

Nurturing Women in Leadership

A Hong Kong mentorship program aims to grow the number of women in decision-making positions

Photo taken October 2019, courtesy of The Women's Foundation

As the COVID-19 pandemic has left a disproportionate number of women out of a job or with the overwhelming share of caretaking responsibilities, leaders are seeing the rising importance of fostering gender equity in the workplace.

The Women's Foundation, a Hong Kong organization sponsored by Steelcase, is laser-focused on improving opportunities for women with three main goals: challenge gender stereotypes, empower women in poverty and increase the number of women in decision-making and leadership positions through a mentorship program.

Jennifer Wang, a Steelcase Business Service Manager based in Hong Kong, is one of 50 female mentees in the program. She meets one-on-one with a mentor to work through professional and personal goals as well as participates in leadership development skills workshops. The cohort of mentors and mentees also meets together regularly to discuss progress and challenges, providing support for each other as they navigate a similar journey. 360 spoke to Jennifer about her experience and the impact The Women's Foundation has had on her.

360: What inspired you to get involved with The Women's Foundation?

Jennifer Wang: I'm quite an introvert and frequently get feedback that I'm too quiet, but I also have a passion to continue evolving professionally. A colleague encouraged me to join the program, but I felt it was too much out of my comfort zone. After living through the COVID-19 pandemic for a year, I told myself if I don't challenge myself now, when would I? And I'm glad I did. It's much, much more than I imagined it would be. There's a quote I like, "It's a marathon, not a sprint." It's impossible for an introvert to run a marathon by herself. Now, I'm in a group of women that supports each other, and I feel so energized.

360: What do you hope to learn through this experience?

JW: I want to improve my presentation and negotiation skills, build my professional network and, finally, find a very clear direction for my career in the next three to five years. My long-term goal is to one day become a mentor so I can inspire more women, especially introverted women like me.

360: How has your involvement in the program helped you so far in your career?

JW: The biggest value comes from the emotionally safe environment this cohort provides. It's given me the courage to keep practising the skills I've learned in every workshop. We share feedback, lessons learned, our struggles and we support each other without any judgement. It has become a positive feedback loop to not only develop new skills but also empowers me in my everyday work.

360: Why is The Women's Foundation's goal to grow the number of women in leadership positions in today's workplace so important?

JW: Women bring unique emotional understanding and open communication to an organization. A pure male-led team can function much like a SWAT team – it's structured, on task and all about go, go, go. When we bring in a female leader, the team's dynamic changes by introducing a new layer at the emotional and social level that makes it more resilient – because that's what women are. We are resilient and agile – two qualities that are especially important in the highly unpredictable environment we're living in today.

360: Another aim of the organization is to challenge gender stereotypes. How do you think each of us can do that?

JW: Be more vocal. Women specifically should feel more confident to speak up and voice their opinions so we can be heard equally. Don't be shy and don't assume that your voice will not be heard.

360: How has being involved with the program connected you more closely to a sense of purpose in your own work at Steelcase?

JW: Before doing the program, I tended to work on challenges or tackle difficult tasks on my own. I also said "No" to things that seemed too difficult. Today I have the courage to take on more challenging tasks because I know there's someone to support me – sometimes that's half the battle of getting started.

To learn more about The Women's Foundation, visit twfkh.org.

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