franchise relations, Asian American Hotel Owners Association; Anne Lloyd-Jones, managing director, HVS; Melanie Brandman, founder and CEO of The Brandman Agency; and Meredith Latham, regional VP, Crowne Plaza Hotels & Resorts, Americas, IHG. [Seated, from left]: Marian Goodman, SVP-development, Aimbridge Hospitality's Channel Point Division; Amanda Marcello, SVP of brand strategy, RLH Corporation; and Amy Hulbert, VP of boutique and upscale brands, Best Western Hotels & Resorts.

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CARLOS RIGAU

Hotel Management's second Women in Hospitality Roundtable took place slightly more than a year after the #MeToo hashtag went viral, and the movement—as well as the dramatic changes that have come with it—became a central topic of conversation during the roundtable, which was moderated by Hotel Management Editor-in-Chief Stefani C. O'Connor.

But far from focusing on the struggles women face in the industry, much of the dialogue revolved around the triumphs, both large and small, that the executives have achieved in their careers. During the conversation, one theme emerged above all: Women can be agents of change in hospitality when they work together and support one another.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

"There is no doubt women bring something different to the table," said Amanda Marcello, SVP of brand strategy at RLH Corporation, stress-

ing women tend to be "a bit" more collaborative than men. "How I got where I am now was part of just being the [hardest-working person] on my team and making the right connections along the way," she said. In turn, Marcello added, she makes sure to encourage junior talent. This, she said, is a key factor to being successful in any industry. "Looking past what we know and reaching beyond our current team or maybe the level above us...I get to build a team of people around me that want to be involved."

"Great leadership is great leadership, male or female," said Rachel Humphrey, COO and VP of franchise relations for the Asian American Hotel Owners Association. As such, she argued, a good team relationship depends on personality more than gender. "If you don't have the right people around you that support you, you're going to be slogging uphill all the time." Sarah Dinger, SVP of brand management for My Place Hotels of America, agreed, noting that

many of her mentors have been men, while many of her role models have been women. "My team of people is a nice balance between male and female," she said of the My Place offices.

Anne Lloyd-Jones, managing director of the New York office at HVS, acknowledged everyone at the roundtable was in a male-dominated industry. "Most of our clients are men, either on the hotel side or on the lending side, and you have to find ways to relate to them," she said, suggesting this does not need to involve cigars and brandy in a lounge or talking about sports over rounds of golf, bonding activities characteristically associated with male executives. For example, Lloyd-Jones has an affinity for remembering children's names. When she meets with male colleagues, she asks about their families. "I found a way to relate to something that's as important to them as golf and cigars—and in fact more important and more unique," she said.



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Sarah Dinger,
SVP of brand management,
My Place Hotels of America



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Meredith Latham, regional VP, Crowne Plaza Hotels & Resorts, Americas, IHG

During her 30 years in the industry, Marian Goodman, SVP of development at Channel Point Hospitality, a division of Aimbridge Hospitality, has seen significant advances in how women become leaders, but still is surprised when women outnumber men at the boardroom table. “We think that the playing field is leveled and we’ve come a long way, but if you want to go back to reality, I challenge you to go to any major hotel conference and look around. We aren’t where we need to be,” she said. Networking and collaboration can help, she added. “We’ve got to create our own playing field,” she said.

#METOO

Since HM’s 2017 roundtable, the #MeToo anti-sexual-harassment movement has picked up equal parts steam and criticism, ending some careers and pushing businesses to change the way men and women interact in the workplace. Humphrey recently heard how at some businesses, co-workers are refusing to stay late at the office together, for fear of a possible accusation. This, she noted, was not an optimal solution to a complex situation. “How do we make sure that we don’t keep the wonderful male mentors that are out there from wanting to play a really critical role in developing our next leaders?” Humphrey wondered. “I don’t know the answer to that.”

Meredith Latham, IHG’s regional VP of Crowne Plaza Hotels & Resorts, Americas, said her company implemented training to improve communication and prevent offensive conduct before it begins. The results, she said, were eye-opening, with all attendees learning about the range of ways they could unintentionally hurt their co-workers and lower overall morale. “It’s not about the shaking of a finger at a person,” she explained of the training. “It’s about bringing awareness to the fact that your words and your actions could have a negative impact on another person and they may not [feel empowered] to speak up about it.” Speaking up comes

in many forms, she added, and an important part of leadership is keeping an ear open. “There are a lot of opportunities for us to listen and to hear about offensive actions that maybe have taken place.”

Amy Hulbert, VP of boutique and upscale brands at Best Western Hotels & Resorts, said this kind of training can work if everyone is on board and willing to see a situation from a different point of view. In one case, she said, she talked with a male employee about a conversation he had with a female co-worker. “He was talking down to her,” she recalled. Thanks to the training, he was able to understand how he had soured a potentially beneficial relationship. “He was like, ‘Oh, gosh, I really shouldn’t have said that.’”

Programs like these, said HVS’ Lloyd-Jones, are “probably the biggest benefit” of the #MeToo movement—but they need to emphasize intersectionality. “I would be really happy if it was taken to the next level in terms of expanding the area of focus to not just women as victims,” she said, cautioning that the perception that there is only one group of victims—rather than a range of people facing different challenges—is a definite downside to the movement. Instead, she said, the “circle” should include anyone who is discriminated against for any reason.

“At the end of the day, it’s about building open transparency, honesty and ethical behavior throughout our organization,” said Marcello, calling the movement a channel that can improve working conditions for everyone. “It’s beyond just #MeToo,” she added. “It’s ethical business practices, open communication, transparency, surrounding yourself with good people—and if somebody isn’t doing the right thing, guess what? We know it.”

AGENTS OF CHANGE

If each successive generation of hospitality professionals is to be better than the one that came before, said Melanie Brandman, founder and CEO of The Brand-



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Amy Hulbert, VP of boutique and upscale brands, Best Western Hotels & Resorts



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Amanda Marcello, SVP of brand strategy, RLH Corporation

man Agency, executives like the ones at the HM roundtable need to take the lead in mentoring their protégés.

“You have to lead by example,” she explained, adding it would be her fault if she put her employees in situations where they would represent her agency (and the agency’s clients) without giving them the tools they needed to behave appropriately. “Or maybe no one has taught them and maybe they’ve grown up without someone who has mentored them,” she said. Nevertheless, she considers it is her responsibility as a leader to make sure the next generation has the tools it needs to succeed both at her agency and beyond. “My job is to make them more successful in their next job,” she said. “For me, success is to see them in amazing jobs after [they work with me.]”

Changing the perception of what is appropriate in the workplace goes both ways. RLHC’s Marcello recalled working with young women just out of college whose sense of fashion did not fit what the broader community felt was appropriate for a professional setting. Rather than directly criticize anyone, Marcello used fictional examples to encourage

the women in a different direction. “I would say, ‘A few years back, somebody came to the ‘blah, blah convention’ and they were dressed inappropriately. And I know I won’t have this problem with anyone here, but it did happen a couple of years ago and it was very uncomfortable for everyone involved.’”

Latham, on the other hand, has found promoting the concept of a personal brand works well with millennials. “I’ll ask people to really think about what their personal brand is [and think about] a person that you would like to emulate, the person that you really respect in your organization or throughout your life and figure out how you can best emulate them in their actions—and maybe also in the way they present themselves.” This encourages employees to think about what tasks they take on and where they focus their energies, she added, all of which can help them in their careers.

“We have a great opportunity to be both leaders and mentors for other females in the industry,” said Dinger. “I think about my own family and my daughters and I can’t wait for them to take my experiences and to grow from them.”



Attendees discuss their careers at the Westin New York at Times Square.



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Aimbridge Hospitality’s
Channel Point Division

CRACKING THE CEILING

While the glass ceiling may be cracking, it is far from broken. That could change sooner rather than later, however, especially if companies encourage diverse leadership, the panelists suggested.

“There’s a crack,” Hulbert said, and that crack can grow with hard work. “You can get there. You just have to be a really diligent person that wants to keep going for that gate. So keep pushing.”

Women, Brandman noted, often can be their own worst critics, and can hold themselves back when they choose to only apply to positions that are a perfect match, rather than taking a chance on something new or something for which they don’t feel fully qualified. Brandman’s trick for getting around this mindset is to encourage the women on her team to map out their ideal personal business plan. “And it’s amazing what they come back with,” she said. “That sort of puts them on the path to think about where they want to go both professionally and also personally. It makes them ask the questions.”

And sometimes women hold



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each other back. “We’re supposed to build each other up, not isolate each other and rip each other apart,” said Marcello, who considers that kind of behavior to be no different from bullying. Any business, she added, should have a plan in place for dealing with bullies, whether they are male or female. “As a leader, you have a responsibility to try to shed some light upon it and recognize it [rather than] just accepting it, because it’s just not acceptable.”

“What we say in the Crowne Plaza group at IHG is that we expect leadership at all levels whenever, wherever you are in your life and your career,” Latham said, noting that the company expects five key qualities in all team members: grit, agility, leadership, a willingness to collaborate and intellectual curiosity. “Having leadership at all levels makes it so there isn’t a glass ceiling,” she said. “You have the ability to create an impact wherever you are.” **HM**