

SONGS for WOMEN in BUSINESS..... elaine cohen.....December 2005



**He who wishes to sing will always find a song.**

That's the motto that has guided me through my life.

I have sung many songs, many relating to business. I am still singing. I am still writing new songs.

I would like to share with you some of my experiences, perspectives and learnings from 23 years in the corporate world.

**MY SONG:**

I grew up in Manchester England, third child, Jewish family, no connection with Israel. I studied languages and got my first job as a Manager in a multinational Procter and Gamble. I quickly progressed and worked in several locations, including Belgium. I followed my dream by immigrating to Israel at the end of 1990. I build and led a business unit in a small company for 5 years, became independent, and then joined Unilever as VP Human Resources until early this year, when I founded my own business called Potential One. Potential One is another dream, a dream to contribute to creating a better world, through assisting individuals and groups identify and unleash their potential.

So let's talk about potential.

**SONGS of the POTENTIAL for WOMEN in BUSINESS**

Business has changed. It's not the industrial revolution authoritarian business of the last century, where men were businessmen and women were housekeepers or social butterflies. Business today is moving towards the traditionally feminine skills of persuasion, empathy, spirituality and flexibility that once were considered the weak options. People understand there is a need for meaning in the workplace. Men are changing their views on women in business. They are (slowly) realizing that their daughters and granddaughters have what it takes and they should have the opportunity. Diversity. Work life balance. Spirituality in business. Emotional intelligence. Conscious capitalism. Social responsibility. Life coaching. These are the business terms we are hearing these days. Businesses also understand that 50% of the world's population is not represented in senior management levels. This is 50% of the world's consumers. This is half the population that is not adequately shaping the next generation of products and services. Women make over 85% of purchasing decisions. Business MEN are realizing that eliminating half the consumer base is not the best way to do business. Theoretically at least, this should mean there is massive opportunity for women, more than ever before.

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My first taste of business in a man's world was when I started to work with Procter and Gamble in 1982. I often had to take flights from the north of England to London or to Ireland—regularly I was the only woman on the flight. When I took over the management of a distribution fleet, at age 23, a group of 12 male drivers twice my age, I recall one saying to me – “, I go home and my wife is bossing me about, I turn on the TV and Margaret Thatcher is bossing me about now I come to work and even there I have a woman bossing me about!” I told him, it could be worse, at least we don't mind making the coffee.

So there is great potential for women in business. Women are making great inroads – women-run businesses generate 4 trillion \$ in the USA and women are generating businesses at twice the rate of men. In the USA women out earn their husbands in over 22% of households.

But still, this is only the tip of the iceberg, what is blocking all that potential of women to reach top positions?

### HITTING THE GLASS CEILING

I never was really aware of any lack of opportunity for women, perhaps that was because I worked for Procter and Gamble – I really did feel I had every opportunity to grow and I did progress quite rapidly up the management ladder. I was lucky to have some male sponsors who valued my contribution and pushed me forward. Up to a point. But I think this is the case for many women. The problem is when you start to see that glass ceiling in your sights. It's then that many women are blocked.

Why?

Why don't women progress in the same way that men do?

What prevents them breaking through that glass ceiling?

Does gender blindness exist?

Should we try to be like men?

What do we need to do to be true equals in the world of business?

Why do so many women opt out of life in corporations in order to start up their own business?

What are the special challenges that face women?

Eight women CEO's in the entire group of Fortune 500 companies

Not one woman on the global board of Unilever, a fairly enlightened company who promotes women. The speech of the last Chairman of Unilever, Niall Fitzgerald, proclaimed in 2003:

Women have different ways of achieving results. They have an approach to leadership, though not exclusive to women, that is crucial to managing a more diverse workforce. It's about being intuitive. About being good at multi-tasking and sensitive to people's needs and emotions. About being comfortable with ambiguity, adaptable and responsive to change. Having a flexible approach to leadership which can respond to the needs of the individual being led.

In fact, the very qualities that are needed to transform today's organisations into the more flexible, matrix-managed organisations which they must become.

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Only one or two women in all the published lists in Israel of the most influential persons.

Why don't women, when we have so much to contribute, have a more influential place?

Well, it's about men and it's about women.

It's about historical behaviour and it's about potential.

Women have that potential. They can unleash it.

Women need to help each other. MY perception is that this is not as obvious a thing for women. Men seem to have these buddy networks that women have to work hard to create. Women don't feel comfortable asking for help. But we need to help each other. We need to promote other women in business.

But first, we need to promote ourselves, and unleash our own potential. Here are some of my learnings:

### SING your IDENTITY

I guess my first taste of business was growing up – my father was independent and had his own business. What I remember most is my father going out in the evenings to collect money from private customers, and they always avoided him with the excuse that they are in the bath!! How many baths do people take in Manchester? For my two older brothers it was obvious that they would enter the business, typically a male business. They didn't even stay at school to do exams. It was equally as obvious that I would not join the business. The paradigm my family had about girls was that they go to secretarial college, get married to a husband who supports the household, have kids and live near their mom. This is fine, but it wasn't for me. I had a dream to be a business woman. To carry a briefcase, wear a tailored suit, and go do business. That was the picture I carried in my head of my future. I didn't know what that meant but I did know that it would be different. And I think that's the first lesson I want to share.

Being in business is not something you do to earn money. Its part of your identity. It's your song. If you don't have a burning passion to do business, whatever that means to you, then it's probably not for you. If it's a solution to a problem you have, then don't do it. If it's a way to earn money, and get rich, don't do it. If it's in your soul, if it's the song you sing every day, something that burns away in you... you HAVE to do it and you will succeed.

Take ANITA RODDICK. She is one of my true heroines of business. She founded the BODY SHOP. It was the way she chose to make her statement and create change in the world. It was more than just a business, just a way to make money for her. It was her life. This is what she says:

"You've got to be hungry – for your ideas, to make things happen and to see your vision made into reality (p43) . Entrepreneurs want to create a livelihood from an idea that has obsessed them. Not necessarily a business but a livelihood. Money will grease the wheels, but becoming a millionaire is not the aim of the entrepreneur. "(p 50)

(Anita Roddick, Business as Unusual, published by Anita Roddick books, 2005)

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### **SING A DIFFERENT SONG – YOUR SONG**

Loretta Lynn – a country music singer – said “You either have to be first, best or different.” I always feel good about the fact that I am not conventional, that I do things differently, that people know me as different. I have always played a little on the edge, getting to the point of breaking the rules. Doing things that I have fun doing.

A few years back I attended a week workshop in France together with the Management of our Israeli company and the 50 other top managers from all over the Middle East and Africa. The workshop had been run several times before at the same old mansion house in France. Ours was the FIRST WORKSHOP Ever to hold an impromptu disco in the evening. My initiative. My music. People had a great time. No one else thought of doing that.. It was just not conventional.

As a board member of Unilever, I was the only one to use smileys in the Board minutes. Or take a bag of carrots to the meeting on my dieting days. Or change my hair colour every month. Or talk about people when others wanted to talk about numbers.

As a woman, be a woman. Be your total self and shine. You are unique and you are special. Only by being true to that will those around you learn to appreciate your uniqueness. Sing your unique song. People will catch on to the melody.

### **SING THE SONG YOU KNOW BEST**

Do what you do best, and leverage it to get what you want. When you are successful, many doors open. People notice. You can only be truly successful by doing what you are best at doing. So if you are best at cooking, then make cooking your business. If you are best at talking, then make talking your business. If you are best at connecting, then make connecting your business. Find the way to use your natural talents in whatever work that you do. Don't just accept jobs because you think you will progress that way. Only do work which builds on your natural talents.

Our natural talents – our songs – re things that emerge in any job that we do, they are part of our personality. For example, I was offered the position of HR in Unilever. I was not an HR Manager; I had never done this job before. But I know that I learn fast and I am adaptable. I also know that whatever the job details, the basic requirements were strategy, vision, leadership, empowering people and creating positive change. These are things I have always done. If as a child at school, leading the French club for the younger girls, or a student on the student council at University, or in any business role I have ever done. Put me in a corner of any room and I will find a way to lead, to vision, to make a positive change. Actually, I am very comfortable in the virtual environment – for years I created and led an on-line international bridge club which was lively and bubbling with interaction. I am a member of so many online networks my laptop groans every time I log on. In any job I have done, I have started with the big picture and build a dream of where I want to go. One bright young Manager who worked for me at Unilever would say to me, ‘elaine, close your eyes, tell us what you see’, when they wanted to hear what I had in mind for the future. I have now chosen another path. My own company. I see the company in 10 years time. I am working now towards that dream. It's slow, it's frustrating, and it feels urgent ... sometimes I sidestep.. But I know what I want have that picture in my mind guiding me. My company is

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build around my best talents – supporting and helping people unleash their potential.. And around my strongest motivations – making the world a better place. I won't make a lot of money, because that's not what drives me and I am not good at that, but I will make a difference to people. Because that is what I am good at. Hopefully I will make enough money to warrant calling Potential One a business!

Only do whatever you do in business if you are good at it .. And get better. That has been my life experience.

### DARE TO WRITE A NEW SONG

Be bold. I want to tell you about TAMA KIEVES. She was a Harvard lawyer. Top class. She found that she was so caught up in lawyering that she wasn't living her true potential. She took the courageous step of giving up her career to do what she was best at, and what most motivated her – write. And she wrote the most amazing book anyone could write, all about her own personal experience of making a life change, scary, tough, challenging.. She dared to dream and dared to dare.

The book is called “This Time I dance! Trusting the Journey of Creating the Work you Love” and any of you having doubts about what is right for you, read this book!

I know many people who have changed route mid-journey. To do something new, you have to let go of what you have. It's scary. But it's not really changing route if you continue to build on what you are best at, and follow your long range passion. It may manifest itself in different ways, but the same true natural gifts and passions show up time after time.

I have made several changes in my life:

- I left my home town at age 18 and never really went back
- I immigrated to Israel in 1990
- I opened my own business for the first time in 1995
- I have had 5 careers – P&G, as a business leader in a private business, consultant, Unilever, and now Potential One.

Each change was a big scary step.

Each change, some big, some small,... like changing your hair colour ... requires a certain bravery.

And this is the third thing I want to share with you. If you are not prepared to let go and take a risk, don't go into business.

Right now, my family can't manage without what I earn, and I have chosen to risk more money than I think is reasonable to start a business. That was no easy decision. I may succeed, I may not, but at least I won't get to the end of my life thinking I didn't try.

Go for it. Dare. Follow your dream. That's the third lesson.

And about that glass ceiling. It exists primarily in our minds.

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As women, we CAN break through that ceiling if we want to hard enough. And we help each other.

I was coaching a young woman last week. Bright, capable, great personality, BA, MBA, other qualifications. Working in a job she no longer finds fulfilling. She complains..” I am looking but I am not having any luck. I am not getting anywhere trying to find a better job”. When we analyzed what she is actually doing, we realized that she is doing more complaining than actual focused planning to achieve her goal. We came up with a whole list of options for her to reach her goal. And she can. If she takes the responsibility to work at this as though it’s a main passion, with urgency, she will end up exactly where she wants to be.

Another quote from a long-standing hero of mine – Dr Stephen Covey – “Any time you think the problem is out there, that very thought is the problem.” Every time we complain there is a glass ceiling, it’s there. We reinforce it by complaining. We can’t ignore it, but we can take focused action with ourselves to remove it entirely.

Take the example of Abbie Conant, the trombonist from Malcolm Gladwells book called BLINK. She was excluded from several orchestras as lead trombonist because this was typically a male instrument. But she was by far the best player and spent five years in court battling to get her rightful place. Now, we may not all relish that sort of battle, but she didn’t let any glass ceiling stand in HER way. (Blink, Malcolm Gladwell, Penguin, p 245)

So in summary, what I want to say to you is:

- if business is your passion - sing about it !
- if you are prepared to be unique – sing your unique song !
- if you can do what you are best at – sing your best song !
- and if you are prepared to DARE – dare to write a new song !

Then you will succeed at anything you try to do. And you will sing your song. In business.

Oh, and a little luck doesn’t hurt. So good luck !!!



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