

Female leaders including Margaret Sheil, Mary-Anne Waldren and Louise Curtis are speaking at a conference at Parliament House this week.
Photo: Graham Tidy



Women with enterprise

Keen to get some tips on leadership? Come and learn from the best of the very best, **Lucy Baker** writes

Female leadership is infectious in the Canberra air, as 15 high-level businesswomen will be converging on Parliament House this Thursday and Friday to share their success stories and inspire.

The Women Chiefs of Enterprises International's annual conference has gathered an impressive line-up of enterprising businesswomen including Canberran Louise Curtis, who owns internet gift business Lollypotz, Australia's fastest-growing franchise and is the recipient of the 2010 Franchise Council Franchise Woman of the Year. Curtis is well qualified to join the array of business talent, having also won the ACT 2008 Business Women's Award for Business Owner and Innovation, and the Telstra Small Business Award.

"Leadership to me is a privilege, not a right," Curtis says. "Even though I head a company – it puts me in a position where I can assist those who work for me in a positive manner – leadership is shown by action where I can lead by example."

The biggest aspect that women in business do differently is in using relationship skills, she adds. "I believe women have a more empathetic attitude to doing business; they are more understanding, more intuitive, and more calculating!"

"I'm thrilled that we have a female leader – however, any leader should be judged on their performance rather than gender – but for me, I like that her attitude and demeanour is measured and well-considered."

A major challenge for a woman in leadership is her credibility, Curtis says, in addition to not being judged on gender – as well as the thorny issue all working women wrestle with eternally. "To attempt to have it all – to manage a family as well as a business life is certainly my biggest challenge running a business."

Humour is a big factor in business and just one of the four "H's" Curtis applies to her focus – the rest being hard work, humility and hunger. "Work hard consistently, appreciate your position and have a continued hunger, drive and passion for your business," Curtis says.

For Libby Koch, successful author and charity pioneer, leadership is about role-modelling and courage.

"Being an example by your actions as well as by what you say," Koch says. "Coming up with solutions and having the courage to give them a go, and being prepared to teach those under you and not simply expecting everyone to grasp the procedure in the same way as yourself."

For Koch, the gender of the Prime Minister doesn't come into it. "She is a leader – [albeit] more removed from other female leaders by not having experienced that juggle of home life and children."

Koch's own role models include those close to home.

"My mother, who always took leadership roles when I was growing up, has been a great role model – and, not known by the wider audience, my Westpac private

banker, Sadie Daoud, is very inspiring." For Ruth Medd, one of Australia's most experienced executives who has held senior positions with Telstra, the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal and the federal government, the reality of a female prime minister "sends the message that it can be done".

"My role models in leadership are women who have achieved from a good idea, executed in an inspiring manner." Getting to this level in the first place is a great challenge and it's best to get a little help from others ahead of you, she suggests. "Get a mentor and have a good business plan."

Other women leaders at this week's conference include: Diane Tompson, chief executive of Powercom, general manager of Novaris and Tasmania's Telstra Business Woman of the Year in 2005; Jo Fisher, who runs a successful executive search and leadership solutions firm and who is an honorary fellow at Deakin University; and Marilynne Paspaley, who is good at everything, it seems. Chief executive standout, she is also a successful actress, business owner and a Member of the Order of Australia.

This conference, however, is not unkind to men in leadership. There is one man at this conference, Tony Dowling, who comes with an interesting background. He owned a Kings Cross nightclub, helped manage the Sydney-to-Hobart yacht race and says he is happiest now pursuing a high-level career in real estate.

Dowling's career is, however, being handled by more than a few

I'm thrilled that we have a female leader – however any leader should be judged on their performance rather than gender.

good women – his financial planner is Justine Back (owner of Back to Back Financial Planners, with an office in Canberra) and his boss is Vicki Laing, who runs the most successful real estate business in Sydney's most densely populated regions. Laing's renowned octogenarian father still comes into the office regularly and Vicki, like him, is an old-fashioned businesswoman whose success is down to hard work, relationships and going that extra mile. Both Back and Laing will also be speakers at the conference.

For Dowling, leadership and how women lead in particular is clear. His own role models include Madeleine Albright, Hillary Clinton and our own Geraldine Doogue.

"Leadership is someone who has the ability to share their goals and vision, are consistent, empowering, are honest and have the ability show by their own exam-

ple," he says. "I've found that women are often more complete and thorough in their overall management skills."

For conference organiser, Mary-Anne Waldren of MAW Action, the gathering is about influence and support.

"In today's fast-paced society, it's extremely important that we continue to support each other in our increasing responsibilities and varied roles," she says.

"And what better way to do that than to hear and share inspirational stories? We have the most amazing line-up of women, including Marilyn Johnson (vice-president, Market Development at IBM), Senator Kate Lundy (ACT) and of course Louise Curtis."

Local leaders include Professor Margaret Sheil, chief executive, Australian Research Council, who is a member of the Prime Minister's Science Innovation and Engineering Council, the National Research Infrastructure Council and the Advisory Council of the Science Industry Endowment Fund; Air Vice-Marshal Margaret Staib who was appointed commander, Joint Logistics, earlier this year and who is implementing reforms she spearheaded for the 2009 Defence White Paper. Staib's work in logistics at the Pentagon in 2000 was recognised by the US Meritorious Service Medal.

Registration ranges from \$440 upwards, with a cocktail party and conference dinner part of the busy program. To register, phone 6226 8704, email info@communicationlink.com.au or visit www.wcei.com.au