

Avanade Leadership Program for Women: Reflections from the Duomo Rooftop

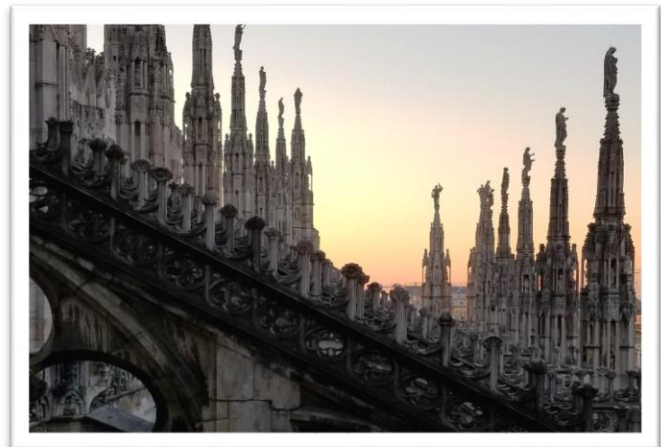
By Amy Bladen Shatto, Ph.D., Global Head of Leadership Development - Avanade

In mid-December I stood atop (literally) the rooftop of the famed Milan Duomo with one of my fabulous team members (my partner in crime) Gail Anderson. We had just finished hosting the *fourth* cohort of our Avanade Leadership Program for Women (ALPW) at the beautiful chateauform Villa Gallariti Scotti outside of Milan. I observed the sun sinking beyond the cityscape that Friday evening and breathed a sigh of... *I don't know what.*

No need to worry, I wasn't considering scaling the building as part of a new workout regime! Nor was it a sigh of relief as this particular program has been my greatest source of professional joy since joining Avanade as Global Head of Leadership Development in Spring, 2015. It was something far greater. Actually, as the sun's rays melted away the remains of our week in Milan, I realized that Gail and I, *and our 106 ALPW alum*, had become part of a bigger, more important mission. That is, we had begun intentionally, and positively changing the landscape of Avanade's future leadership.

Women Leaders Are a "Must Have"

Each year I stand before these women, heads nodding, as I share how developing women leaders is not a "nice to have," but a business "must have." I point to research showing how companies with higher female Board representation, gender-diverse teams, and business units consistently outperform those that aren't (e.g., Joy et. Al, 2007; Badal, 2014). What's more, while there's little difference in preferences for male vs. female bosses today compared to those in the 60's when more than a third preferred males (Rifkin, 2014); new Center for Creative Leadership (2017) studies reveal that both genders experience



female-led organizations as more supportive and less prone to burn-out. This, in turn, directly affects retention. And in an economy where top companies are competing for the best talent, retention is a critical differentiator.

Despite the research, however, retention across women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) fields continues to drop significantly with tenure (CCL, 2017). This means for women to assume senior level roles, they need to **leave** the fields they cut their teeth in. Fortunately, with support for programs like ALPW, we have evidence that Avanade is beginning to do things differently.

What is ALPW?

The ALPW initiative is the direct investment in changing the future for STEM women in our US \$2.5B; 35K employee joint venture between Microsoft and Accenture that is Avanade. This isn't a program where women come and listen to lectures, do "ropes" bonding courses, or take a respite from their hard work. While there is a place for those things, ALPW is an intensive annual program for a highly select group of global nominees to come together not only to learn and accelerate their own careers, but to advocate for the future of women leaders at Avanade.

The program, co-sponsored by Leading International Women's Research Consultancy, Linkage, Inc., includes three full (very full, as the ladies will tell you) days of interactive workshops, skill development, and high-impact networking with one another as well as with supportive Avande Executives. This year we were lucky enough to have Toni Handler (Executive, Global Talent & Rewards), Dave Gartenberg (Executive, Chief Human Resource Officer), and Christiane Noll (Executive Country Manager, Austria) join us. Past guests



have included Pam Maynard (Executive, GMU Leadership); Stella Goulet (Executive, Chief Marketing Officer); Anna Di Silverio (Executive, Area President, Growth Markets) and Adam Warby (Chief Executive Officer) himself! Participants also receive feedback from a rigorous 360 assessment with external coaching prior to the event. The women are expected to integrate insights on strengths and needs with program learnings and follow up with a development plan to influence their future career trajectories at Avande.

But this program is so much more than the presentation of statistics or anything that I can cover in a few paragraphs for folks who have not taken part in it. Women literally describe the opportunity as “life changing”, “transformational,” and “one of the greatest experiences of [my] entire life.” Our beloved partner, Linkage researcher, internationally acclaimed key-note speaker [Susan MacKenty Brady](#) whisks these women onto a journey of introspection, deep reflection, and active resolution around the evidence-based

“7 Hurdles” faced uniquely by women. You can dive into detail about these and other challenges in Susan’s recently published, best-selling book (in which I am honored to be featured on the topic of brand and presence): [Mastering Your Inner Critic and 7 Other High Hurdles To Advancement](#).

True Return on Investment

Of course, a skeptic might be tempted to discount anecdotal results alone, which is why my team and I conducted a longitudinal study of bottom-line Return on Investment (ROI) across the previous three years. Specifically, we compared **retention** and **promotion** rates for high potentials attending ALPW against a *control group of high potentials* meeting all program criteria at the time of selection but not attending in any given year and demonstrated Level 4 Kirkpatrick ROI. For those of you whose eyes and/or heads roll backwards when you see statistical gobbledygook – **this is good**, actually great, and breaks down as follows:

- **17% ALPW participants vs. 33% of the control group** separated during an equivalent period of time
- **30% ALPW participants vs. 8% of the control group** were promoted

Additionally, 46% of ALPW participants vs. 20% of the control group participants agreed or strongly agreed that others would report a difference in their self-confidence as a leader in an equal time period.

So back to the sigh I mentioned earlier... it was an exhalation of joy, collaboration, meaningfulness, and a feeling that if you’re working towards a larger mission you really can make a difference over the long haul. And as Gail and I watched our breath freeze in the air, I thought about the amazing things this year’s cohort of women will do, like the cohorts before them and I wondered:

“where will we be standing, smiling, and reflecting after the Avande Leadership Program for Women next year?”