

TABLE OF EXPERTS

Overcoming obstacles on the road to success

Few successful executives - specifically women - had a direct path that steered them to success. As Forbes magazine founder B.C. Forbes once said, "History has demonstrated that the most notable winners usually encountered heartbreaking obstacles before they triumphed. They won because they refused to become discouraged by their defeats."

Whether in personal or professional lives, almost every person has been challenged by a roadblock on the way to success. Focusing specifically on women, many overcame difficult personal circumstances early in life or faced a tough choice or setback in their career, and turned failure into an opportunity on the path to greatness.





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CAROLINA HERRERA
Lennar

In this roundtable discussion moderated by Holland & Knight partners Miriam Soler Ramos and Isabel C. Diaz and presented by South Florida Business Journal and Holland & Knight, four notable South Florida female leaders in different fields shared insights on how to manage inevitable challenges, mistakes, miscalculations, failures and adversity to not only survive, but thrive.

They explored examples of how they moved past a roadblock to achieve a goal in either their personal or professional lives, recognized possible defeat as an opportunity, and maneuvered beyond a bad decision or other challenge at work by recognizing that women are often not given the same latitude as men when taking a misstep, and ultimately found success.

Bringing distinct perspectives

The panelists were chosen for not only their roles, but the scope of industries they work in, Diaz said.

“Our selection couldn’t have been more fitting. Each woman brought forth a distinct perspective on tackling challenges and navigating through them,” she said. “What was particularly insightful was the realization that regardless of one’s position or level,

everyone encounters hurdles in life. It’s only by directly confronting these obstacles that we truly grow stronger and learn invaluable lessons from them.”

The moderators began by asking each participant to share a personal experience of overcoming a challenge and the lessons she learned from it. Carolina Herrera, VP of land acquisition with developer Lennar, said executives overcome failure every day. Herrera received her law degree in her home country of Colombia and immigrated to the United States. When she first sought work as an executive, nothing came. Instead, she was hired as an assistant to a construction manager in a field new to her. It was humbling, in part, to learn the “dream job is not the reality” to someone who was new to our country.

“There’s a reason why challenges are placed in front of us,” Herrera said. “It’s through failure that you discover your true self and build up that ability to be ready for that next opportunity, because they will come.”

The moderators discussed how they bounced back from setbacks. Beatrice Butchko, a judge with the Eleventh Judicial Circuit of Florida, offered the advice she would give others facing challenges. During a brainstorm for the event, Butchko was intimidated by

the word “failure.” Not the act, but her inability to think of any failures. That’s not to say she hadn’t endured challenges. It’s just that in the face of setbacks, her mindset is different. Failure is a “chance at a new opportunity, a chance to pivot,” she said.

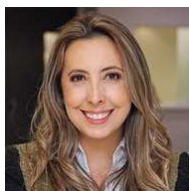
She thought back to her time as a sophomore at the University of Florida. She first wanted to be a psychiatrist, but struggled with math and chemistry. The sight of blood as a phlebotomist at a local hospital convinced Butchko medicine was not in her future.

“For a moment, I thought my life was over,” she said. “The lesson is, focus on your strengths, what you are good at. I love to read, love people, and finding resolutions. In my job as a judge, I read 400 pages a night in the complex business division. You have to put yourself in the right mindset in life. I don’t like that word ‘failure.’ It’s just a challenge, or the timing isn’t right, or your approach is wrong, or it wasn’t right for you and you have to focus on something else. You can’t be afraid to fail. Fear is a liar. It will stop you in your tracks, tell you you’re no good, prevent you from trying, keep you from succeeding. Who cares what people think. It’s not, ‘don’t be afraid to fail. Don’t be afraid to go for it.’”

PANELISTS



HON. BEATRICE BUTCHKO
Judge
Eleventh Judicial Circuit of Florida



CAROLINA HERRERA
VP Land Acquisition
Lennar



CAROLINE O'CONNOR
President of Business Operations
Miami Marlins



MADELINE PUMARIEGA
President
Miami Dade College

MODERATORS



MIRIAM SOLER RAMOS
Partner
Holland & Knight



ISABEL C. DIAZ
Partner
Holland & Knight

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HON. BEATRICE BUTCHKO
Eleventh Judicial Circuit of Florida



‘A girl’s mindset’

As president of the nation’s largest institution of higher learning, Madeline Pumariega was asked what strategies and support systems she relied on to bounce back from challenges along the way. She called her mindset “a girl’s mindset,” a focus on continually working on the best version of herself - the Madeline who became a mother, the Madeline who was diagnosed with breast cancer soon thereafter, or the Madeline who steps onto her campus each day.

“The lens changes,” she said. “Every day is, ‘how do I become the very best person that I’m supposed to be.’ That is grounded in faith and believing that God puts you where you need to be. Faith shines the brightest in my life when it is pitch dark. We all have pitch dark days and moments. That’s when faith says, ‘I have a flashlight beaming right here.’ That has helped in my own resilience and helped me grow as a mother, a sister, a daughter, a cousin.”

At a recent employee day addressing 3,000 employees at the college of 125,000 students, Pumariega thought back to her days as a “scrawny, skinny, nerdy, not feeling like I belong girl playing basketball” there, and before that, the thought of her immigrant parents being processed at the Freedom Tower. Each needed faith and hope to see it through.

“I don’t think there’s a magic button on how you come back from adversity,” she said. “You come back from adversity in a different way at different times in your life. I don’t know how many times I bent the knee and prayed as a parent. These kids can humble you in two seconds and show you how little you know about anything in life. I love those moments. They’re where I become better at who I am every day.”

Balancing the need for resilience with the importance of learning from failure and making improvements for future endeavors are two sides of the same coin to

Caroline O’Connor, president of business operations with the Miami Marlins. To O’Connor, the two go together. Balancing them requires being upfront in talking about the challenges you’re facing, then relying on a personal and professional network - “those people with you on your journey,” she said - to get and weigh input and opinions.

She also welcomes input early. When going into a meeting to present a new idea, she will have first presented it to others to give them the opportunity to consider it first, to offer advice and opinions before presenting it.

Build your support system

“Building that support system, bringing people with you and building the network and support system is really about bringing people with you in the challenges you’re having, that helps you bring something that’s better formed and will have a better success,” O’Connor said. “Don’t put yourself on an island. Have a coalition around whatever you’re doing. Just be comfortable saying, ‘I don’t have all the answers. What do you think about this?’”

Pumariega called it “finding your tribe,” a personal board of directors, whether that includes peers, your accountant or attorney, or close family and friends. “Always have a cheerleader, someone who thinks you walk on water,” she said.

As a rare woman executive in the construction industry, Herrera has faced gender-specific challenges in her journey of overcoming failure. Ramos wondered how she navigated them. Herrera was in her early 20s when she entered the industry as an assistant. Men headed her department and only one leadership position was held by a woman, she recalled.

“I didn’t have anybody in the room to aspire to,” she said.

Any roadmap she hoped to create would have been modeled after a man’s journey. “That’s not good,” she

said. She couldn’t talk sports in a bar, or hadn’t faced similar opportunities or challenges as men in the business.

“I had nothing in common with the men I was dealing with. So for me to act like something I’m not, doesn’t feel true to you,” she said. “You have to build your own roadway. There’s no women to aspire to; people told me, ‘you’re never going to grow there.’ I said, ‘no, it’s my job to create my own roadmap and bring others with me.’”

Tasked with buying land and structuring deals under the pressure to produce, Herrera would credit her community of women. Today, there’s a shift at the company and the industry. Half her team are women.

Dispelling mistaken myths

Some myths endure, like women who want to have children having to put off motherhood, or women executives having to share experiences with male counterparts.

“All of that is so mistaken. We have proven that again and again,” said Herrera, the mother of twin boys. “The job is not to replicate somebody else’s job. It’s to make it your own.”

Diaz asked Butchko how she saw the role of mentorship or sponsorship by women impacting the resilience of female professionals after setbacks. Her short answer was to profess disappointment in “women who don’t help other women.” Butchko supports the next generation of young women as a teacher of litigation skills at the University of Miami, and a mentor to female students from high school to law school, as well as interns at the courthouse.

She’s judged mock trials at Our Lady of Lourdes Academy and St. Thomas University Law School. It was later she met a student from one of the events, upon whom she’d made an impact. She was “my little protege I had never met,” Butchko said with admiration. “You have to pay it forward.”



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CAROLINE O’CONNOR
Miami Marlins

Part of paying it forward is also to continue to set an example for the next generation. When Butchko began practicing law in 1989, gender discrimination occurred among older attorneys and judges who’d never grasped how to act professionally among women attorneys, she recalled. Her mantra, “act like a woman, think like a man.” Much has changed, yet to the next generation, Butchko implores, “we can’t lose any traction.”

Each woman mentioned different traits and practices that help them through overcoming setbacks. For Pumariega, it is gratitude and recurring self-reflection. Mindset shifts and a focus on “making things better” contribute to O’Connor’s success following setbacks.

In college, Herrera thought she could change the world, maybe even as a future U.S. President. Today, she creates change by giving back, including by helping Lennar address affordable and workforce housing.

Look in the mirror

“The money, the position - there’s no value to that if you can’t look at yourself in the mirror and say where you gave back,” she said.

That mirror for Butchko emerges each morning at 5 a.m. when she spends an hour in prayer and meditation, reflecting on God, her goals, and her aspirations. For O’Connor, her focus is using her talents, perseverance and skills to be a leader, “making the most of that and opening the door for others,” she said. “That motivates me.”

“That’s what purpose is,” Pumariega said. “It’s this thread between passion and faith and helping people - contributing to somebody feeling good about themselves that day...When you find core values, check yourself on your actions - did your actions match your values. It’s about this little internal light that shines. The

world needs our lights to shine.”

The experiences of these successful women are not unique, as evidenced by the nods of attendees. Soler Ramos saw “femaleness” as a source of power and strength, citing a comment from Michele Obama. “It’s not about being perfect. It’s not about where you get yourself in the end. There’s power in allowing yourself to be known and heard, in owning your unique story, in using your authentic voice.”

“Speaking honestly and transparently, our panelists shared how reacting to challenges with strength and thoughtfulness can turn those challenges into opportunities for growth and power,” Soler Ramos said. “Witnessing exceptionally successful women leaders, in our community, speak of encountering difficulties, allowed us all to realize that failure, missteps, and roadblocks are part of everyone’s life and it is how we choose to react that shapes our individual future.”

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MADLINE PUMARIEGA
Miami Dade College

