



Be the Author of Your Own Story

My Journey to Leadership

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My love of beautiful things and a passion for travel inspired me to pursue a career in luxury design.

I started as a first-generation college student, and now I'm the first female managing director at PYR, a premier luxury design firm. Curiosity, hard work and a voracious desire for new challenges fueled my rise. My professional journey has been extremely fulfilling, and I believe my experience could be inspirational for other women in creative leadership roles.



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I was the first person in my family to attend college. I had no map. My only guidance came from a high school counselor who tipped me off about a free Saturday program in design at FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology) in Manhattan. I applied for college there. I was totally on my own. My mother provided emotional and spiritual support, but affording tuition was a significant hurdle. I found part-time work at a small design firm and stayed laser-focused on my development as a designer. I remained at the same firm throughout college, graduating amid a major recession.

Always Say Yes

Opportunities emerge from a void. I continued working at that firm for more than eight years, approaching it like a real-world laboratory for everything I'd learned inside FIT's classrooms. The years following graduation are an incredible learning experience, absorbing so much, almost as if by osmosis. Starting out in the design field, I said yes to every opportunity. I viewed each

task, no matter how seemingly trivial, as a chance to expand my knowledge in the field. Sorting samples in the materials library was an education in itself; I learned about the nuance and qualities of the various materials and met many vendors that would have a further impact on my career.

Saying yes to new roles allowed me to gain a 360-degree perspective on the industry very early on in my career. I seized opportunities that other folks passed up, like taking field measurements, preparing tedious working drawings and developing renderings. I walked building sites with construction managers when no other designers wanted to. I also became closely involved with new business development.

As time went on, I made it a point to attend conferences and industry events, locally and globally. Immersing myself in these events provided me with a global view of the field, as well as a broad network of professionals I could rely on in the future. Eventually, I was leading presentations and panel discussions as a thought leader and design expert.

Be Respectful and Resilient

Women approach leadership differently. We've had divergent formative experiences from our male peers. We see things through a different lens.

No one ever told me, "You can't make it." But back in the 1980s, a well-meaning mentor once advised me, "Just remember, it's a man's world, learn to navigate that and you will do well in your career." Not fazed or insulted, I viewed this as sage advice to a young woman embarking on her career.

We have come a long way since then, but change happens slowly. Just as I challenged the status quo over the years, today I enjoy the experience of being challenged by my younger team members. In good faith, hard questions serve to open people's minds and build intimacy and trust among coworkers. Hard questions lay the groundwork for change.

Receptivity Is Key

Active listening is one of the most powerful tools a leader can employ — and model. Often, increased receptivity among team members leaves both the creative team and the client better prepared for challenges, and more open to change. Cognitive, creative and professional leaps often stem from feelings of discomfort. A healthy, generative workplace culture should acknowledge and accommodate these complex interpersonal dynamics.

The more diversity you have in any organization, the broader the perspective you have. Different perspectives, different solutions. Bigger ideas, bigger achievements. The complexity of large hospitality projects always involves large, diverse teams of designers, planners, engineers, builders and other contributors. It's important for existing leaders to make sure everyone has equal access to managerial roles in these long, complex projects.

Pay It Forward

In my first two decades as a designer, I sought out strong, nurturing mentors. I looked for mentors who explained “the why,” who’d sit and draw with me, and who inspired and challenged me. Challenges work both ways: both the mentor and the mentee need to lean into discomfort. Discomfort with challenges makes way for new ideas. A healthy mix of peer pressure, competition, inspiration and collaboration enhances creativity.

What does effective mentorship look like? Active listening. Collaboration. Compassion. At my present firm, there is strong support for female executives. Ongoing conversations, mentorships and friendships cultivate a sense of community where everyone feels supported, regardless of level.

Be Present

Collaboration strengthens professional communities. As the first female managing director of a world-renowned luxury hospitality firm, I believe I have a moral responsibility to make sure all of my designers and team members have opportunities to succeed and evolve. The availability of senior leadership is critical to the cohesion and growth of the team. I make a point to be available to all who need me.

I have built many amazing relationships through successful networking with people. I value the face-to-face interaction in the relationship-building process. I want to ensure the teams I mentor have the same opportunities I had because those experiences made all the difference in my growth as a professional.

Lead With Flexibility and Compassion

As a leader, a powerful vision for the future is necessary tool to define purpose, but in our era, qualities like receptivity, compassion and a willingness to admit what you don't know are also major strengths. Vulnerability can be an asset — it makes you human and approachable.

I never perceive challenges as roadblocks. Obstacles often present an opportunity. While the pandemic has been uniquely hard on women, it has also led to massive changes in the creative workplace. We are reentering an almost unrecognizable professional universe. The power dynamic is rapidly shifting, and we have our seats at the table.

My advice: Be receptive. Listen. Learn. Pound the pavement. Field rejection, grow from it. Say yes!

Amy Jakubowski is principal and managing director of the prestigious design firm PYR (Pierre-Yves Rochon).

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