The Edge: Only obstacle to success is yourself

Written by Carol Craig
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If anyone has had a career path that screams “equality,” it’s probably me. I seem to gravitate to areas that are traditionally dominated by men. I continually get asked to describe the obstacles or challenges I faced as a woman in those male-dominated fields.

And the truth is, obstacles are obstacles. … I like to believe the only obstacle is yourself. I know it sounds a little Norman Vincent Peale, but it’s true. There are very few things that are impossible and most of the problems come from ourselves — and we let that get in the way of success or just doing the things we want to do.

The Harvard Business Review reported in September that women “remain distressingly underrepresented at the top levels of institutions around the globe. … In corporate America, women hold only about 15 percent of C-Suite jobs and 17 percent of board seats. … Only 4 percent of companies on the 2013 Fortune 500 list are led by female CEOs.”

While many may see me now as one of the women who is tipping the scales, I still experience gender discrimination in business. It was only about six months ago that I was asked, “Are you familiar with the term ‘C corporation’?” I was a little shocked by this, would a man be asked the same question in a high-level business discussion?

I know some of these attitudes can be cultural, as well. I was touring a businessman from Israel though our manufacturing facility in Cape Canaveral, and he said, “A woman runs this? You’re the woman?” I could see the mental shock on his face.

Manal Al-Sharif, a Saudi woman, was jailed after driving a car and challenging cultural customs in 2011. Al-Sharif says it’s not so much about rule of law as it is about women’s attitudes about themselves: The danger is internalizing an oppressive society’s insistence that women are inferior. She concludes that change can only happen “if women stop asking when, and start taking action now to drive our own lives.”

Amanda Woerner reinforces this idea in Self magazine: “People who are happiest and most successful have one key thing in common. If they take an emotional hit, they don’t ball up in a fetal position and give up.”

I am lucky my parents told me I could do anything I wanted. The perceptions other people have about us affects the way we see ourselves and respond to adversity. While I’ve had a lot of personal obstacles to overcome — being one of few girls in engineering classes, one of just a few women to go through flight school, starting a business and immediately having a son with a disability — nothing I am writing here should be considered exclusive to women.

Whether you are a man, minority or fit any other demographic that faces adversity, I encourage you to embrace the fear, passion, perseverance and competitiveness to recognize the patterns and identify on your own what it takes to overcome yourself.

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engineering and advanced manufacturing firm. She is the mother of two school-age children. Columnist series sponsored by the Women’s Business Center at Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne. For more information, visit http://wbc.fit.edu/.