Step In to Stand Up, Let It All Out: Create an Environment of One's Own

Barbara Rusinko
President of Bechtel Nuclear, Security & Environmental, Inc. (NS&E) (The United States)

Interactions beyond the norm: a judgment call

"Learning how to interact and treat people with respect earlier, you' ll get that back." Sticking to this principle of inclusivity over these thirty years at Bechtel, Barbara Rusinko has risen from an intern to president of a global business with more than 5,000 employees on four continents. "When I first started my full-time career in Bechtel," Barbara recalls her initial stage, "I worked in the field with pipefitters and welders in the piping department, and I was one of the two women in that group. It was always a male-dominated workforce in construction. That became my norm, and it didn' t feel like something new going into the environment that was almost all men. They are really good at their craft, and I love working with them." Barbara has learned a lot from them by asking

questions. " 'How do you weld like that,' and they showed me. 'Why do you measure that way,' and they showed me." I opened myself up to say, "I don't know what you do, but what you do is amazing." From where Barbara stands, being an engineer in construction doesn't mean she knows all the answers. "Embracing the skilled workforce and getting them to help can make a world of difference."

Some challenges are inevitably specific to females. "When I was pregnant with my first child, the crews I had worked with became very protective after a while." When Barbara was on duty in construction, there were times she needed to climb up the ladders, which would constantly arouse the anxieties from her coworkers. "No way you are mounting these ladders," to which Barbara responded, trying to ease their irrational worries, "But the doctor told me that I could climb the ladders, as long as my center of gravity was not too far out. I am five-feet tall, and it wouldn't take long for that to happen." Barbara would then say to her colleagues, "I can embrace your friendship because it came from a place of caring, not a place which you wanted to put women in." For Barbara, it matters to recognize where the heart is from the person communicating with you. "The environment can absolutely affect things, and for women it can be very difficult. Unfortunately a small number of people in the workforce don't come with a good heart; they can be quite hateful. Surrounding yourself with people who have your back is really important."

"The more women there are in these fields, the more people would catch themselves saying improper things." Particularly wry comments are still present on the job sites, Barbara claims. "Sometimes I just ignore them depending on how egregious it is. Sometimes I'll turn around and reply, 'You know what? In this work environment, I'm confident and capable of being here.' " Besides the remarks that could be heard, there remains "unconscious bias" that does not intend to insult or undermine someone on purpose. For example: "During a discussion, I just hit upon an idea, but nobody reacted to it. Joe stated the same thing, and everybody said, 'Wow that's a good idea.' My reaction

would be, 'Thank you Joe for enhancing the idea that I mentioned five minutes ago.' If that happens to another colleague, I would say, 'It was a great piling on, to what Sally just said.' It was not meant to slap somebody down or make the situation more awkward; it was just a gesture to check the moment and allow others to know what happened." This engagement is an education process, Barbara contends, "You have to recognize it when you see it; when you do see it, you must be bold and confident to actually verbalize and interrupt the action."

Independence from gender-specific roles: not just family matters

"Although I came from a traditional family where the father worked and the mother stayed at home, my parents never fit the children into gender specific roles." She adds, "My mother didn't make me clean the house and cook all the time, as my brother also had to share some. So I was able to help my dad while he was working on a project." Back to reality, however, there still exist some gender stereotypes. "Following my relatives' Facebook posts, I could still see it from the pictures of their families and children: The boys got the hammer, and the girls got the kitchen stuff. We are continuing to, unfortunately, drill in some gender roles." As such stereotyping from family comes to be perpetuated in teenagers, it could even hinder their development. From her observation on how boys and girls interact in middle school, Barbara hears comments from some girls, "I don't want to look smarter than that boy who may not like me. It's not necessarily cool to be the smart girl." Barbara sighs, "That's really disappointing, but it still exists. I don't have any answer to how those reinforced gender roles can be dispelled, other than continuing to watch Captain Marvel—my favorite movie!"

What Barbara offers here might not be a clear-cut answer to the existing stereotypes created by others, but to the future vision: How can we motivate more women from the next generation to join the STEM fields? From

her experience as an active mentor to women of all ages, Barbara puts her solution in three buckets: It starts at home, then at school, later at work. "At home, parents should be given more opportunities to grasp what career options are out there for their kids, making sure the options include careers outside the gender norms that we have created over generations. Also, parents could be supportive when their children show an interest in math and science, even when they may not be good at these subjects or when parents themselves are no experts in those fields." Schools can do likewise. "When we see some young girls drift away from math and science, we can refocus them to keep the option for STEM available as long as possible." To bring the best of our future generation, Barbara pushes forward a more exciting idea, "Why not make it mandatory to take all the advanced courses, even if you don't plan on having a career in STEM?"

To fill in the last bucket of her solution, Barbara proceeds, "There's at least one silver lining that came from COVID-19, at least in our company." In this hard time when this pandemic is still worsening, there still lies a blessing in disguise to entice more women in pursuit of their career. "We were never a work-from-home company, even though the whole organization of engineering also includes office roles like project controls or finance and accounting. We have heavy projects where we're in the field watching things built in person. We can't do that job from home. When COVID-19 happened, however, we had to figure out another way out, and you know what? It's working. I don't love it, but it does provide flexibility to manage our home life more easily." Due to the outbreak of this pandemic, certain policy adjustments made by the government have coincidentally linked up these three buckets of solutions. "Here in the US, most of our schools are on remote learning. Where parents used to drop their kids off at school on their way to work, they don't have that chance for now." Looking at the bright side on COVID-19, Barbara affirms, "That is what we have learned and going forward, if the communities were to open up again, this

work-from-home policy would be carried on in some method."

Bonding up women with their care: a better place to live

Barbara, as a major in mechanical engineering, where there have been less women graduates traditionally, has noticed more women going into biomed and environmental engineering rather than other disciplines. In the US and UK, Barbara has also worked on the nuclear waste clean-ups that came from the production of nuclear weapons during and after World War II. "We put those waste products in the processing plants and turn them into glass cylinders. Now the waste becomes immobilized." She can't hide her excitement, "It changes the community's water tables, so that they are protected from pollution."

To make this world a cleaner place to live, she thinks nuclear power a realistic solution to climate change. "We know nuclear power in a lot of areas have been disputed, but we're making power plants more resilient to challenges like Fukushima or Chernobyl." Reflecting upon the incident of Fukushima, she sums up, "We are reminded again to further examine the potential risks, despite the fact that the plants had operated fine. Had the plants been designed a little bit differently, it wouldn't have been catastrophic."

"If I lean into a bit more traditional gender role for just a moment, I would say women care about the surroundings in which their children will grow up." From this perspective, Barbara argues, women may be drawn more to the environment and thus display stronger affinity for cleaner energy sources. "I make this leap not to say that men don't think that way or shouldn't think that," Barbara clarifies, "I just want to encourage more women to take up engineering, and maybe all the other fields can become supported." "The needs of the community are important. A big part of our efforts is to make sure the community is a better place to live."