

Rachel Powers

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#SheInspires

Rachel is an accomplished senior executive and also a professor at UC Berkeley with more than 20 years of experience leading business transformation. Often seen applying human-centered designs, Rachel strongly believes that every organization must strive towards diversity and visibility for women in leadership roles, to drive women participation in STEM fields.

In this conversation with the editorial team, Rachel talks about how she happened to get into technology, the challenges of being a woman in STEM field, and what it takes to get ahead as a female tech manager.

Hi, Rachel! Give us a quick introduction about yourself.

I'm a senior Vice President at HCL. I head the digital consulting practice globally. We work with clients to help with digital transformation and scaled agile programs, bringing consulting and business expertise in partnership with the client. In addition to what I do, I am also a professor at UC Berkeley where I teach innovation and entrepreneurship.

You have been working in technology for around 20 years. Tell us a bit about how you started and how you came to where you are now.

My career originally started in the creative arts. Originally, I went to art school. But what art school did is teach me to look at things differently, and how to ask really important questions. Taking that and then moving into design, originally, early on in my career, I started out at Disney. I was also a senior engineer at Apple, Accenture, and a variety of other companies, designing physical products, digital products, new services, and things that may just not have existed yet, from wearables to sensors, and IoT. And now, it is really about bringing together a delightful user experience that would have an

impact on a company's business, creating net new revenue, or also optimizing to create money saved within an organization.

What have been some turning points in your life?

I would say a few different things. One is being able to learn every day. That keeps you fresh, keeps you on your toes, and keeps you looking at things a little differently. It allows you to come up with new creative solutions to solve complex problems. So I look at it as a journey of 20 years, not necessarily just single points within that journey. But there are some notable turning points and one notable one would be being on site at Disney, for example, and learning that there's a method called scenography. And at Disney, where you're actually designing for the senses—smell, sight, touch—and so that creates a much more immersive experience.

So now, how do you take that immersive experience to create that kind of engagement and build a brand that advocates now into digital and into technology and into business? So that was one really interesting point, which was literally standing on Main Street and absorbing that moment. And it's one of those moments that you just remember forever. And now it is still carrying through 20 years later.

Have there been any other turning points that made you relook at what you were doing?

On a personal note, that would probably be having kids. I think that having children makes you always stay young. It's always important to be able to look at things in new ways as if through the eyes of a child, say. Having children and bringing that in to my career and being able to balance all of those moments. Other moments are working with students, actually mentoring others. I really see it that by not just sharing of information and knowledge on a daily basis, but also what I can learn from them. That way, it's a much more collaborative, continuing growth process.

You talk a little bit about the work-life balance being successful. How do you balance?

Short answer is you can do it. It is possible. Is it work? Yes. Are there times in life where it may feel that things may be out of balance? Yes, there are some moments. But I think that it's really important to have a few key qualities around perseverance, around being able to handle anything that's thrown at you in a very professional way.

I have three children. And so, in that case, especially when they're younger, I needed a bit more flexibility in my career. And so it was really important for me, at that time in my life, to work with an employer that would give that flexibility, because the times have changed in the corporate world where you don't necessarily have companies that are requiring you to always be onsite at a desk nine-to-five or ten-to-six. Those days have changed. We have technology. We have Skype, Facetime, Google Hangouts, or whatever other technology that really allows you to work from anywhere and globally. It also helps to bring different perspectives, because now you have global teams that are working together in a collaborative way without necessarily being in the same place.

What are the three things you would advise young women on balancing work and life?

I would say, you can do it. It is possible. I think having perseverance, having courage are really important factors to be able to never give up. It's about building strength, and having that life-work balance actually helps to build that. It gives you different perspectives to be able to deal with every obstacle or every setback that may be thrown your way. And with three children, there are a lot of obstacles and setbacks. Some of you may not ever, ever expect what comes at you. And so it's important, too, to be able to be fluid and be able to handle what life throws at you.

You do some much differentiated work on human-centered design and take it to organizations to build more efficiency, to build better processes. Tell us a little bit about what differentiates your team and your role as a leader, especially as a woman leader, which really helps you as a differentiator of your team.

I would say that it's about creative problem-solving and being able to apply creativity in a way to complex business problems as well as to technology. And that is, at HCL, we have ideapreneurs. It's built into the DNA of every single hire who comes in, where you have that ability of creatively approaching something to solve a problem, which is very unique and very different than what you will have in other organizations.

There's also a high sense of collaboration where now it's not your idea or my idea, it's now our idea. No matter what vertical you're with, no matter what silo or division that you come from, the teams are able to really cross-functionally work together so you can have an engineer, an architect, a designer, a business strategist, a process designer, all working together in tandem to move from concept to prototype to MVP to actually build and scale products and services for companies.

You are a technical person and you've done some of those roles, and now you're actually solving business problems. So how do you think grounding on the technical front has helped you from a business perspective?

It's important to really understand technology, especially when you are working, not only to be able to talk to engineers and engineering teams, but also to CIOs, CTOs. But if you look at the role of business and technology right now, it's changing. And so those lines are getting very blurrier and they're coming closer together. So it's very often that you go into a meeting and you have a CMO and a CTO or a CIO to look at how we're going to work with the client, depending on what the demand or the situation is, as one is supporting each other and all are working in tandem together. From a human-centered design standpoint, human-centered design is an agile approach to solving problems. We use human-centered design in a way to work with the CMO and the CTO to be able to really come up with the right solution to solve the business problems at hand.

Do you recall any incidents, experiences—positive or negative—that have helped you become a stronger leader today?

There are many moments that have made me become a stronger leader. I think that what makes you a leader are qualities that are going to help you not only to inspire a team, to have a positive impact on the business, but to be a role model as well. And those are the qualities that apply, whether it be for a man or for a woman. Things around, for example, empathy. Empathy is a really important quality for both male and female leaders to have. EQ is just as important as IQ. Perseverance is another one, especially for women, as you may hear remarks, you may hear insults, or their associated stereotypes. And again, it's not just a male and female thing. It could be cultural, could be gender. It's really about diversity. The perseverance is about having the courage and the strength. My mother once told me that words should never hurt you. I know that sounds like a childhood rhyme. However, it is something that I've held to heart as I've gone through life because of the fact that it is about having the courage to make a difference and the courage to lead and the courage to grow.

What has been your inspiration to always look forward to all this, and the goals, and that perseverance, and to reach where you are today?

To always be learning. I think that if you look at life where you're constantly learning and evolving and it's not set in stone that that is where you're continuing to change. Technology changes. Business changes. And if you're trying to solve the same problems that you were five years ago or 10 years ago, you're probably not solving the right ones that are there today.

Is there a role model that you have, a person now or before, that you talk about?

Yeah, several role models in my life. I would say some of them have been professional colleagues, some of them have been former managers. Of course, my mom and my dad. My dad, he was a small business owner. That work ethic of always moving forward is just ingrained in who I am. My mom for telling me to do what you love and the money will follow. It's about passion. You have to be wanting to get up in the morning and go do what you love because you're going to bring that passion to what you do. That's an important part in life because it's not about a job to me. It's more of a calling and being part of something bigger than myself—being part of a greater mission.

You spoke about your dad being a coach. Any learnings from there that you bring back to work?

Yeah. My dad, I would say, there's a couple that he taught me. One was about being assertive. I think that being assertive, also being OK to be imperfect, because your unique abilities and being who you are, and having that strength and courage, is what also makes a difference when it comes to business. Both on a personal level, but then also on a professional level. Because if we all looked and thought the same, the world would probably be a pretty boring place.

What are the three biggest accomplishments of your life that you would like to talk about?

My life's three biggest accomplishments are child one, child 2, and child 3. I think that those have been pivotal moments in my life. And having baby number one and then baby number two over a 10-year period. I actually used to bring the kids with me to work, one two-week-old with me, and I'm on a plane going to help go solve a client's problem. It's like they're part of who you are. You bring them with. Now, not all employers have that kind of philosophy.

Talk a little bit about your passions outside the workplace.

I have several passions outside the workplace. One is spending time with family. I do travel. And since we have a global team all over the world, it's important that I'm out there with them. So, spending quality time with the family. So, when I am home or I am on FaceTime, it's important to take advantage of those moments and make them really mean something. My second one is photography. I love going out and taking photographs. I love spending time in nature. I live in an environment where I can really decompress every day where there is no such thing as the fear of missing out. It is who you're in the moment. You're enjoying life. It helps you to reframe. And so, really, it's important to me to have that balance between nature as well as with the city's urban environment, as well as with corporate America or just corporations globally.

What can organizations do today to increase the number of women in their senior leadership roles?

Having women in senior leadership roles is actually really important for a few reasons. Currently, we have less than 4 percent of the global economy. Less than 4 percent are women at the CEO level. And so, in order to grow and increase that number, it's really important for a few different aspects. One is having diversity initiatives, they are really going to make a difference for the company. These initiatives need to be visible and transparent within the organization that are tied very closely to the strategy, but also with accountability, with management to make sure that those are actually being integrated into the culture, because ultimately it's a culture change, not just a program. Research has shown that if you have a diverse workforce, you actually will have higher engaged employees. You will also have increased revenue of upwards of 17-18 percent annually. So there's actually greater financial gains.

Two is having women visible in leadership roles. That way, they are mentors who are actually helping to drive strategy. It also helps with prospective employees, but also current employees, to see that there isn't a glass ceiling and that they can actually reach their potential.

If you could have a little magic wand, what positive changes would you bring about for more women to take up STEM.

For women to take up a career in STEM, I'd want to reframe around that. It's not STEM. It's STEAM. And I say STEAM for a reason. Because the A is for arts. And it's important that in today's business, in order to solve complex problems, that you are engaging both the right and the left sides of the brain. You need interdisciplinary thinking. An example of that would be da Vinci. Both art and science. So it's not just about the scientific process, but also engaging with the arts, with music, drawing, painting. So you're really working both sides of the brain and building that muscle. So, later in life, you're going to have much more to work with.

What's the best advice that you would like to give forward to the next generation?

Best advice to give to the next generation is to never give up. Keep going. No matter what is coming your way, keep going because you too can make a difference.

For women to be successful, it's extremely important to have a very supportive environment. So, what are the two or three things in your life that really stand out in your mind, that have really supported and continue to support you, and help you be the leader you are today?

From a support standpoint, it's not just you. I think that both in personal life as well as in professional life, it takes a team. So, at home, having a spouse who loves to cook, helps with the dishes, and is also really active in the kids' lives; and having a family that comes together in order to help create a vision, because it's not just your vision. You're actually not only settling, being a role model for your kids, but you're also helping.

Is there any item that you want to talk about that represents a memorable moment or something that you deeply care about?

Actually, some of my kids' favorite things. I have horses here. Our family, we are animal fans. We have lots of animals, 15 chickens, couple goats, a couple horses. But the reason why this is important is because of the imaginative play, I think that today we tend to forget that it's important to create. And so having these moments with the horses, or also with painting. This is my eight-year-old's starry night painting. Also, we have elephants. Elephants are a symbol around the world. And my eight-year-old loves elephants. And to see it play out in ways like this, I carry around notebooks, little design thinking notebooks where I am actually coming up with new ideas to solve things. If you have an environment early in the family where you have an environment to play with flow, it's fun. And it helps to spur creativity and imagination, which is going to set you up much stronger for later in life.

What are your technology predictions for 2030?

Well, I actually think that the way we interact with our computers is going to be very different. The direction right now is mainly voice and touch. So using laptops is probably going to be pretty archaic by then. However, I do see, with climate change and sustainability, that there is a trend to start using technology and design in ways that are going to have a much more positive impact on society and on the world; reducing waste and reducing the footprint that we have on a daily basis. And the way to be able to do that is people and technology coming together to make that happen.

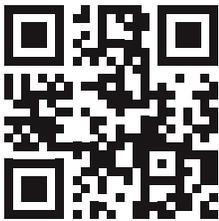
What role do you think human-centered design has in building a sustainable world?

Human-centered design has a significant role in creating a sustainable world. For one, with human-centered design being a natural approach to problem-solving, it allows you to ask the right questions and really solve unmet needs, human needs, in a really unique and creative way. I think we need strategic creative thinking in order to really start to pivot from how we are currently impacting our Earth in order to change it for the better.



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