

Leading the Way

By Maria Torres-Kitamura

CHERYL KAUHANE LUPENUI
President and CEO,
YWCA of Oahu

PHOTO: RAE HUIO

YWCA CEO Cheryl Kauhane Lupenui describes an Aha! moment when she realized her leadership style could best be described as “The Cheryl Show.” Like many independent, high-achieving women, she unconsciously held the thought that she had to do everything herself. “I’m thinking, ‘Gosh, nobody’s taking any initiative around here, they’re always coming back to me with their problems.’ Suddenly, I realized, ‘I created that!’” She had said she wanted her employees to be empowered, but had undermined her own words through behaviors and actions that tied everything back to her.

That Aha! moment came as part of her work in contextual leadership through the California-based Institute for Women’s Leadership in 2003. She explains that context is about examining the various elements and conclusions that each individual brings to leadership: “Being a woman is one of them. Our ethnicity, the culture that we live in, the culture that we’re in today, the birth order, all the things that we kind of inherited or our upbringing allowed us to be in or experience brought us to this point,” she says. “On top of all that is the context or culture of the company that we’re working in. That adds a whole other layer of how you define leadership and what aspects of my leadership will be most effective in any given situation.”

As the YWCA has examined its own 100-plus-year history, she and her colleagues have found that, while the organization’s top-of-mind recognition may have come from offering childcare and swimming lessons, its core mission — articulated in 1927 as civic duty, social responsibility and community service — has really always been about leadership. The YWCA recognized an opportunity to shift the context surrounding the organization: “The Cheryl Show” began to give way to a more inclusive, empowering style, and the organization followed. This new context has led to actions and behaviors that enable members to drive the conversation together with a “we” versus “me” mindset. To that end, the YWCA has refocused its efforts into being a high-impact community leader for sustainable change, encouraging and cultivating underrepresented groups to become highly visible role models and leaders.

Its leadership development programs now range from a youth leadership and mentoring program called Life Inc. to Women Leading Change, the program that gave her the Aha! moment. The program completed its fourth session this year and has an alumni group of more than 50 senior executive women who meet regularly to create a community of support.




BUILDING LEADERS: The renovation of the YWCA’s Fuller Hall (envisioned above) is scheduled to be completed in October. It’s part of a \$12 million renovation of the future downtown Laniakea Leadership Center.

Lupenui says, “So rather than just being a leadership center in Hawaii, we are building leaders of Hawaii. It makes perfect sense that, given our root culture, the YWCA’s leadership principles are going to be grounded in relationship-building and connections founded on real trust and caring for one another, having communities of support rather than perpetuating a ‘go-it-alone’ process. I think we have a really unique opportunity to create this base within the YWCA because this is our mission, it is our vision.”

The changes being made are not just programmatic. The YWCA is in the process of a \$12 million renovation of its main, downtown location, headquarters of the future Laniakea Leadership Center. The first phase of construction, the restoration of Fuller Hall, is scheduled for completion in October.

In 2003, Starwood Hotels and Resorts Hawaii and French Polynesia, was developing a similar relationship-based leadership approach with Na Wahine Kuilima O Ka Lea Kamaehu (Women moving forward together with one voice of strength), which aims to increase the number of high potential women in the pipeline for senior management and leadership positions, focusing on training, mentorship and support services applicable to all women within the organization. Cheryl Williams, Starwood regional vice president of sales and marketing for Hawaii and French Polynesia, was among the women leaders within the organization who developed its core objectives. Although she has passed on the day-to-day business of the council to a successor group, Williams continues to mentor eight women in a variety of different roles and responsibilities. “We really encourage the mentees to drive the process, to set their goals and objectives, what they want to get out of the mentorship, and the end result hopefully leads them to be promoted into a manager role,” she says.

Williams reports that Starwood Hawaii currently has 200 women in management positions and 31 women senior executives. “Is it enough? No, I think we’re just getting started. Within our region, we have 17 hotels and only three general managers are women — all on Kauai. So it’s a great start, but we need to take it up three or four notches.”

Leadership development consultant Wendy Nakamura believes that, while most organizations are committed to having women leaders within their organizations, the YWCA and Starwood’s Na Wahine programs successfully address a common gap: helping women to steer their careers toward leadership opportunities. Nakamura says, “Even in the best organizations, there’s not a whole lot of career planning—most people leave it to chance. The more organizations can do to help folks identify what their interests are, where they can make the biggest contribution, what opportunities will be available in the organization in the future, the more we will be able to prepare people in advance to develop their careers.” 

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