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“Have Confidence and Own It”: Theresa Howard Shares Insight During Gender Wage Gap Panel

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[Theresa Howard](#), Martin Selig Real Estate's senior leasing agent, recently shared her thoughts at the Seattle World Trade Center's (WTC) [Can We Talk? The Good, Bad, and Ugly Truth About the Gender Pay Gap](#) panel.

Theresa and Colleen Fukul-Sketchley, senior director of diversity and inclusion at [F5 Networks](#), discussed their experiences as women in the workplace and shared wisdom for up-and-coming female leaders.

“The language for the 1963 Equal Pay Act was first crafted by a woman in 1942,” said Vanna Novak, the panel moderator. “And here we are, 70 years later. Why is this still an issue? If we progress in this area at the rate we're currently progressing, it will take us anywhere from 70 to 100 years to experience equal pay.”

Novak opened the panel by sharing the [top three reasons the gender gap still exists](#):

1. **The “motherhood penalty.”** Many employers have a history of seeing women who have children as less competent and committed than other employees. This gap creates a loss of about \$500,000 of income by the time women reach age 60.
2. **Salary negotiation.** Women often face a double-edged sword when negotiating a salary or asking for a raise: Some women do not get the money they deserve simply because they do not ask, while employers often label women who do ask as aggressive, controlling, or difficult to work with.
3. **Gender stereotyping in the workplace.** [Studies show](#) that employers, whether knowingly or unknowingly, tend to undervalue their female employees.

The WTC included this event in their “Can We Talk?” series to spark conversations about these issues and ask leading ladies in Seattle about gender bias challenges they have faced and overcome.

Theresa has been with MSRE for over 30 years. She joined the Selig team as a receptionist in 1982 and became a leasing agent a few years later after asking Martin if she could take on the position and he told her to “go for it.” These days, Theresa is MSRE’s senior leasing agent and supervises the leasing team. During the panel, she shared her experience working and thriving in the male-dominated world of commercial real estate.

“Women are sensitive, they listen well, and they are less competitive,” Theresa said. “I genuinely think this makes us better at business, whether we’re receptionist or CEO.”

Theresa, who says 99 percent of the people she works with are male, many of whom make seven-figure salaries, shared insight into communicating and negotiating with these individuals. Whether negotiating a salary for a new job or a multimillion dollar commercial real estate lease, her strategy for negotiation is always to do her research and prepare to the best of her ability.

“Every woman needs to do a lot of research and be right in everything she’s asking for,” she said. “When I negotiate a lease, I prepare. I look at the discussion from 360 degrees and try to foresee any objections.”

She says the same goes for women who are negotiating salaries in the workplace: Women need to know their professional skills, know the market value of those skills, and advocate for themselves.

Colleen echoed her sentiments on closing the wage gap through better salary negotiation and shared an anecdote from a conversation she had during a hiring process.

“The phone call started with, ‘Colleen, we want you. How much will it take to get you?’” she said. “You need to be prepared to answer that. Do your research and have a strong answer.”

Both women also spoke about the importance of matching your communication style with the people with whom you work with and closed with a few tips for women to bring back to their respective workplaces.

Colleen shared the importance of being authentic in the workplace and how her current role allows her to be herself and bring her values to work every day. Theresa closed with simple words of encouragement to women everywhere.

“Have confidence in the fact that you’re great. Women are great,” she said. “Have confidence in your abilities and own it.”

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