

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. I am your host, Laurie McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership, and over the years I've come to learn one thing: women need women, and not just any women, but inspiring women. Tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at [InspiringWomen.show](https://www.inspiringwomen.show) or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening, and I hope you will be inspired.

Laurie McGraw:

I am looking forward to speaking with Denise Brosseau this morning on Inspiring Women. Denise is the CEO and creator of Thought Leadership Lab, which is an organization that works with people and companies to develop their strategies as well as their leadership. Denise is a keynote speaker. She is a thought leadership strategist, an author and executive coach.

Laurie McGraw:

Now, Denise has been at Thought Leadership lab for over 25 years, starting out in other commercial businesses. She has been working specifically and is committed to developing women leaders over many years through both her form, her company, as well as other types of organizations like being a top 100 women of influence in Silicon Valley. She's been recognized as a Champion of Change by the White House. And she was also received a Forever Green Award by the Girl Scouts.

Laurie McGraw:

Now, Denise is a Wesley graduate. She has a Stanford MBA. She has a long list of organizations where she is a board member. And Denise, I am really pleased to be speaking to you today.

Denise Brosseau:

Oh, I'm so happy to be here.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, let's get going. I mean, you have been in this space of helping and fostering women leaders for quite some time, so I consider you to be an expert. I'm looking forward to learning from you, but why don't we just get started with, what are you doing right now? Tell us a little bit about Thought Leadership Lab.

Denise Brosseau:

Yeah. It's been such a wonderful journey, Laurie. I started this organization about 10, 11 years ago with a focus initially thinking that I was going to be helping women leaders with their careers, really career advancement, but pretty quickly I ended up doubling down on a particular area of expertise in thought leadership.

Denise Brosseau:

And it really all began from a conversation with one of your previous guests, Van Ton-Quinlivan. Van and I had known each other for a while and she called me up one day and she said, "Hey, Denise, you know how you were that thought leader in women's entrepreneurship? I want to do that too." And our work together, taking her from being someone practically invisible in her field to being a recognized expert and then a thought leader and honored in a number of ways and headhunted by the governor, that

journey of working with her on that strategy and that plan, helped me to understand that my own background, as what I call an accidental thought leader.

Denise Brosseau:

And my own real interest in helping women leaders could kind of combine into a organization that's just really focused primarily on helping women build their voices, build their followership, take big ideas out into the world and advance in their careers.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, not just doing that, but being recognized for it at a pretty significant level, a White House Champion of Change. First of all, what is that? What is that award? I mean, that's amazing. And how did you get to that level of being recognized as that Champion of Change?

Denise Brosseau:

The Champion of Change Award was actually instituted under the Obama administration and it was a series of communities that they recognized across the United States in a variety of different arenas. And so they would bring together people who were doing sort of very prominent work, important work in these different arenas, whether it be a workforce development. In my case, entrepreneurship for women. Lots of different areas of expertise, manufacturing, et cetera, and they would bring forward these honorees to come to the White House, which of course is quite a treat-

Laurie McGraw:

Exciting.

Denise Brosseau:

Right? When do you get invited to the White House to get honored? That was super fun, but even better was that in addition to this sort of honoring ceremony, there was then a full day of get togethers with these other people who shared your interest and expertise. And so, just really great round table sessions and sort of going from room to room and different configurations of talking to people across the United States who were working on entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship for women, and having a chance to collaborate and learn from one another.

Denise Brosseau:

That to me is really, in addition to getting great pictures and having a chance to be an honoree at the White House, to really get to hang with people who taught me a great deal and who I got to share my learnings with.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, also one of those opportunities where you really took advantage of it. I mean, that's networking at an extreme level and sounds incredible, just sounds absolutely incredible. Denise, in your career trajectory, what you're doing now and sort of the journey to get there, you started off in what I would consider more traditional kinds of roles.

Laurie McGraw:

So, you've got your Stanford MBA, you're doing product management, you're working with more brand name types of commercial companies. And then it seems that you went on to found your own businesses, be more of an entrepreneur. And I think today, most people sort of know what entrepreneurship really is all about, but 20 years ago, that really wasn't the case, at least in my experience. So, how did you make that pivot? How did you move to being a founder, being a, "I'm going to create my own business," when I believe that wasn't sort of the experience of most women at that time?

Denise Brosseau:

No, not at all. I started my first company when I was 26 and I really, again, sort of fell into it. This was because I had worked for a crazy startup, and at that startup, I had gotten a Macintosh computer on my desk and I fell in love with this little machine and I started learning everything, everything, everything I could about it. And the company crashed about a year later and everybody in the company knew me as this, I guess I would call myself a Mac groupie. And I had been teaching Mac classes during lunch and after work. I wanted everyone to try this cool new machine.

Denise Brosseau:

And I went to another company. I went to a software company following that, and kept getting all these calls from people saying, "Hey, my company's starting to buy Macs, and we need some help. Can you come set up our network? And can you tell us to what to buy and can you teach us how to use it?" And so I started this little business on the side, in addition to being a product manager. And that honestly, I made more money doing that than I did at my job. I just did it because people called me.

Denise Brosseau:

And I think that the thing for many of us who sort of become these entrepreneurs, the best way to be an entrepreneur is to found a company on something that people already think you are the go-to person for, because you're not trying to make a market. You're just following the market, and that's been my experience. And then I started out of business school. I started my first trade association for women entrepreneurs with some friends out of Stanford. And that, again, was because so many of the people that we were hearing from, my friend and I who started this, were feeling really lost and feeling very kind of isolated.

Denise Brosseau:

There wasn't a lot of help for women entrepreneurs back then. There wasn't any incubators, there wasn't any of that. And we're kind of talking back in the day. I hate to admit how long ago that was, but at the time, less than 1% of venture capital funding was going to women, and we were determined to do something about that.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, you've made a lot of progress. It's only 2% or 3% at this point. So, there's still some work for everyone.

Denise Brosseau:

So much work to be done. So much work still to be done.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, Denise, in terms of that, that is just incredible because so many women entrepreneurs today, they still get so much value from being with other women. And it's just because there's not enough in terms of the circle, and people need those kinds of relationships or people like them that they can ask the questions to, and the like.

Laurie McGraw:

I wanted to ask you about some of the work that you do at Thought Leadership Lab. You've spoken a lot, you've written about what thought leadership is and actually how anyone can become a thought leader. You've talked about building your personal brand. I'm wondering if you could comment on those concepts.

Denise Brosseau:

I think it's such a great definition to... I mean, we can only begin with this sort of definition of personal branding versus thought leadership. So, thank you for this question. I think that many people sort of conflate them, but here's an easy way that I explain it.

Denise Brosseau:

To me, personal branding is bringing people to you for your expertise and bringing attention and people to pay attention to you. Whereas thought leadership, on the other hand, is really about spreading big ideas. Really, at its maximum, it is about creating a movement around something, and it can be anything from a social justice issue, but it could also be trying to gain followers and gain attraction for a big idea around a business process improvement or a new way in which to distribute software. I mean, it can be a lot of different things, but as a thought leader, your goal is, "How can I get people to pick up my ideas and carry them outwards?"

Denise Brosseau:

So, they're not about looking for people to come inward. You're looking for others to help you carry ideas further and further and further from you. So, I think of it as pebble in the pond going out, is really what a thought leader is. And that work is something that, I don't know about you, but I didn't learn how to do that in college or business school. How do I get people to pick up my ideas? How do I get people to carry forward complexity and build on, on what I know? That's the work that I do.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, in terms of that, I think today, I want to understand sort of the conflation of just having your own ideas, building a brand, and then just how people use social media. I think that today we've all become familiar with using social media, how to amplify things that we want to say or promote or whatever, but that's not the same thing as being a thought leader, at least as I've understood some of the things that you've talked about.

Laurie McGraw:

So, maybe you could talk a little bit about good use of social media for building a brand to help you promote your own career. And just how do you advise women in particular for doing those things differently, but impactfully?

Denise Brosseau:

For me, it really begins with having an attitude of thought leadership instead of an attitude of, "Look at me, look at me, look at me." Right?

Laurie McGraw:

Right.

Denise Brosseau:

[inaudible 00:11:22]. There's a couple of starting points that I try to encourage people to think about. So, imagine that you are really building either a brand as an expert in your area, or you are really trying to move forward an important change in the world as an effective change agent. I think you want to start as an amplifier of the best ideas out there. So, thinking to yourself as somebody who... let's pick a particular arena of women's entrepreneurship, what are the ideas there that need to be spread? So, you're amplifying those best ideas.

Denise Brosseau:

Secondly, you're curating. Let's take the best of the best and use your social media, use your following to move forward those ideas. People are not as expert as you are in whatever your particular arena is. So, use that expertise to highlight the best, to curate the best information. That's sort of a second technique.

Denise Brosseau:

And a third technique is to really look at thought leadership as a way to be a spokesperson for a cause. So, not just amplifying others' ideas, but what is your vision of the future? What is your point of view and perspective? So, people can focus in their thought leadership efforts and those three particular arenas, instead of it just being random, or it just being what you had for lunch or your favorite movie star. Let's focus on, what is my expertise? What should I be amplifying? What do I want to take a stand for? What is the curation that I could do to help people find the best information? That, to me, is a really effective use of social media.

Laurie McGraw:

How about younger women who are just starting out in their careers, who probably, at the early stages, aren't as clear in what they're thinking, they are more sort of like doing work, learning on the job, those types of things? How might you advise them to use social media to promote themselves professionally?

Denise Brosseau:

I believe the most effective way to do this is to be a little restrained. Don't overdo and don't share everything that flips across. If you see something that's exciting and fun, you don't have to upload it, you don't have to like everything. Instead, think about it very much as sort of looking forward a year. Imagine it's a year from now, and you were looking back at what you did, what you did upload, what you did share, what you did comment on. Does it tell a story of you as a thoughtful leader?

Denise Brosseau:

It doesn't mean you have to be brilliant. It doesn't mean you have to have the biggest, best ideas. But being thoughtful, constructing a story with the choices that you make on social media will actually move you forward, even if you are not yet the expert, even if you're not yet.

Denise Brosseau:

So, let's say that you care deeply about a cause or two. Pick a cause or two, don't pick 23. I think restrained, being a little more thoughtful and understanding that all of the choices we're making on social media tend to follow us for a long time. And so if you can be a little bit more strategic about it, people will look at what you've done and think, "Oh, she may not be completely a spokesperson about an idea yet, but she has a point of view by the choices she's making."

Laurie McGraw:

Do you think for younger women today, professionally being active on social media is an important part of just building your career?

Denise Brosseau:

I think [inaudible 00:14:55] already is, that everyone looks to your LinkedIn profile in almost every career that we have right now. People will look to your LinkedIn profile previous to conversing with you, previous to meeting with you. And so if you are not crafting a story, if you are not careful in what you're saying, if you are not establishing a well-written, no errors, I mean, having a well-edited point of view, perspective, bio, whatever is going to serve you. And so why would you overlook that since that is where everybody is looking at you? Why would you not want to construct that as well as you construct an outfit for a night out?

Denise Brosseau:

People spend more time, I find, constructing the perfect outfit to go to some social event than they do thinking about, "What does my LinkedIn look like?" That makes no sense to me.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. I agree. I think it's the new normal. I mean, you no longer have... just being a private worker, with, "I'm just moving onward and upward," if that's what you desire to do. You have a public persona, no matter who you are, and it's something that you really need to take care of it. Professionally, it says something about you. And then I think particularly about younger women, at the early stages of their career journey, because I'm hoping for all of them to move faster forward.

Denise Brosseau:

Yeah. Take a great picture for your profile and use it everywhere. Don't have some haphazard shot where you've cut yourself out of a group of friends, that has a terrible background. Really think about, "This is how people are seeing me. If I care at all about building that reputation, then I should care what I look like on social media." And by the way, take down the pictures... I tried to hire a young woman a year ago and we found some all but naked photos of her on the social media like, "Okay. Might want to take those down."

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. Well, this is how I advise my children when I stalk them on all the social platforms that they're on. Denise, I will also want to ask you about some of the work that you do with corporations. So, one of the themes that I've seen in some of your talks is, "Don't fix the women, fix the culture." So, I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit about that. What do you mean? Why is that important?

Denise Brosseau:

I spent the first number of my career years in corporate America and I found it exhausting because it is a place where you do have to fit a particular perspective about what women are supposed to be. I was regularly being labeled as too this or too that, and it was so rare to hear a man getting that kind of feedback. And so then I started working, as I left and started my own business, I started working with women's leadership programs and women's organizations, and realizing how often we are told just terrible advice about how we are supposed to show up in the world: fake it till you make it and all the rest of the crazy stuff that we're told.

Denise Brosseau:

And I just think it isn't so much about, "There's something wrong with the women." There is often something wrong with what you are trying to do to women in order to get them to fit some very small point of view you have about what women are supposed to be, based on your mom or your cousin or the teacher you didn't like when you were in fourth grade. And instead, imagining that women are as diverse as men are, and we have a lot of different ways in which we show up and we shouldn't have to be some stereotype so that you're happy.

Denise Brosseau:

You should be looking at our skillset and our effectiveness more than whether or not we fit your... So, I could go on about this and I'll let it go for now. But it is, to me, the key essential element here that all of these women's leadership programs need to also regularly help the culture change, not just the women change.

Laurie McGraw:

And how do you think about that? Because there are now, today, many organizations working on whether it's an employee resource groups or specific leadership development classes, courses, programs to support women in their organization. How do you square that with the focus on whether it's the women's programs, with the culture piece that a corporation needs to modify? Are there backlash opportunities? What do you think about there?

Denise Brosseau:

The challenge and opportunity are kind of intertwined here though, right? On the one hand, you have a dominant culture, which in many places, maybe not healthcare, but many places that women work in tech and financial services, where they are in the minority. And whenever you have a dominant culture and a non-dominant employee, you need some support structures around that. You need to help them to figure out how to advance, how to survive, how to thrive. And that is also true of people of color.

Denise Brosseau:

Whenever there is a few versus a lot, you need to find ways in which to support and provide every type of professional development that is available. At the same time, you also need to recognize and reward

those leaders who are not putting women and people of color in a box, who are not expecting them to be just one way, and in fact are promoting and supporting and developing people who don't look like them. Because for all of us, and I fall into this trap as well, we tend to hire and promote those who we're comfortable with that, that are like us, and that doesn't always translate as people who are women and people who are people of color.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. Well, I agree with that. I mean, I knew the answer to the question personally. I just wanted to hear from you, Denise. I mean, this is just great. You work on many organizations that work on women empowerment. So, whether it's a chief, whether it is springboard enterprises, the Forum for Women Entrepreneurs that you founded, can you just talk about why these programs are important specifically in terms of helping already pretty accomplished, aspiring women, but help them, propel them even further?

Denise Brosseau:

Well, when we founded the firm for women entrepreneurs, it was really around that issue of less than 1% of venture funding going to women. And that was about three things. We founded the organization to provide education, what is venture capital? How do you structure your company to gain venture capital? What's an exit? All of those things. Second was a community of connections with other women who were also building those kinds of businesses. And third, it was about access to the resource providers: the bankers, the lawyers, the accountants that you needed.

Denise Brosseau:

I find that those kinds of... If you structure an organization with some sort of specific set of goals that are actually provable as a way to transform what is broken, then you can move things forward. And similarly, Springboard Enterprises, when I helped start Springboard, which was the first venture capital conference for women entrepreneurs that grew into a mighty organization that has had global impact on... We've had, I think it's 850 women who raised over 10 billion in capital over the last 20 years.

Denise Brosseau:

And that organization similarly was about how can we effectively improve women's access to venture by giving a surrounded ability of resources and training and access and community that was going to allow women to win in those settings of venture conferences and other places where women seek investment?

Denise Brosseau:

And I think, similarly, chief is all about how can we get more women to the C-suite and keep them there? And again, surround women with a community structure or these wonderful peer networks that meet every month. I run three of these groups now. And there's peer network of women leaders at senior levels in their companies. Now, they have a chance to kind of let their hair down, share their goals and their aspirations, but also the challenges along the way, and get advice and counsel and peer coaching from each other, as well as having access to some of the top women speakers who come into to provide knowledge and expertise, as well as just lots of other great services.

Denise Brosseau:

Each of these organizations, sort of in that order, as I've gotten involved with them, has always been about, what can we do to leverage women's possibilities, to open the doors to opportunity and really create a level playing field when it isn't?

Laurie McGraw:

And I think these kinds of organizations are so important, and I just really encourage women to get involved with them. It's very important to participate, I think, in the ones that are within your own organization, but being in an external group with other like-minded women is so helpful to just build that network of other people who can either support you or provide advice and those kinds of just really non work-related forums. So, that's just fantastic.

Laurie McGraw:

Denise, this has been just a rich conversation. I really appreciate all of the information. As we close out here on Inspiring Women, you've worked with women as well as men, your entire career, helping to build their professional careers. Can you just close out with what is the best advice that you can provide? Particularly, I always think about the younger women who are starting in their professional careers to just help them along the way.

Denise Brosseau:

I love this question. It flashed me right back to this moment early in my career. I had a mentor, a woman that I always look back so fondly on her, and she gave me a piece of advice that I still use today. She said, "If you're not living on the edge, you're taking up too much room."

Denise Brosseau:

And I really want to encourage women to think: are you living on the edge? Are you taking the uncommon path? Are you pushing yourself out there and being a boundary setter and a boundary pusher, instead of just taking the normal, whatever falls in your lap? This is your chance. You only get one great career, so why not make it one where you have an impact and where you inspire other women and you have some fun along the way?

Laurie McGraw:

That is great advice. I love that, Denise. This has been an excellent, inspiring women conversation with Denise Brosseau. And Denise, thank you so much.

Denise Brosseau:

Thank you. This was a treat.

Laurie McGraw:

This has been an episode of Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. Please subscribe, rate, and review. We are produced by Kate Crews at Executive Podcast Solutions. More episodes can be found on InspiringWomen.show. I am Laurie McGraw, and thank you for listening.