

Dr. Laurie E. Locascio, vice president for research, division of research, University of Maryland, challenged innovators from industry, government and academia to work collaboratively, lead by influence, support each other and “stand up for yourself,” during a recent virtual event highlighting Women in Innovation: Breaking the Glass Ceiling. The two-hour program, hosted by TechPort UAS Business Incubator and Community Innovation Hub, focused on the unique challenges facing women in innovation and how they succeed.

A biomedical researcher, Dr. Locascio has published more than 100 scientific papers and holds 12 patents, including one that is being used to help manufacture the Moderna and Pfizer COVID-19 vaccines. She spoke candidly about spending 30 years working at the National Institute of Standards and Technology as the only female in her work spots. She confronted sexism without anger and instead with grace.

“My first thought was always, ‘They didn’t realize what they were saying,’ and 95 percent of the time it ended there,” Locascio said, recalling how she would speak privately to those who spoke to her in condescending ways. “So I think just a gentle and kind approach, for me was always the first one and that way you don’t start off in a defensive argument.”

She recalled a time when she was the highest ranking candidate for a promotion, yet the job was offered to her on a trial basis. When asked if the job would have been offered to a man on a trial basis, the employer immediately recognized his error and she was offered the job permanently.

““There are subtle little things that happen along the way that you need to watch out for because honestly I don’t think the person that offered me that even realized what they were doing,” Locascio said. “That was hard for me to ask. For a lot of us that is very difficult. Remember, that you are good and you got there because you are good, so stand up for yourself.”

Panelists included Lainie Rodriguez, assistant director for strategy, Air Systems Group at Naval Air Warfare Center Aircraft Division (NAWCAD), Theresa Shafer, aerospace engineer at Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR), Vetpreneurs and minority-owned and women-owned start-up companies, researchers and founders.

LaShonda Torbert, an electronic warfare engineer for NAWCAD led a discussion regarding women who question if they are smart enough to be where they are. Julie Lenzer, chief innovation officer for the University of Maryland, offered that men feel the same way, but are able to dismiss their insecurity as false.

“If you got the invite, you belong” said Rodriguez, who also reminded attendees to volunteer for every opportunity and make connections across networks.

Dr. Chhandra Dutta, chief, clinical gerontology branch, National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health, emphasized the need to women to network together, adding that when she was in graduate school in the 1980s women were major competitors against each other.

“The culture has changed and women are willing to support each other, and it’s so, so important that you reach out to other people,” she said. “You may find that you have a lot of commonalities and you can help each other.”

Locascio noted the importance of finding a good mentor and then becoming one. She credits her mentor, Dr. Willie May, vice president for research and economic development at Morgan State University, for guiding her in this philosophy.

“He told me, you’re going to be my successor,” she said, and then she understood what she needed to do and began providing opportunities for those who would follow her.

TechPort intern Alexandra Walker, a student at the College of Southern Maryland, enjoyed her first opportunity to be a part of a women’s event.

“My biggest takeaway was having a support system of women behind you,” Walker said, noting that even at TechPort, she connects “on a different level” with the other female intern.

Funlayo Alabi, founder, CEO and social entrepreneur of Shea Radiance spoke about what it’s like to be an entrepreneur and walk into board rooms where no one looks or sound like she does.

“I am a woman. I am black. I am an immigrant. I have an accent. I have all these things that should make me feel insecure,” she said. “As I get older, I see the value in what I’m bringing and I am a different package and you need what I have.

“I let confidence and data guide me. The data is showing that women’s presence in board rooms, corporations and business is actually allowing businesses to be more profitable. The fact that we’re not like anyone else is actually an asset,” Alabi said. “We bring a lot of value.”

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