WOMEN IN SUSTAINABILITY LEADERSHIP AWARDS

How These 10 Women Are Making the World a Greener, Safer, Better Place

By Laura Rote
municipalities, board rooms, construction sites, universities, and all over the world, these 10 women have been making waves that demand recognition. From a young age, this year’s winners knew they wanted to achieve greatness, and they dove into their careers headfirst, whether it was a male-dominated industry that welcomed them or not.

When, sometimes, no drive toward sustainability existed at their workplaces, these women spoke up, suggesting green initiatives and making the case for why a more sustainable process might make for better business. When dangerous chemicals were all too common in consumer products or the rapid rise in greenhouse gases were not taken seriously, these women took notice and spoke up, even when told not to. This year, as part of gb&d’s sixth annual Women in Sustainability Leadership Awards (WSLA), we recognize these inspiring leaders for their continued accomplishments as they encourage us all to do better.

Laura Heidenreich is the CEO of Neutral Posture, a company she believes you can have it all. She and her mother took their ergonomic seating company Neutral Posture from a startup to a publicly held company in nine years. In 1997 Neutral Posture became the first and only certified women-owned business to be traded on the NASDAQ before a family buyout of public shareholders in 2001 made Neutral Posture a privately held company again.

Today Boenigk continues to make smart business decisions and push the industry forward as part of her work with BIFMA, the not-for-profit trade association for business and institutional furniture manufacturers, where she serves on the board to lead, advocate, and develop standards for the industry. Boenigk was the first woman president of the organization. Neutral Posture has been BIFMA LEVEL certified since 2013.

Boenigk had to overcome her share of misconceptions about females in furniture manufacturing to get to where she is today, though, even facing discrimination at banks early on. “Overcoming the stigma that females were not cut out to work together in my industry and even within my hometown was a challenge,” she says. In 1996 she and her mother bought their building—only after the bankers redrew the papers without the business owner in sight—she and her mother bought their building—only after the bankers redrew the papers without the business owner in sight. “There wasn’t a lot of us when my mother and I started our business in 1989. When I first joined the BIFMA board, it was amazing that the members of the board who also had competitors would sit around the table working for the good of the industry, but I was the only female at the table. Working with competitors from DC and lobby for the industry, partnering to create higher standards, and testifying before Congress on the importance of small business opportunities and opportunities for women in business helped to validate Boenigk to others. “Not only do I strive to make the business world more female-friendly, but small business friendly.”

Eden Brukman When Eden Brukman was 8 years old, she told her parents she wanted to be an architect. Her love of the built environment quickly evolved into green building and, as an adult, she’s spent more than two decades fostering socially and environmentally responsible strategies in design and construction. Given the fast-paced and highly competitive setting in architecture firms, she dedicated her free time to giving herself an edge over her counterparts, and she learned what was a valuable lesson—she had to prioritize her interests and channel her energy to achieve marked results. Starting out, fellow advocates for sustainability were few, but precious. Brukman listened to them and followed in their footsteps to become a mentor to others, too. Among her many accolades, Brukman coauthored the Living Building Challenge and the Health Product Declaration, both of which went on to have tremendous impact, to say the least. The HPD quickly became one of the most widely recognized tools in the industry.

Brukman currently serves as the Senior Green Building Coordinator for the San Francisco Department of the Environment, researching opportunities for integrated policies and advising municipal project teams working on more than seven million square feet of new construction or renovations. She has mentored recent college graduates and young professionals. She also worked as an architect-in-residence and leader at the Arts and Architecture for Elementary Schools, one of the most far-reaching mentoring and education efforts she has helped create. In 1997 Neutral Posture became the first and only certified women-owned business to be traded on the NASDAQ before a family buyout of public shareholders in 2001 made Neutral Posture a privately held company again.

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SUSAN KLOSTERHAUS

Small projects can be a catalyst for global change; just ask Susan Klosterhaus. She conducted research on flame retardant chemicals in consumer products at the San Francisco Estuary Institute where she worked for the past seven years to lead a team of scientists focused on developing standards that help manufacturers ensure their products are as safe and circular as possible. Along the way, Klosterhaus has realized that for product designers and manufacturers, making a small change in the human and environmental safety of a product can feel like a bold act, but once they realize the benefits, those small changes frequently lead to even bigger improvements.

“Afflicting real change requires bold actions, especially actions that go against the boundaries. I learned quickly that getting those bold actions often comes with being asked to change and to adapt.”

Klosterhaus’s work at Cradle to Cradle Professional Association demands that she and her team continue to push those boundaries. “We are developing one of the world’s most advanced, science-based standards for manufacturers seeking to improve the circularity and circular potential of their products. We have an obligation to be collaborating and to keep pushing, publicly, for stronger and better technical solutions that help protect human health and the environment.”

ARATHI GOWDA

Arathi Gowda has jumped out of a plane, but the scariest thing she says she’s ever done is speak about sustainability for audiences who are hard-wired to focus on the bottom line. Gowda (joined Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) in 2004, all while she spearheaded and leads the firm’s weekly High-Performance Design (HPD) meetings, among other sustainability-focused initiatives.

“When she is not auditing SOM’s designed energy savings portfolio, accounting for nearly 400 million square feet of projects to date, Gowda can be found discussing sustainability best practices, software training, high-performance design techniques, and methods to engage and persuade clients to improve their sustainable aspirations. She also helped develop a web-based HIP portal which aggregates and shares environmental design knowledge that is now used by SOM offices around the world.

Gowda has served as a longstanding member of SOM’s Women’s Initiative, an employee-led group aimed at addressing workplace gender disparities. She describes herself as a “testbook introvert,” but cites the struggle of seeking out mentorship—and of course the advice she received—as a formative experience in finding her own voice. integral in this was her involvement in the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, where she found great mentorship. Today’s passing that on. “I have always believed empowering should know no age, and that those others or younger can be mentors and mentees both,” she says. This model has served me well, and I’ve been heartened by those mentorship of women, by women, has worlds supported my personal development, especially the ones I have the honor to work with.”

Gowda has been involved with the first Design-Build program in the Philippines, where she and colleagues completed a passive community center building for victims of the tropical storm that caused catastrophic damage in 2011. Gowda was also a previous contractor at the Illinois Institute of Technology and currently works within the real estate program at Roswell University.

MAUREEN EISBRENNER

Maureen Eisbrenner is no stranger to taking risks and finding new, creative solutions, having founded three companies in her career. As the current founder and CEO of software company arinco, her work has helped to disrupt the world of green bonds in a disrupting market that reduces carbon emissions and improves environmental quality with a myriad of solutions. The company’s efforts are already making visible change in the UK, and that work continues globally.

Eisbrenner comes from a family of entrepreneurs and self-starters, so she’s seen up close and from a young age just how hard work gets done. While her career began at an entry level job in finance, experience with phenomenal mentors helped guide her on how to operate in even often male-dominated fields with integrity and respect. “Mentorship is an invaluable gift to receive, especially when pursuing any career or business because it facilitates education in a real-world setting. Having someone take you under their wing and show you the ins and outs of a business or career can give you experience and confidence you wouldn’t otherwise have, she says.

Eisbrenner says it takes a lot of hard work and courage to become a disruptive tech company CEO, but she’s continually overcoming the obstacles that are involved in being an innovative leader. “The biggest limit “Working in predominantly male industries my entire career has had its challenges, but I believe these obstacles fueled my drive to work hard and exceed expectations. I find it exciting to be part of a decade where there continues to be an exciting time to be a woman in STEM. It inspires me to see the number of truly brilliant women dedicated to sustainability, especially the ones I have the honor to work with on my team. I am really looking forward to seeing even more talented female leaders in the future.”

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