


# WOMEN OF INFLUENCE

MAGAZINE

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## THE Change Makers

Three C-Suite women reveal  
their process for driving  
change from the top.



**Tracie Crook,**  
Chief Operating Officer,  
McCarthy Tétrault



**Janet Kennedy,**  
President, Microsoft Canada



**Colleen Albiston,**  
Chief Marketing Officer, Deloitte

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# From C-Suite to SOCIAL IMPACT

Hong Kong is an epicenter of business advancement, yet corporate gender diversity is still in its infancy. Su-Mei Thompson is guiding its growth. BY HAILEY EISEN



Su-Mei Thompson,  
CEO, The Women's  
Foundation, Hong Kong.

While women make up half of Hong Kong's labour force, only two per cent of CEOs and eleven per cent of board positions of companies listed on the Hang Seng Index are occupied by females. There is, however, a small but powerful community within the country talking about women's advancement. At the centre is Su-Mei Thompson.

CEO of The Women's Foundation (TWF)—an NGO dedicated to improving the lives of females in Hong Kong through research, community programs, education, and advocacy—Thompson is passionate about tackling issues of inequality in boardrooms and communities. Her commitment extends beyond TWF to the 30% Club, a group she founded to advocate for increased female

representation on corporate boards, and The Hong Kong Equal Opportunities Commission, of which she is an active member.

“I always knew I’d end up doing something with social impact,” says Thompson, “From an early age I remember saying I’d like to run an airport or a hospital.” While she hasn’t done either of those yet, **the 47-year-old has had an impressive career, including senior management positions with The Walt Disney Company, the *Financial Times*, and Christie’s.**

Thompson’s success can be attributed to her fearlessness for trying new things and her insatiable love of learning. At 12 she left her native Malaysia for boarding school in the UK. “I was homesick for about five minutes and then I got drawn into the learning, cultural, sporting, and social opportunities available at Cheltenham.”

While taking her MBA at IMD in Switzerland (where she was the first woman to graduate on the Dean’s List), Thompson

was asked to help write a case study on Pearson PLC’s acquisition of NCS, a large U.S.-based education testing company. Despite the extensive time and work commitment, Thompson leapt at the opportunity. Through interviewing a number of senior executives she had the chance to speak with Sir David Bell, director of people at Pearson and chairman of the *Financial Times*. “At the end of a wonderful discussion I was thanking him for letting me interview him, and he said: ‘I was thinking it should be us interviewing you—are you looking for a job?’” She was offered the position of managing director of the *Financial Times* in Asia. “You never can tell where opportunities will lead. But if you’re willing to step outside your comfort zone and work hard, in general I think good things will follow.”

In 2009, when Thompson accepted the role as CEO of TWF, she had just taken a year “off” to spend time with her two daughters, then 18 months and four years. **“That was the year I realized it wasn’t possible to have it all—all at the same time,” she says.** “When I decided to join Christie’s my daughter was not even two and I was pregnant with my second. I had a massive job in which I was responsible for 13 regional offices and the writing and executing of business plans across Asia, among other things. I ended up feeling like I wasn’t doing anything well—I couldn’t spend enough time in all the local markets I was responsible for, and I wasn’t being a very good mother.” Thompson made the decision to step off the corporate ladder for a year, something working women in Hong Kong don’t often get to do, given that they are only entitled to ten weeks of statutory maternity leave.

“Hong Kong has a ferocious work ethic where people who

choose to work part-time are regarded as slackers, and working parents are expected to pass the childcare burden on to domestic helpers so they can focus 100 per cent on work,” Thompson says. So, despite the fact that her year off involved serving on a number of boards and helping to launch the charitable organization Intelligence Squared Asia, she still got many “blank stares” at social functions when people asked, “What do you do?”

**Taking time off helped Thompson understand why many accomplished women who take a career break feel unnerved by the experience, and require confidence, courage, and determination to return.** It’s with this knowledge that she now dedicates her energy at TWF to ensure barriers to women achieving their potential are being discussed and addressed. “I want people to know that it is possible to take a break and then get back into the game in a real way.”

Moving from the corporate world to an NGO wasn’t as

dramatic a shift as expected.

Thompson found that the skills she’d garnered over the years—including partnership building, negotiation, marketing, and networking—were exactly what she required to be successful at the helm of TWF. She was also passionate about the cause; Su-Mei wasn’t a stranger to gender bias in the corporate world.

**It was in her role at Christie’s that she experienced first-hand the inequality female senior executives often face.** Despite how hard she was working, she got a visit from the global head of HR asking her to consider being more of a “warm leader”—continuing to focus on excelling at the process, but also forming relationships and resonating with people in an emotional way. The HR executive suggested that Thompson buy note cards and send

personalized letters to those employees she needed to align with.

“While that was great advice and people actually responded well to the notes,” Thompson recalls, “I realized what a double standard there actually was. No one would ask a male executive to send personalized notes! As a woman, people are looking for signals that you can be a good leader while still being warm, humble, and nurturing—basically you have to exaggerate these qualities if you want to be liked.” While she’s hoping all of this will change eventually, she’s willing to work with what she’s got to ensure TWF’s success. ☺

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**The Women of Influence Senior Executive Dinner Series is heading to Hong Kong June 25th. For information about our Dinner Series, visit [womenofinfluence.ca/global-executives](http://womenofinfluence.ca/global-executives)**