

Paving an Executive Path: Women in Tech Share Their Leadership Secrets at Women Impact Tech



“Executive.”

There are a wealth of images that come with that word.

As a kid, I remember watching movies and television shows where fancy men in nice suits sat around a table. There was always a catered lunch, and maybe a woman or two dressed in pencil skirts who came in to deliver coffees.

This is what I thought it meant to be an “executive.”

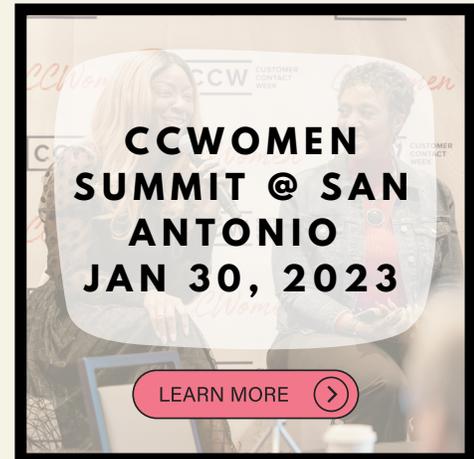
Or maybe someone like Bill Gates or Sam Walton. These were household names that we talked about in school and held up as respected models of ingenuity and success.

Although I knew contemporary women in leadership positions existed, I never saw them on television, and I never read about them in books. Especially not in the world of big tech, which boasts some of the most powerful, wealthy, and influential leaders in the world.

Despite my belief that women SHOULD be decision makers, throughout my life I was exposed to a very limited model of what a decision maker might look like. This might be because [women make up only 29% of the executive positions](#) overall in the private tech sector.

So, walking into the [2022 flagship Women Impact Tech conference](#), I was delightfully shocked when my antiquated model of “executive leadership” was nowhere to be found.

CCWOMEN UPDATES



**Lessons from an Ex-
Call Center Agent:
Insider Tips on
Employee Engagement**

LISTEN

**Solving the Empathy
Problem: Why Women
Leaders Have the
Upper Hand**

READ

About the analyst



Grace Gilbert is a writer, editor, content creator, and DEAI advocate at CCWomen.

They are the host of the CCWomen Podcast, which features cutting edge insight from women executives, activists, gender equity advocates, and more. If you would like to be featured on the CCWomen podcast, please reach out at ccwomen@cmpteam.com.

Women Impact Tech: A Conference for the Rising Executive

Women Impact Tech, explains president [Paula Bratcher Ratliff](#), is all about equity and inclusion in the tech space. With a handful of events in 2022 and at least seven slotted for 2023, WIT matches young women in the tech industry with major companies through a sponsored job board service.

Powerful women across the world fly in to deliver cutting-edge tech insight. These women range from software developers for government intelligence agencies to CEOs in the gaming industry, but they all share a common goal: break the mold, and open doors.

During a session titled “The Executive Path,” I had the privilege of hearing six distinguished speakers share their insight into what it takes to make your way to the executive level.

These six executives included:



Karen Cervantes
Sr Director, Cyber Risk Governance & Analytics, Shutterstock



Ciara O'Sullivan
Director, People, Bilt Rewards



Lisa Rossi
Director, Talent Acquisition, Transfix



Lori Ali
Managing Director, Head of Talent, PSG



Therese Parkes
Industry Director, Technology B2B, Google



Monica Malhotra
Executive Vice President, Clever Devices

Listening to these six women discuss their successes so openly was eye-opening— and I was not the only one who thought so.

During Q&A, many young women in the audience jumped up to ask the questions we were all thinking to ask— what advice do you have? How do you balance your energy? And how do you stay confident in a world full of men?

Their answers were concrete, enlightening, and inspiring— so tag along as I bring you some of the burning insights from women at the top of the ladder in big tech.

Top Insights from Women Executives in Tech

Q: What motivated you to become a leader?

Lisa Rossi: "I think it started when I was very young. I was never ok with the status quo. I also always displayed an issue with authority. But, most importantly, I was obsessed with people. I always wanted to know what made them tick. I think all these qualities contributed to my role as a leader."

Monica Malhotra: "I grew up in a family of engineers. Though I pursued that for a while, I decided it was definitely not for me. So I assessed my strengths. I realized that a huge strength of mine was that I could see ahead of the moment. As a leader, one thing you have to know is how to take chances that fall outside of your comfort zone. You also need to see beyond what is directly happening. Look at body language. There are things that people say, and then there are things that you can observe while they are saying it. That's what you need to pay attention to."



I stopped asking for permission.

-Monica Malhotra

Q: What was the turning point in your career that led you into an executive position?

Ciara O'Sullivan: "My turning point was for sure joining a startup. I was one of very few people on our team to begin with. I was the only one dealing with people. This means that, when someone needed an answer, I became the only person they would come to. This made me very good at figuring out the answers, because I had no one to refer them to. Being on a small team made me into the leader I am today."

Lisa Rossi: "For me, it was an environment where it is okay to fail. The tech world has an appetite and tolerance for taking risks and failure, because that is a necessary part of the process. This was hugely important for my career growth. Also, I had to learn that a career is a process of elimination. You find what you need by discovering what you do not want. And it is okay to have some subpar jobs along the way, because you don't know what you don't know. "

Lori Ali: "Pedigree mattered a lot in my organization. But I never found that to be appropriate. At first, I was insecure, but I learned that organizations need hardworking, smart, invested people, regardless of whether or not they went to Yale. I also worked, like most of you, in male-dominated fields. At first, I found that I was naturally subservient in the workplace. But with time I learned how to be more assertive."

Monica Malhotra: "Honestly? I stopped asking for permission."

Therese Parkes: "From being an employee, I learned a lot about how I did NOT want to be managed. These experiences were valuable because they shaped my leadership. As a leader, I began to be very democratic, give a lot of context for what we are doing and why, and be super transparent and expose my thinking. But I also learned that, sometimes, I need to just make a decision and let it stand. Democratic leadership is important. But you also have to know when to center yourself a little bit."

Q: Can you share what your support system looks like?

Ciara O'Sullivan: "Growing up, I always had a system of women around me— in my family and otherwise. So, it was only natural that I wanted to surround myself with women to mentor and guide me. One thing I learned recently is that a mentor does not have to be older than you. They can be younger than you! It can be very lonely at the top. So, I want these younger people to see a path to the top, and I think we should share our experiences to help one another get there regardless of age."

Therese Parkes: "I think it is so important to have male sponsorship. Given that most people in the tech space are men, it is good to have that support and perspective. It is just a good idea to have a touchstone who is different from you. I also think that, as a woman at the top, there is a lot of mentorship pressure on me. I am only one person, and I cannot be a mentor to every young woman. More men need to step up and mentor young women, because it matters to have a distributed network. And, as a mentee, always think about what you can offer back."

Lori Ali: "You need sanity-checkers. People that you can vent to and keep you sane, which keeps you moving. This is a necessity. Maybe they are not friends you hang out with outside of work, but you should have people you trust that you can connect with."

Q: What advice do you have for women in leadership?

Lori Ali: "I knew nothing at the beginning. But self-awareness is key in growth. You learn along the way what you love. Figure out what you're good at and run towards it. Find your mentors."

Therese Parkes: "You need to build your own brand and self-articulate your value proposition. Know your "three." The three defining qualities that make you who you are, that you can pitch to people during interviews or presentations. Give yourself that foundation. Then, through mentors, you can scale that message about yourself."

Lisa Rossi: "My favorite thing to do is to ask myself— would a man be questioning himself? The answer is usually no. So why should I question myself? You can balance empathy and confidence."

Ciara O'Sullivan: "Build the confidence to know what you do not know. I get the best responses and feedback from others when I am transparent about what I do not know, and when I ask for help."

Monica Malhotra: "It is ok to say, 'I don't know' upwards and downwards."

Lori Ali: "If you make a promise, deliver the promise. A company is just a series of relationships. Establish yourself as trustworthy and consistent and keep those relationships strong."

Monica Malhotra: "Always have friends at work. You have to have a support system."

Therese Parkes: "I hate to break it to you, but it never gets easier. You just learn to do hard better."

