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Interview with Elizabeth van Geerestein

‘Women make unique leaders.’

As more females and racial minorities bypass hierarchies, shatter glass ceilings, and hop national borders into leadership roles, others are sure to follow, says leadership coach Elizabeth van Geerestein.

text Stephen Hoare, Rebecca Morris photography Kimberly Gomes

Consultant. CEO. Business leader. Thirty years ago, these words could only mean white, male and over fifty. Today, they belong to a young, black, female entrepreneur. As CEO of her own leadership consultancy firm, Elizabeth van Geerestein may still not be the archetype of today's business leader, but she could very well be a harbinger of things to come. UK-born and raised Elizabeth (who has a PhD in Chemistry from Leeds University) completed her Executive MBA at RSM in 2001. Shortly afterwards, she founded Papillon & Partners, a change management and leadership coaching consultancy firm. In 2006, her contribution to the business arena was formally recognised when she was conferred the European Federation of Black Women Business Owners (EFBWBO) Award (European category). Today she adds to the role of CEO of Papillon & Partners an adjunct professorship at RSM, guest lecturer, executive and advisory board member, and (in case she was short of things to do) wife and mother. Elizabeth shared her thoughts with RSM Outlook on the challenges women and ethnic minorities face in business, and her vision on the future of leadership.

You were recognised for your contribution to business by the EFBWBO. Was this a surprise for you?

Yes. I was speaking at a conference in September 2006 where some key EFBWBO members happened to be present. They approached me afterwards and told me that they would like to nominate me for a business woman's award – and the rest is history. It was a surprise.

How challenging was it setting up Papillon & Partners?

For a long time it was all-consuming. I got the company up and running while I was still working four days a week at Atos Consulting and during my maternity leave for our third child. It required determination and my vision of the company continuously in focus. It helped that I have a strong business background in both strategy and financial management. My consulting experience in North America and across Europe really came to the fore.

It is often said that woman or minority groups need to be twice as good to succeed in business. Would you agree with that?

I have met with some barriers, definitely. Not now with Papillon as we operate internationally, but at the start of my business career. Prejudice is very hard to pin down. I have a Dutch surname, my CV looks good, and when I am speaking on the phone I do not have an accent. But while I would get interviews for every job I applied for, many times they seemed to have excuses why I was not suitable. I never let it bother me. I have never been out of work and have always been moving up the career ladder.

What do you put that down to – your determination to succeed, or business becoming more open to diversity?

Perseverance, discipline, and focus. But I also believe that there has never been a more opportune time to be in business. We operate in a global economy and for those who perceive them, the opportunities are endless. Thankfully, society has become more open to women and diversity in business. If you are willing to deliver consistently high quality work – beyond what you are paid to do – then success is virtually guaranteed. ►



What were your ambitions growing up in London in the '80s?

My mother was a nurse and my father had his own accounting practice. Looking back, my main ambition was simply to please my parents. They really believed in education and sent my sister and me to a private school – Kings School in Ely. For a time, we were the only black pupils. I was single-minded in pursuing science and got a place at Leeds University studying chemistry. Then I went on to do a doctorate at Sheffield University.

What drew you into the commercial world?

I decided early on that science was a springboard and I wanted to be involved in running a company. It took me until I was in my late-20s however before I first began to set life goals around that. Then I applied to RSM to study for the two-year part-time

collaborative skills, people skills; they are great multi-taskers. But there is also simply the value of having diversity of opinion and perspective. Women in the workplace and, for that matter, different cultures and educational backgrounds mean a richer range of ideas and ultimately better results.

How important is it that potential women leaders, and other ethnic groups, have role models?

Very important, but they do not have to share your gender and race, you just have to connect with them in a meaningful way. Of course this is easier when you share powerful commonalities like background, gender and race. There were very few black women role models in business even just as recently as the 1990s, and even now I am still something of a rarity. However, I see a lot of black

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executive MBA while working for Ernst & Young and KPMG as a principal consultant. The MBA was critical in helping me clarify my business goals and values. By this time I had become a fluent Dutch speaker, had started a family, and was living in Holland.

You coach men, women and teams on their leadership abilities. Do you think women bring unique characteristics into the role of leader?

Yes. I feel women often bring an additional dimension of emotional intelligence and dedication into the workplace in general. Women have all kinds of unique competencies as leaders like

women in middle management who have heard of me and deliberately seek me out for leadership coaching. These women will be in senior management one day, and the more these women rise to the challenge, the more younger women will start to see the possibilities.

What advice would you give to young women about achieving their leadership potential?

I would encourage them to focus on finding out what they enjoy and what they are good at – and be gut-honest in that process. What is really important to you – not your peers or your culture, but you? Identify those areas of

your life where you have the potential to be outstanding and develop a disciplined approach to cultivating these areas. Success requires a great deal of self-knowledge, so you must be very clear on who you are and what your strengths and weaknesses are.

As a lecturer, you encourage students to demonstrate a higher level of responsibility and accountability in their roles as future leaders. Is this something you consider important in your own leadership style?

Absolutely. Working out my values was something I got out of the MBA. Core values give order and structure to my internal world. When our internal world is in order, we can bring order to any magnitude of external disorder. My vision for Papillon is based on my core values of integrity, honesty, confidentiality – the bedrock of everything we do – and excellence. Other important parts of my leadership style are being entrepreneurial and flexible. I can change direction quickly to achieve the desired outcome. But integrity, honesty, and authenticity, these are the core values of how I see myself as a leader. ■

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP - Text Lesa Sawahata

Beyond all other kinds of diversity, the paucity of women in leadership roles continues to niggle and confound the experts. "What is wrong with the system now," says Carien van der Laan, one of the founders of executive search firm Woman Capital in Abcoude, NL and an instrumental figure in the set up of RSM's women leaders mentoring scheme (MBA programmes), "is that the character traits and behaviours that get you to the top are not the ones that necessarily make you a good leader."

Van der Laan, who has an MBA from Harvard Business School and has worked as a corporate attorney, business consultant and manager before beginning Woman Capital in 2004, cites the fact that business is based on a 'male norm' ("competition, conquering, rationality, power, hierarchy, focus on expansion, the enormous need for respect, and the will to be the boss," she says) – for increasingly unsustainable business practices. The need to "show double digit growth all the time" has led to corporate acquisitions that rather than delivering increasing profits, "in many cases are actually destroying capital."

"At first I thought I had begun Woman Capital because I was tired of hearing that there were not enough competent women to be appointed to top executive positions," says Van der Laan. What she discovered, however, was that women in business simply did not desire power to the same extent that men do, and were often unwilling to engage in the behaviours that might elevate them into 'the inner circle.'

"Women may think, 'This is never going to change – maybe we should become entrepreneurs, so we can run a business according to our own values and create a sort of parallel universe'," she says, adding that "really, the best thing is to collaborate, to have balance. But in fact you are asking men to make a place for women, and – in their eyes – why should they?"

Why they should, in fact, is because the traits found more frequently in women than in men are precisely the skills that are required in new-era business. One of the 'closely-guarded secrets' in Anthony F. Smith's book *The Taboos of Leadership* [Jossey-Bass, 2007] is that 'Women Make Better Leaders [When That's What They Really Want To Do]'

'The traits found more frequently in women than in men are precisely the skills that are required in the new-era business.' – Carien van der Laan.

"Women tend to demonstrate more in the way of connectiveness; eye for context, for processes and people; focused on content rather than on political behaviour," lists Van der Laan. "Women may well find themselves helped by their EQ and community-building skills – the ability to make bonds, to show vulnerability, to share, to succeed in non-competitive models, for example – into positions of leadership."