

Women in Management shatter the glass ceiling

BY JENNI McMANUS



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Back in 1984—when it was still considered appropriate to question female job applicants about their sex lives and child-bearing aspirations—a small group of professional women decided they were fed up with the old-boy grapevine that formed the power base of the Auckland business elite.

One of their number, Trish Henderson, then office manager at McConnell Dowell Corporation, had become inspired after attending a seminar at the Institute of Management run by American author and professor, Dr. Sharon Lord.

Lord's message? Networking and contacts are the name of the game, and if the guys won't accept you into their informal power-broking sessions on the golf course, at the poker table, or in front of the urinal, where all the real deals are said to be done, well sisters—you'll just have to do it for yourselves.

And, so, among a half a dozen malcontent women and several boxes of wine in a cold seminar room in the winter of '84, the New Zealand Women in Management Network Inc. was born. Henderson, now in business for herself running training schools in New Zealand and Australia, became its founder president.

Nearly 10 years later, the organization boasts a membership of more than 100 high-powered women, and last weekend held its inaugural conference at Auckland's Waipuna Convention Centre.



SHARON LORD: THE FONT OF INSPIRATION

The theme was "Shattering the Glass Ceiling"—the invisible barriers preventing women, even in the 1990s, from being appointed to top management jobs.

Some 300 women fronted up to hear internationally respected feminists Dr. Anne Wilson Schaefer and Dr. Farida Allaghi, and attend a host of workshops headed by top-notch home-grown

professional women such as Sharyn Cederman, Deborah Kellam, Vicki Salmon, and Sue Kedgley.

The opening keynote address was given by Sharon Lord—the woman who provided the inspiration in the first place. A former Pentagon staffer with the ranking of a three-star general, Lord told delegates, "When life closes a door, we have a choice—we can feel sorry for ourselves, or find a way to crawl through a window.

"It is important to have a clear vision of what we want our lives to look like if they were perfect and in balance. And we need to constantly revise those visions as doors open."

Other speakers hammered home the need for women managers to pick their battles carefully, to train themselves to delegate (a major problem for women, who tend to be perfectionists) and to try to overcome the "superwoman syndrome"—the belief that every minute of one's time must be spent in productive activity.

The attendees—among them some of the toughest business names in the country—later described the conference as educative, supportive and inspirational.

"And I hope these women went away fired up and motivated and that this won't dry up when they go back into their offices and confront the same old problems," says current WIM president Lauren Maser.

Maser, marketing manager at accounting firm Price Waterhouse, expects to see a huge membership drive as non-member conference attendees realize the importance of contact and networking, and how these underpin the informal power structures that have previously been the preserve of men.

While WIM is currently an Auckland-based organization, Maser anticipates professional women in areas such as Wellington, Christchurch, Taranaki, Palmerston North and the Waikato will be interested in setting up affiliated groups. "We will be helping to organize this and assist in these initiatives," she says.