

Leading Gracefully

How Monique Svazlian Tallon is advancing female leadership and gender balance in the boardroom

IF YOU HAVE ever contemplated leaving a comfortable career to pursue a dream, you are all too familiar with the voice. That little voice inside your head that says your true destiny lies elsewhere. For Monique Svazlian Tallon, it was a call to action. In 2008 the San Francisco native was working as a key member of the Event Marketing team at eBay when what started as a faint whisper gradually grew louder. “The voice was telling me I needed to be doing something more to help others and impact people’s lives in a more direct way.”

Today, Tallon is in high demand as a successful women’s leadership coach and speaker. Founder and CEO of her own business, Highest Path, she partners with leading Fortune 500 companies including Microsoft, eBay and Google to help increase representation of women and minority groups through program development and coaching to create inclusive workplaces for their employees.

From the moment she enrolled in her first coaching course, she knew she had found her calling. “I will never forget the first class I took, they had us coaching right away and I just felt this aliveness that I had never felt before in my work.”

The interpersonal nature of Tallon’s chosen profession is perfectly aligned with her outgoing personality and worldview. As a first generation Armenian-American who grew up navigating her place between the new world and old world; progressive liberal San Francisco in the midst of the gay rights movement and sexual liberation versus a sheltered and conservative traditional Armenian upbringing at home, Tallon learned the meaning of diversity and what it felt like to be a minority, an outsider wanting to fit in but not necessarily



knowing how. “The experience of navigating that challenge completely informed the work I do now as a coach. I think that the Armenian lens allows me to speak and teach on the subject in a way that is unique and reflects a deep sensitivity.”

She put those skills to use early on in her career, starting with a summer internship through AGBU Summer



Internship Program (NYSIP) in New York. She also was hired by a mining company to train a team of men and women in Kapan, Armenia who only knew the Soviet model of doing business. “They were ambitious and motivated but completely dysfunctional and chaotic as a team,” Tallon remembers. “Over the course of a few years I helped them transform on both a personal and professional level to become one of the most highly effective working environments I have ever witnessed.”

Helping empower women in leadership roles in particular is a challenge especially close to her heart. Among the CEOs in the Fortune 500, only 23 are female. “One of things I noticed at eBay having worked for female bosses, is that women really struggled with power in the workplace. The way that manifests for a lot of women is that they tend to take on masculine styles of leadership to conform and adapt to a male-centric model. I saw that wasn’t really working for women as a whole, many felt they couldn’t be both authentic and really impactful. Faced with pressure to behave in a certain way, that lead to burnout and women opting out of their careers. “I wondered if this could be why we are seeing such a gap.”

Research confirms Tallon’s hypothesis, that along with other factors including sexual discrimination and disparities in pay, the added challenge of being a woman leader in a male dominated industry was taking a toll. Seeking to reverse the trend, she developed a new model of leadership and published a book entitled *Leading Gracefully: A Woman’s Guide to Confident, Authentic and Effective Leadership*, to help women leaders embrace their unique strengths such as empathy and collaboration, qualities Tallon stresses make women better leaders, when combined with traditionally more masculine perceived traits of decisiveness and assertiveness.

This balanced approach has helped her clients feel more fulfilled in their job and

better able to achieve the results they are seeking. “It’s hugely rewarding to see women take back their power in a way that they can communicate better, build more productive relationships, and ask for the compensation they deserve versus holding themselves back. That’s why I got into this career to help people realize their full potential and that brings me the greatest joy.”

Studies have shown society as a whole benefits with more women at the helm. Companies that are diverse outperform ones that are less diverse by 35% financially. In an increasingly information-based and innovation-driven global economy, diversity of thought is critical to remain competitive. Women furthermore hold the power of the purse, notes Tallon, making nearly 80% of consumer decisions. If companies do not reflect that dynamic internally, they can’t speak directly to their customer base at the expense of their bottom line.

Tallon cautions however that parity alone is not sufficient. “The biggest mistake we make is thinking that if we have a 50/50 ratio, everything will be fine. That is actually not the case. The corporate sector needs to find a way building a workforce culture that promotes inclusivity, values differences and leverages that diversity in their business model. Without that, a lot of companies

are missing the mark.”

As she continues to help women reclaim their voice in the workplace, Tallon finds herself suddenly listening to a faint whisper inside her head once again. This time the voice is urging her to enter politics to fight for equal pay and opportunities for women. “Serving as a role model for other Armenian women to be active in politics is important to me,” she admits. “Women make up 50% of the population and our voices need be represented in government where the decisions that impact all of society are made. It’s important because we are stronger when we are diverse.”

