Courageous Leadership: Stepping Out of Your Comfort Zone

By Tracy C. Ivers, UnitedHealthcare and Tracy L. Fink, CohnReznick LLP

CohnReznick LLP is one of the nation’s top assurance, tax and advisory firms in the country and has been named one of the Best Public Accounting Firms for Women - for two consecutive years.1 In furtherance of its mission, AHLA’s Women’s Leadership Council reached out to the Executive Women’s Forum (EWF) Director Tracy Fink to learn more about the forum’s initiatives, how the program was started and for practical advice on using courage to push through for success in the workplace and home.

On Starting EWF:
As a marketing director for ten years with CohnReznick, Ms. Fink was acutely aware that successful professional service firms, such as accounting, law firms and banks, were built on trusted relationships that could yield profitable returns. She saw how working women were progressively searching for new ways to connect with one another and to share collective personal challenges in the workplace as a means to support one another. Although initially drawn to women’s leadership programs to improve her own skills, Ms. Fink soon realized that rising female leaders across the country were also looking for new ways to develop their networks and to cultivate referral sources to both give and get business. Creating and implementing a program to help women build long term relationships based on trust while helping each other succeed, (without having the pressure to show immediate results) became Ms. Fink’s passion project.

Ms. Fink designed EWF and pitched the idea to CohenReznick’s leadership team as a pilot in 2005. The pilot was approved and has grown into a national movement with six offices across the country with ambitious plans for expansion already in the works. In addition to creating trust and building deep relationships, some of the benefits of the program include acquiring talent, elevating the Firm’s brand, positioning women as thought leaders in the communities they serve, and aligning with client values for women’s leadership.

The EWF targets women manager level and above but “does not exclude men from participating,” Ms. Fink emphasized. “Support from our male colleagues is a key element to EWF’s success. We not only rely on men to communicate the program with their female contacts, but we need them to tell other men that when women succeed, everyone succeeds,” she said.

On Courage:
After nearly two decades of working closely with women at all professional levels, Ms. Fink sees women with unyielding confidence which they’ve earned from top notch colleges and universities, from playing team sports, from supportive parents, and from collaborative teams. Despite this, she says women continue to struggle with courageous leadership. How does Fink define courage? From her perspective, courage “it is about embracing your fear then putting it under your feet and standing on it. The fear is always with you but it doesn’t stop you from doing things”. She points out that cultural influences have played a big part in the evolution of feminism and courage. Society has not traditionally rewarded women for courageous behaviors such as speaking out, advocating for themselves or taking calculated risks.
Courageous women were seen as outspoken or brash and therefore, avoided displays of courage for fear of being stigmatized. As a result, there has been a shortage of courageous female role models for women to look up to. Culture is key. In a culture of courage, Ms. Fink says, people feel safe to push back, take risks, explore and innovate. Fink says she is constantly working on overcoming her own fears by asking questions and practicing compassion and positivity.

We can thread the needle to find our voices, especially at work by stepping out of our comfort zone and by creating our own cultures of courage. Some of the ways we can do this include:

1. **Face your fears.** We best combat our fear when we recognize the physical symptoms of fear and go deep to figure out what it is we are afraid of. When we actually name our fear, it becomes a part of us and how we lead. When we try to avoid it, it rears its ugly head, mostly at inopportune times.
2. **Allow for failure – Practice kindness and compassion for yourself for failing.** We are all beginners and cannot always know how something will work out. When we allow ourselves to fail, we are much more forgiving and compassionate towards others when they fail. And, they will remember your kindness.
3. **Surround yourself with courageous role models.** Courage is contagious. When you see how it’s done, you are more apt to try it for yourself. No need to go it alone.
4. **Reward innovation.** Create a culture where trying something new is rewarded whether or not you achieve the desired outcome.
5. **Visualize the end game.** The mind is powerful. If you envision it, you can achieve it. As Gandhi said so eloquently, “Be the change you want to see in the world”
6. **Think win-win.** If you think a positive impact for all parties involved, you are more apt to create a scenario that makes everyone feel like a winner.

**About the Authors**

**Tracy L. Fink, MBA** ([Tracy.Fink@CohnReznick.com](mailto:Tracy.Fink@CohnReznick.com)), is the Director of CohnReznick’s Executive Women’s Forum, a business development initiative is focused on relationship building and business development among business leaders and decision makers. The EWF offers a series of local educational and networking events and industry-related activities for executives to leverage meaningful opportunities to enrich their professional lives, increase their knowledge, expand their networks and meet their career goals.

**Tracy C. Ivers** ([tracy_ivers@uhc.com](mailto:tracy_ivers@uhc.com)) is an associate general counsel with UnitedHealthcare in Hartford, CT. As a member of UHC’s Legal, Compliance, and Regulatory Affairs Team, Ms. Ivers works on a broad range of legal issues impacting business operations and payment integrity initiatives. She also holds a joint certification in health care compliance and professional coding.

**Endnotes**

1. "CohnReznick was named among the 2014 and 2015 Best Public Accounting Firms for Women by the Accounting & Financial Women’s Alliance and received the 2015 Innovation in Women’s Programming Award from the American Women’s Society of Certified Public Accountants."