IEEE WIE International Leadership Conference Report

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Left to Right: Casey Miller, Stephanie Steren-Ruta, Jessica Boles, Mwamba Bowa, Zahra Mahoor, Nicole Pennington

The IEEE Women In Engineering International Leadership Conference was held in San Francisco, CA on May 1-4, 2014. The conference featured four tracks: Inspiration, Empowerment, Enjoyment, and Engagement. All three of us did not stick to one track, but rather instead we each jumped between tracks, attending sessions that interested us or felt the most relevant. Even though we went to some of the same talks, between the three of us, we
attended majority of the seminars offered. The conference taught us a lot, and we are excited to share the insights we gained there.

A couple of hours after we landed, we walked over to the Square headquarters, where the opening reception of the conference was to be held. The reception included a presentation of high school students who completed the 8-month-long coding camp organized by Square.

On the first day, Liz Centoni, the VP/GM at Cisco Systems, gave Nicole’s favorite talk. In her talk titled “Inspiring the Next Generation”, Centoni discussed the bleak numbers of women who hold high power positions and gave frank real-world examples. She noted that many of the women CEOs were awarded that position in need of a new direction, calling them “turnaround companies”. These companies, including Yahoo, GM, Ebay, and HP, were all on their last leg and were desperate for a new direction. Centoni also referred those present to the TED Talk given by Amy Cuddy, which is a great talk about the importance of body language and “faking it until you become it”. Nicole says that she plans on recommending that the Systers group watch the TED Talk together at some point.

Ann Ulrich, Founder of The BOLD Factor, gave one of the first sessions at the conference, which inspired Casey. Ulrich’s talk focused on bringing out the best in yourself and in turn, you can bring out the best in others. Another memorable presentation was lead by the eccentric Kimberly Wiefling, the Founder and President of Wiefling Consulting. Her session, which was titled “Leading from Any Chair: Inspiration for People Who Must Make the Impossible Happen”, was about creating dreams and driving forward to achieve them.

On the second day, Nora Denzel, the former Vice President of Intuit, gave the keynote presentation titled “Career Myth Busters”. She summarized her own experiences in five points. Firstly, she states that a career path is not a ladder; instead it is more of an obstacle course. Secondly, avoiding failure is wrong. Failure is a part of success. Denzel’s third point discusses the importance of building your network in an efficient way. Instead of the commonly heard advice of “it’s who you know” or “it’s what you know”, it is really more about who knows what you know. This idea is continued in her next point: the necessity of telling people what you do at work and thus finding sponsors. Lastly, she talks about the impact of having a good boss.
On that same day, Zahra also attended a session by Jo Lifeld (Author/Coach Success Reboot) about how and why our fear of failure is slowing our success. Lifeld showed those present some practical techniques that can be used to develop confidence and be an effective leader in a team.

Other talks, such as the ones about etiquette and mentorship, also provided valuable insight. The etiquette talk brought up cultural differences in etiquette and reminded the audience that etiquette was about making others comfortable. The mentorship talk brought up the concept of sponsorship, of which many of us had never heard. The speaker stressed the difference between mentors and sponsors and explained why both were important: mentors give you advice and insight, and sponsors strive to give you opportunities for advancement in your career. Sponsors are important because the door to advancement sometimes depends more on the recommendation of someone in power and less on how hard you work. This can certainly be the case in scenarios where your hard work is only noticed by your immediate supervisor and not necessarily by the board making the hiring decisions. In this situation, having a sponsor would make a difference. Also, the speaker included a list of questions that both a mentee/mentor and sponsor/protégé pair should bring to a meeting, which Nicole says she plans to share with our Systers group here at UT.

The most unique session in this conference was the one given by Ray Arata, the Co-founder of GenderAllies, titled “Engaging Men to Advance Women in Leadership”. Casey and Zahra agree that he should be invited to UTK to have a talk on this matter. “After hearing his talk,” Zahra says, “I think promoting women in leadership without changing men’s perspective is impossible.”

Zahra states that the sessions she attended discussing balancing work and life for women were very useful as a professional, young married woman. In the one by Phyllis Stewart, the senior director at Stanford, the audience learnt that one could enjoy their life and at the same time be successful in their career. In another workshop by Amy Chang, one learnt some helpful tools to enjoy personal, professional, and family life.

In addition to what she learned in the conference sessions, Nicole states that she also learned a good deal about the importance of communication. “After all,” Nicole said, “I was
sharing a hotel room with two friends that I had not spent much time with outside of Systers’ activities.” All three of us feel that this conference trip gave us valuable insights that will enhance both our professional and personal relationships. We are very grateful and wish to thank Dr. Michael Berry and CISML for this opportunity.