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## 'We are all women but we walk different roads' and other highlights from the Women in Leadership panel

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Three women shared their stories of navigating the business world in the annual Women in Leadership Panel. [Shari Dunn](#), executive director of nonprofit Dress for Success Oregon; [Pat Reser](#), board chair of Reser's Fine Foods and chair of Reser Family Foundation; and [Yvonne Wassenaar](#), CEO of software company Puppet spoke before a sold-out crowd at the Sentinel Hotel on June 27. Here's some highlights of the conversation:



HEIDI POZZO

(From left) Shari Dunn, Pat Reser and Yvonne Wassenaar talk business with the PBJ's Suzanne Stevens.

### On mentorship

**Yvonne Wassenaar:** From her own career Wassenaar has seen the importance of having people see things in her that she couldn't see in herself. From a college professor who encouraged her to code to a career coach she had while working at Accenture. Within Puppet and the broader tech community she looks for future CEOs and tells them when she sees it. "There are raw skills and talent to think strategically but act tactically. People who others want to follow. I look for those individuals in the company and in the community. ... The only way we move the needle is if we all work together. By giving back what I learn and take some of the fear (away) and fuel the confidence," she said.

**Shari Dunn:** Dunn noted she hasn't had many mentors, partly because she changed careers several times — from lawyer to journalist to nonprofit executive — and partly because she is a woman of color in the business world. “For people of color, mentoring is a difficult situation. You don't find people who step into you like that,” she said. Dunn said the best career advice she got was from her mother, who worked in hospital: “‘Don't let people run you off your job.’ What she said was don't let anybody else decide how you do something.” Dunn used that advice in each of her roles showing up “as myself every day, all day from the beginning and they will eventually figure it out. If they don't then I can't do a damn thing.”

**Pat Reser:** Reser told the audience to not only look for and be formal mentors but to also look for and be informal mentors. That informal relationship builds from common values and friendship and can lead to support through more difficult and personal trials. In her own life, she is focused on informally mentoring her grandchildren as they discover the passions they want to pursue.

### **On facing down bias**

**Pat Reser:** A self-described cockeyed optimist, Reser said there will always be bias but “what I like to think is how we let that form and define who we are.” She encouraged people to recognize when they start to see the world as “us versus them” and then step back. She added that through her work at Oregon State University she sees a deep bench of women leaders entering the workforce.

**Yvonne Wassenaar:** As a woman in technology, Wassenaar has seen bias in the form of flat-out inappropriate behavior and the more subtle unconscious examples. She shared with the audience that she has learned that personal trauma as a child has shaped her life and formed who she is. “One of the things I realized is part of my drive and career is I don't want to depend on a man for any part of my life. Don't mess with me and if you do, it is never going to happen again,” she said. Wassenaar tries to be aware when she sees women around her backing down from big projects or pointing out when she sees women being held to higher or double standards compared to men, especially in management promotion discussions.

**Shari Dunn:** Dunn encouraged the audience to look at the issue through the lens of intersectionality. So far, leadership has been defined by the white, male style. So anything that is different is jarring and then white women and minority women are

cast as too aggressive or bitchy in leadership style. “Hispanic women, black women, Asian women, trans women, we are all women but we walk different roads. From the moment you hit the world, the world is telling you what you are not. You have to have full armor the day you show up. (So,) black women lead differently. They come off more aggressive people say. You need that certainty in a world that says, no,” she said.

### **On key takeaways**

**Yvonne Wassenaar**: Wassenaar encouraged the women in the room to take more career risks. She told them to remember that if something doesn’t work out you can always go back to what was comfortable. “Reach higher, not for yourself but for those behind you,” she said.

**Pat Reser**: Reser advised women in the room to truly understand who they are to the core. “Don’t allow anyone else to define you. Think about your values, put names on them. Is it integrity, compassion, empathy? Allow it to root inside you and know all through your life there will be pivots and the opportunities of the world will open to you,” she said.

**Shari Dunn**: Dunn agreed with Reser and told the crowd to really know themselves so that others can’t drive a wedge in your identity. She also encouraged women to get involved and find supporters. “I’ve lived in a lot of cities. I have never found a better group of women supporters than I have in Portland. It really feeds my soul,” she said.

### **Malia Spencer**

Staff Reporter

*Portland Business Journal*



