

Women in Business: Tips from the Top

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A chess player, Susana Robledo, 39, has used game strategy to build her \$6 million curtain business. “You have to think of the end goal and stay focused,” she said. She figured out in her 20s what life pieces she would sacrifice. When her friends were going to nightclubs, Robledo concentrated on hiring employees, luring customers and filling in for whoever called in sick. “It’s not always easy, but you have to stay focused on the win,” she said.

Women who want a role in re-engineering the culture of America’s business world have a lot to learn from Robledo and other female leaders who will be recognized on Thursday by The Commonwealth Institute South Florida for running [Florida’s largest women-led businesses](#). Robledo plans to expand her business further through national partnerships this year, and like other women leaders, she has an optimistic view of continued growth.

She also has strong opinions and insightful advice for the next generation of female leaders who are coming into the workforce at a time when the gender gap continues at the top ranks of most big companies. Robledo and her counterparts at the top believe young women must take it upon themselves to create opportunities. Here is their cheat sheet on how to advance:

- **Be a goal-setter:** Robledo began as an employee at a commercial laundry company. When a customer asked for a service that her employer didn’t provide, she seized the opportunity to start a company that would wash, sew and replace curtains for hospitals. She now oversees 30 employees at Cube Care and has healthcare customers nationwide. Robledo advises young women to create a plan for how to advance: “What strategic moves will it take to get there, who is going to help you, what do you need to learn, and who do you need to work with.” Once you have a big picture plan or goal, break it into smaller victories, she said. “No move is below me if it gets me to my end goal.”

- **Get clear on priorities:** Take “doing it all” off the list and get real, said Debbie Snow, president of Accredited Holding Corp., an Orlando insurer that recently sold for \$25 million (Snow stayed on). Building a company or a track record takes a lot of work, and you must be honest about that with yourself and people you love, Snow said. As a young employee, Snow had to prove to her father, who founded Accredited, that she could run the company. That took dogged determination, long hours and putting work first. “Future women leaders should decide early in their career how much time they are willing to devote to work,” she said. “You will work 60 hours a week. You will travel. You will have less time to spend with family. There is a personal price to be paid.”

- **Think bigger:** Robledo previously took a job as a receptionist to get in the door, and then offered to help people in higher positions in which she had an interest. Before long, she became a vice president. “You have to work above the position you are in and look for people who are going to help you,” she said. Even as women’s advancement has stalled in corporate America, those who take stretch assignments and drive results have a better chance of moving into positions of power. Snow tells young women who want to advance at Accredited: “Let us know what you are doing that’s exceptional.” Snow said she recently was asked by an ambitious female employee what class she could take, skills she could learn, or task she could take on to advance. Snow was impressed: “Know where you want to go, and speak up.”
- **Trust yourself:** Barbara Weinstein runs Family Central, a South Florida nonprofit that supports early learning and literacy. She counts herself as a decision-maker. “That means trusting your judgment,” she said. Studies show effective leaders can lead collaboratively. Even so, Weinstein said women need to trust their ability to call the shots and make confident financial decisions in order to advance and lead: “Value your own opinion. If you don’t think someone on your team is right, stick to your guns.”
- **Create a network:** The onus is on women to build relationships, find sponsors who will fight for them, and make sure their hands are up when other women reach down. When TCI surveyed Florida’s female leaders, many noted women have mentors who give advice, while men have sponsors who offer opportunities. Janet Altman, a principal and marketing director for the [Kaufman Rossin Group](#) in Miami, advises future female leaders to find people whose expectations will stretch them rather than people who listen and give support.
- **Outsource what you can:** If you try to do every task yourself, you will miss bigger opportunities. [Meg Green](#), owner of [Meg Green & Associates](#), an Aventura Wealth Management firm, calls hiring her assistant critical to her growth as the leader of her company. “My assistant gave me my first bit of leverage, and from there, it built,” she said. Other women business owners may need to hire someone to run the financial aspects of their company, she said. To lead a company toward future growth, Green said, “you have to get past trying to do everything yourself.”
- **Build your team carefully.** In building her path to the top, Kay Stephenson, CEO of Datamaxx, a Tallahassee provider of data communications for law enforcement, discovered she would need motivation, credentials and the right team: “You have to understand how to put the right team together and effectively persuade your team to actually want to follow your lead.” You do that, she said, by showing you are passionate and tenacious about what you want to accomplish.
- **Take risks.** Raise your hand for assignments, agree to job rotations, and take on operational challenges. In the technology industry, where the gender gap is widening, Lynn Root, a software engineer for streaming music service Spotify in San Francisco, told USA Today that she has become comfortable with making herself uncomfortable. Stephenson of Datamaxx agrees with that outlook: “Women need to put themselves out there. Once they do, they will see how exciting and lucrative it can be.”

SURVEY'S FINDINGS

Here are some findings from the 2015 survey by The Commonwealth Institute of Florida's top women-led businesses:

- Florida's top women leaders believe they steer their companies differently than men do, according to the TCI survey released this week. They believe women leaders are goal setters, communicators and collaborators who help to grow career paths for their employees.
- Women-led businesses are a growth engine in the American economy, and Florida — particularly Miami — is one of the leading markets for this growth.
- Women who lead Florida businesses are optimistic about their future growth — 85 percent expect continued growth in the coming year and 60 percent plan to increase staff
- Florida's women business leaders are self-starters. More than half cited savings as their main source of financing and most have been in business for more than 10 years.