

Fostering Growth for Women in IT Leadership

By [Coco Brown, President and COO, Taos](#)

After decades of female employment gains in IT, the number of women in IT is on the decline. There are a variety of reasons for the decrease and those reasons are often debated, but as many industry experts have noted, it is not a positive trend for business.

I also worry about the decline but remain hopeful for the future. Part of my role as a female COO of an IT services organization is to ensure that variety and diversity exist and sustain within our space. If a workplace doesn't reflect the audience we service, or the world our customers live in, our products and services will lack certain insight, perception, intelligence and flair.

Compared to the number of male CIOs, the number of women who make it to an executive IT leadership post is few. It's essential to fostering a strong community that this group of "elite" females stays closely linked and learns from one another. And that's exactly what my Women in IT Leadership Dinner Group strives to do. Held bi-monthly in various locations across the Bay Area, the Women in IT Leadership Dinner offers CIO-level women, and women being positioned for an executive role, a uniquely informal atmosphere to connect with their contemporaries. It's my way – Taos' way – of giving back to, and being a greater part of, the Bay Area IT executive community.

JDS Uniphase CIO Marti Menacho puts it this way: "We all have opportunities to network with peers and, whether we are men or women, at the end of the day we are trying to get the job done and propel our company to success. But, this is specifically an opportunity for women in leadership roles to share experiences and ideas. The atmosphere seems more intimate and conversational. I find that the discussions are less about *what* we do and more about *how* we do. The nuance between the two conversations makes a huge difference in what I walk away with."

I initiated the dinners after meeting with CIOs through my role with Taos and realizing that my fellow female executives, sprinkled throughout the area, needed an uninhibited venue for sharing. I then decided to play an integral role in helping build and strengthen these relationships. We now have a list of over 600 women who are at the top, or nearing the top, throughout the Bay Area. I host these dinners to open up lines of communication, to transfer knowledge, to share common experiences and challenges and to create a sense of community within this compact group.

I don't believe there's anything else like this out there where we can come together in a relaxed environment, exchange ideas and network without having to pay a membership fee and be tied to a pre-set agenda. We get to discuss what's top of mind for everyone in real-time. It can be as spontaneous as "listen to what happened to me today."

Tessera CIO Alayne Gyetvai also appreciates the laid back atmosphere. "Each dinner gives me the opportunity to reconnect with my peers. Our discussions range from what projects we are working on to how our executives interact with us. It is very nice to know I can let down my guard and ask very direct project or vendor questions around what went wrong, how I could have done something better, who knows more about some area I am researching, what went really well or who you can count on, etc. I really look forward to these dinners. Finding a comfortable forum to stay connected to peers and being around really intelligent people is a lot of fun and very meaningful. The CIO position carries such a high level of responsibility, and it's great to be able to network with others of the same title and know you aren't alone!"

In other efforts to assist in ensuring women remain in the IT sector, I also co-host an annual Fulbright Scholarship Dinner with Francine Gordon, PhD, of the F Gordon Group and Chair, Tech Women's Program at SDForum. The SDForum is a Bay Area non-profit organization devoted to informing, educating and connecting entrepreneurs and business professionals in the technology field. The dinner is part of a week-long event that allows students from learning institutions across the U.S. to congregate in the international center of IT leadership and gain access to world-renowned organizations such as Google and eBay. The dinner seats CIO-level women with PhD- and master's-level Fulbright Scholarship female recipients who primarily hail from developing countries. It provides a formable setting where the students can interact, one-on-one, with women in IT leadership positions and learn from their experiences.

It's great exposure for everyone involved. The students receive a first-hand account of what it's like to be in an IT leadership role and gain invaluable knowledge on how to get there. And, in turn, the CIOs enjoy participating because they want to see these ladies succeed and grow.

The next Women in IT Dinner will be held in the San Jose area on Wednesday, March 18th. For more information, please feel free to contact me directly at coco@taos.com.