



## Changing tides

**BlueShore Financial Credit Union member and WNORTH CEO Heather Odendaal is expanding her global online networking platform in order to guide women along the executive path.**

by Alexandra Gill

It wasn't your typical break-away session. On a chilly night this past April, in the ski-resort municipality of Whistler, BC, about 70 attendees from the three-day WNORTH Conference for mid-career women on the senior-executive-leadership track convened at the outdoor Scandine Spa.

They splashed through waterfalls, floated under the stars and networked in wood-burning saunas. Keynote speaker Halla Tomasdottir, an entrepreneur and former presidential candidate in Iceland who co-founded the investment firm Audur Capital—guided by feminine values—held court in a steaming hot tub, doling out advice on everything from how to generate high-level support for equal-pay legislation to the difference between raising sons and daughters. Then she challenged the women to a cold-water plunge. “Let’s pretend we’re men and see how long we last,” Tomasdottir joked.

Heather Odendaal, a member of **BlueShore Financial Credit Union** (42,000 member, \$5.6 billion in assets) is the dynamo CEO who founded the WNORTH conference, now in its fifth year. Although she wasn't there for that magical spa night, which captured much of what makes the intimate, mountainside retreat so unique, Odendaal's prudent time-management speaks to important lessons, lately learned, that are helping her lead the company through a period of rapid international and technological growth. “I've had to prioritize,” says Odendaal, who is now launching six WNORTH city chapters in Vancouver, San Francisco, Seattle, Toronto, New York City

and London. She is also gearing up for the second membership drive of The Members' Club at WNORTH, a global online networking platform, in addition to planning the next conference—all while pregnant with her second child. “It's been really hard to let go of those preconceived notions that I have to participate in every conference call and be at every event.”

It is these types of skills: achieving work-life balance, running a board meeting,

that they are qualified to take those positions.”

Odendaal points to the example of a friend who works for a company headed by a female CEO. “The CEO is allowed to work from home once a week but no one else is. How can we expect more women in leadership if we don't change corporate structures and help them navigate that delicate time in mid-career when they're starting families and setting their long-term priorities?”

“HOW CAN WE EXPECT MORE WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IF WE DON'T CHANGE CORPORATE STRUCTURES AND HELP THEM NAVIGATE THAT DELICATE TIME IN MID-CAREER WHEN THEY'RE STARTING FAMILIES AND SETTING THEIR LONG-TERM PRIORITIES?”

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getting onto a board of directors, negotiating a better salary, which women in mid-career are often not taught. “There is a huge gap between middle or senior management and the executive level,” says Odendaal, noting the headlines about the lack of Fortune 500 companies led by women, which is down to 24 from 32 in 2017. “The big rebuttal is usually that there aren't enough women in the pipeline to fill those positions. I believe that we need to support more women all the way through so

Odendaal was only 30—and expecting her first child—when she launched the first WNORTH conference in 2015. Whistler might not have seemed the obvious choice but having lived there since graduating from the University of British Columbia and working in several capacities as an “accidental entrepreneur,” she felt the need and saw the potential. “I couldn't find a conference that addressed women in my generation, so I created my own,” says Odendaal, who was then

running an events-management firm, Bluebird Strategy, while also working as a territory manager for Constellation Brands, a Fortune 500 wine-and-spirits company.

More than just offering a mountain getaway, the remote location and boutique nature of the conference (capacity is limited to 170) helps break down barriers and promote meaningful connections, says Odendaal. “I really try to attract speakers who don't just fly in and out but who participate as much as possible. It's one thing to hear someone on stage but it's a whole other thing to talk to them over dinner or in a hot tub.”

Although the in-person component is important for the conference and new city chapters, working so far off the big-city corporate track also helped Odendaal see the opportunities for building a global community connected by technology. Within the Members' Club, for instance, she is now launching a series of leadership mastermind webinars. This will connect groups of 10 to 12 women from multiple industries in discussions about the common challenges they face at work but may not be comfortable discussing with their peers. “My new global director is based in London, UK. She'll work on stuff while I'm sleeping and then, when I'm awake, I'll pick up where she left off. It's been really interesting to build and grow a team this way. There will be even more challenges when I take maternity leave but technology is changing the way we work and offers even more flexibility for women.

“Believe me,” she adds laughing, “I've been in many conference calls while breastfeeding. It can be done. Corporate Canada is coming around but it still has a long way to go.” ■