Accenture Cybersecurity Forum Women's Council

Supporting Women in Responsible Risk Taking

On November 11, the Accenture Cybersecurity Forum (ACF) Women's Council met for a virtual roundtable to discuss how women can be supported to take responsible risks to further propel their careers in cybersecurity. The meeting included women cybersecurity leaders and board members, male allies and several emerging leaders. The discussion kicked off sharing key themes from the ACF Women's Council recently released research, **"Jumping the hurdles: Moving women into cybersecurity's top spots."**

To further lay the path for responsible risk taking, the meeting featured a woman executive and her male ally's story highlighting how current leadership can empower successful risk taking and sponsor future leaders to further advance women into cybersecurity leadership positions.

The following is a high-level summary of the rich, candid conversation that followed.

- **Fears and doubts**—Women often feel imposter syndrome or diminish their capabilities making it difficult to navigate and grow their careers. Women can avoid self-qualifying themselves out of a promotion when they don't "tick all the boxes on a role description." They are also encouraged to specifically ask for consideration for the role and for what they need to be successful in the position. "Women who deserve it don't ask and men who don't deserve it are asking for it," said a Council member. "Ask!"

- **Obligations and choices**—Women aren't given the same boundaries as men to meet obligations outside the workplace. There's a feeling that women don't have permission to unplug from the workplace. To overcome this challenge, women need to be transparent. For example, if family obligations get in the way of a promotion or transfer or, the timing is not right, express why, and "articulate that a 'no' now doesn't mean a 'no' always," said a Council member.

- **Culture and practice**—As one Council member said, "Until our senior men own this problem and address it, it will just continue. I feel like I have to take a stand and stop preaching to the choir." Organizations that enable and encourage men to speak out in support of women in cybersecurity are on the right path to support inclusion and diversity

as part of the culture. A shift in tone and behaviors from the top is critical for any organization to help women in cybersecurity rise to senior levels.

Lessons learned

Council members also shared the lessons they have learned throughout their successful careers. Among the best practices:

- "Recruit allies, including men, who you can talk to, support your career goals and provide constructive feedback." One Council member found her strongest ally was her husband, who encouraged her to take on the risk of a promotion that required more travel.

- "Don't limit your vision about what's possible," said a Council member. "A shift in my mindset allowed me to take additional risks."

- "Honestly reflect about what risks you're willing to take," said a Council member. "Ask yourself what you are really looking for in your career."

- Challenge your assumptions about your career progression. Check to see if doors really are closed to you. Ask for what you are really looking for. One Council member said, "I used to assume I wouldn't get any assistance but, while I was nervous asking, I actually benefitted from male advocacy once I asked." Be willing to ask for and define what a new role or responsibility might look like for you.

- "Find the courage to talk to your CEO." A Council member seized the opportunity with her CEO to state her interest in taking on the CISO role. The conversation was successful, and she knew the risk in the moment. The Council member admitted, "I knew I was either going to make my career or break it."

- Invest in yourself, such as taking leadership training or calling upon an executive coach.

- "Pay attention to the conversation going on in your head," said a Council member. "Doubt is a natural reaction. If you can take a step back to look at your situation, you'll see that emotional concerns are part of a natural process. They mean you're growing."

- A Council member recommended, "Don't forget 'yet' when questioned about a lack of experience. It should be OK to say, 'I'm not there yet, but here's how I'll grow into the job.'" After all, men are largely comfortable applying for a new role without all the requisite skills.

- Recognize the invisible risks of presenting your authentic self. Council members said they still struggle with how to present themselves considering implicit gender bias. Can a woman in a technical role be too feminine? What impact does physical appearance, presence or sexual orientation have on perceived leadership potential? The best way to address these challenges in the workplace is to engage in honest conversations about perceptions and their impact on a woman's career. *The Myth of the Nice Girl* by Fran Hauser was recommended reading on the topic.

- Council members also mentioned two other books they found useful: *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success,* by Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D, and *"Brag! How to Toot Your Own Horn Without Blowing It,"* by Peggy Klaus.

In conclusion, Council members heard that advancing to the top spot in cybersecurity as a female executive can be a challenge. Enterprises need to take comprehensive actions in key areas to help organizations retain and promote women into more senior cybersecurity leadership positions to include responsible risk taking. And, just as athletes condition and train, women cybersecurity executives who take responsible risks are more likely to build the capabilities, agility and confidence to reach their career goals.

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