

Influencing for good in the Silicon Valley

By Joelle K. Jay, Ph.D.



Silicon Valley is filled with influential women, and their numbers thankfully grow with every day. These women show us the power of leadership as they shape the future of business and chart a new path throughout the Bay Area.

Their successes are a sign of hope in the Silicon Valley — of progress toward a better future, driven by the talent and innovation for which the technology sector is known. The Silicon Valley Business Journal is, for the 10th year, honoring 100 of them, celebrating them as Women of Influence.

It's really an appropriate term. When we honor *influence*, we emphasize one kind of power — the power of positive change.

But influence on its own is not always positive, and the change is not always good. Influence by itself is neutral, and its impact depends on our intention. As leaders, we choose whether our influence will overpower and tear down, or lead and lift others up.

We can see instances of influence being distorted in recent high profile failures. Accusations of fraud at Theranos; the exposure of sexual harassment at Uber; descriptions of cultural corrosion in Emily Chang's "Brotopia" all throw a spotlight into the darker corners of the Silicon Valley business culture.

The intention, in each of these cases, was to *influence*. But this version of influence takes advantage of the opportunities in a thriving business culture and makes things worse for people, instead of better.

These unfortunate examples are warning signs and a reminder that some of the best features Silicon Valley culture — creativity, innovation and wild market success — are vulnerable to negative influences that put its reputation at risk.

Intention, on the other hand, is a choice, and influence can also be transformative in the most positive ways. Balancing out crises of culture are inspiring examples of leaders influencing for good. What's worth celebrating is not influence itself, but influence that is motivated by a higher aspiration.

As an example, Adobe's Executive Vice President Donna Morris has transformed the employee experience by dramatically expanding family leave, championing leadership development programs for women, closing the wage gap between male and female employees in 80 percent of its employee population, and striving for 100 percent pay parity in 2018. Such achievements by Adobe have made it a best place to work.

Similarly, Accenture has set public goals to achieve a gender-balanced workforce, including a commitment to accelerating women in positions of senior leadership, in an effort that CEO Pierre Nanterme says will make the world a better place. Around the Valley, company after company is committing in new ways to advancing women, valuing diversity and doing well by doing good.

In the grand scheme of American business, Silicon Valley's reputation is still evolving. At least two paths are emerging for the future. One capitalizes on a culture of influence characterized by money, power and fear. The other cultivates a kind of influence based on inspiration and promise.

As an executive coach, I've watched these two trend lines develop. They've been especially powerful in one of the signature programs we run at the Leadership Research Institute, the Leadership Circles Program, which we've found successful in helping organizations such as Microsoft, Intuit, Adobe and Sumo Logic influence for the good, by accelerating talent and advancing women in leadership.

In each program, we see the challenges leaders face related to negative business culture influences, and we work with individual leaders to help them strengthen the power of positive influence. One wonders, over time, what will Silicon Valley ultimately be known for? And who decides?

Today, as we recognize Women of Influence, we can all take a moment to consider our own influence and make a decision about how we want to contribute to the business future we want to create.



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