

TRAILBLAZERS AND TRENDSETTERS » ILSE TREURNICHT

A different pace to leadership

To utilize women's full potential, society must realize they may not take on senior roles until later in life, Ilse Treurnicht says

BY DIANE JERMYN

Ilse Treurnicht, 53, has been CEO of the MaRs Discovery District, a non-profit innovation centre that brings science and technology entrepreneurs together with business leaders, since 2005.

Prior to MaRs, she was president and CEO of Primaxis Technology Ventures. The South African born and raised Ms. Treurnicht did a DPhil in chemistry at Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship, where she met her future spouse, University of Toronto president David Naylor, and came to Canada.

What quality does it take to be on the Top 100 list?

The common theme for many of these women is that they were able to find the intersecting space between what you care about and what you're good at.

How did you get there?

I seem to like building things. I have a high risk confidence and I'm comfortable with the ambiguity of the process of building things. You have to be prepared to take on projects that are somewhat intimidating, scary or challenging in a different direction outside your comfort zone and keep an open mind for all those wonderful opportunities that sometimes come out of left field.

There are a lot of executive vice-presidents on this list, but not so many CEOs. As one of the few CEOs, do you think it be different in five years?

I'm somewhat concerned. There are many talented women in the senior pipelines so I hope we'll see more in leadership roles, but the numbers are not going up in the larger corporations as fast as we would have guessed. There's no one simple answer. It's challenging for a lot of women to find their own authentic voice and organizations that are receptive to



'I seem to like building things,' says CEO Ilse Treurnicht, who brings science and technology entrepreneurs together with business leaders through the MaRs Discovery District, a non-profit innovation centre. PETER POWER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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those authentic voices. My advice to women is to look for those kinds of organizations where you can be comfortable in expressing yourself in an authentic way.

Do you agree that, 20 years ago, we would have expected more women CEOs on the list?

Yes. But the peak career building years are also the age when women have to decide about having a family. There still seems to be a penalty for dropping out and coming back.

I would agree. There are a lot of distractions during that period of life where women have to make key decisions about their careers. I think my generation of women came into our grown-up lives believing that balance was achievable and that's nonsense. The demanding balance of work and family remains an enormous challenge for most women, particularly in that 30-to-40 age period - I don't think we can get away from that - but what I'm finding is that women often

emerge as leaders later in life.

I've become somewhat philosophical about it. The whole notion of balance is an untrue statement at any point in time. We should look at balance as something that could be threaded over a lifetime. I watch women who are 10 years ahead of me, whose kids are adults, and see that they are achieving amazing things they would never have been able to do at age 33. Maybe there's a different pace to women's leadership. If society wants to take advantage of the full potential of what women can bring, we need to understand and accommodate the fact that women may not take on those very senior roles until a little bit later in life.

How have you managed to integrate work with your family life?

I have four kids so there were days when it was all frankly chaotic. It still is. But I took a detour for the period when my kids were young (they were all

very close together). I got out of the early stage company life and did 10 years of consulting, which was really a pragmatic strategy to stay connected to my work life and also to have a bit more flexibility to be with my kids. I have no regrets about that. I think I was fortunate that my career path was a bit untraditional. I wasn't in a law firm trying to make my way up the partner ladder.

What support system did you have then and now?

I have a nanny that's been with us for 18 years - she still is. The kids adore her. We all do. She's been a member of our family and part of my kids' lives. That's how we managed it.

Best piece of advice you were ever given?

Never work for a jerk. Life is very short. It's important to choose organizations that share the same values and passions that you do. Don't be hung up on the exact title or

job description.

You've worked for a jerk?

He was an accomplished person but entirely random, so it was management by creating a crisis. It was very destructive for the people who worked in that environment. There are still a lot of dysfunctional workplaces, even with our advanced approach to management and workplace culture. Workplace culture is so important to bring out the best in people.

Are you the same woman you were in high school?

I think so. In high school, you see the core threads of the person you're going to be as an adult, but the journey shapes you enormously. I come from an Afrikaans family and went to high school in South Africa. I was a very competent athlete in high school, very engaged in the community and later became an active student leader against apartheid in my traditional Afrikaans university - which was outside my family's comfort zone. When I look back at those threads, I see that I was beginning to find my voice in high school. Now I hope it's a little more textured and richer.

Do women view risk differently?

People often say that, but I think it's because we've defined risk in a very male way - very much as a win/lose metaphor. We fight wars, win in sports, jump off cliffs and place humongous bets on the financial market. But having and raising a child is a gigantically risky venture that women do. In nursing, women are on the front line making critical life and death decisions with very ill patients and in triages. I think we're not as black and white as men. We see the nuances and are more accommodating. Maybe that looks like we're taking less risk, but I don't buy it.

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