

US Glass[®] METAL & GLAZING

THE MAGAZINE OF RECORD FOR ARCHITECTURAL GLASS INDUSTRY LEADERS

Volume 57
Issue 12
December
2022



Women in the Industry

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A
KM&R
PUBLICATION

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Reflections from



The Glass Industry's Women Leaders Talk Leadership Styles, Mentorship and More

by Jordan Scott

Being a woman in the glass industry isn't as lonely as it used to be. In 2021, women made up 23.7% of the glass and glass product manufacturing workforce and 11% of the construction workforce, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Whereas in 1994, women made up only 7.7% of the entirety of BLS's operators, fabricators and laborers category.

While the number of women in the industry continues to grow, women still face hurdles, especially when attaining leadership positions. According to a 2020 survey from Thomas and the Women in Manufacturing Association, only one in four overall manufacturing leaders are women.

Though women leaders are underrepresented in the glass industry, most don't take on a women-versus-men mentality. Many received mentorship from men in the industry throughout their careers. While most women interviewed for this article were hesitant to ascribe leadership qualities to either men or women, there are commonly held beliefs about the characteristic differences between men and women in

the Glass Ceiling

◀ Alex Oanono, President, Blue Star Glass

Alex Oanono says her family got into the glass business by mistake. Her father invested in a company making insulating glass units with Venetian blinds, and it “snowballed into a whole operation.” Oanono wanted to work in fashion and planned to work for the family business on the construction side only until she found a job in fashion. However, she eventually moved to the glass side full-time, and the company started to grow.

“I thought my brother would do that, and I’ll do my own thing. I had no idea I’d love it so much. They say once you get into the glass business, you can’t get out. I really liked it and, in many ways, it’s a very creative business,” she says. “I love seeing a project through from start to finish. In that way the job fit in with what I wanted to do, but I liked the job in unexpected ways as well.”

One aspect of her job that she enjoys is implementing more automation. For many in the industry, she says, automation used to be a fantasy. Now, it’s a necessity. Implementing automation to save on labor costs while keeping quality high has been exciting for her and her family.

Oanono says her biggest achievement is learning the technical details of how glass is produced, especially as a young woman. She has worked on the floor and knows

how to run the tempering furnace.

“I’m a better operator and salesperson because I know the level of detail and how much work it takes to get something done,” she says. “I understand and respect how much coordination we need and the difficulty a job will pose. I’m proud that I’m never afraid to roll up my sleeves, go to work and come home a mess.”

Oanono says she’s sometimes had trouble with being taken seriously as a woman and felt she had to work that much harder to prove herself. Especially as a young woman, Oanono says people sometimes confuse age with competence. She says she never had the benefit of not finding the answers to questions.

“I didn’t have time to waste not asking the questions to get to the answers I needed. You can’t be ashamed to ask,” she says.

Her advice to young women entering the glass industry is not to be afraid.

“Go in head first. I’m a spiritual person, and I’ve never feared the unknown with change. When we opened the business in Texas, I picked up my life and moved, but I didn’t fear the outcome. I went into it with a positive mindset,” she says. “When you think the best, the best happens.”

the workplace. For instance, women are more nurturing and more willing to listen while men are more direct and confident. Despite these perceived differences, women leaders in the glass industry agree that diversity is vital for a business’s success.

Speaking from Experience

Being a woman in a male-dominated field can come with challenges. Many women leaders in the glass and glazing industries have had a similar experience: discussing something with a male colleague or customer who didn’t believe what they were being told until another man backed it up. Another common experience is saying something in a meeting that isn’t taken seriously until a male colleague repeats it. While most women leaders say they haven’t experienced significant prejudice due to their sex, they know women in the industry who have.

Lynda Nishimoto Lax, president of Pulp Studio in Garde-

na, Calif., says that the glass industry has sometimes felt like a boys’ club since men run most mid- to large-sized companies. This created challenges for her early in her career, but she did her best to move forward.

“I don’t think gender should make a difference, although it does,” she says.

The disparities between men’s and women’s experiences aren’t always blatant. Women are less likely to negotiate for higher salaries or pursue promotions due to the perception that they aren’t qualified enough.

One commonly cited statistic claims that men will apply for a job if they meet 60% of the qualifications, while women will only do so if they meet 100% of the qualifications.

“Women often are raised to be perfectionists. I see it all the time,” says Kris Vockler CEO of ICD High Performance Coatings based in Ridgefield, Wash.

Women also have been criticized for being strong leaders who voice their opinions. ➔

Like Mother, Like Daughter

Father-and-son teams aren't unusual in the glass industry, but mother-and-daughter teams are rare. However, for Cathie Saroka and Laura Little, seeing each other at work is the norm.

Goldray Glass was founded in 1985 by Saroka and her then-husband Greg Saroka. They were young and knew nothing about glass at the time, but both of their families were entrepreneurial, and they wanted to work for themselves.

"We decided to start by doing things no one else in the industry was doing since we didn't have enough money or knowledge to compete," says Saroka. "We needed to ensure that we were making money since we had kids."

Saroka says she grew to love the glass industry as the company got bigger and she met more people. She was president and CEO of the company from 2014 to 2022, when she stepped down and transitioned to the role of executive chair while to focus on other projects.

She says that in hindsight, building the business and raising a family at the same time was a major achievement in her career, along with getting her MBA.

Little and her brother, Michael Saroka, the company's CEO, grew up in the family business, coming in on evenings and weekends to work and play.

"I didn't want to work in the family business, so I traveled and pursued my psychology degree. However, I moseyed my way back into it as I saw that glass is a good industry and Goldray is a good place to work," says Little. "It turned out to be a lot of fun."

Little started in a marketing support role and worked up to running the marketing department. That's when she realized that she wanted to get people excited about the company's products. She is now Goldray's vice president of sales and marketing, which she considers a major achievement in her career.

Saroka says that in a family-owned business, family and business morph together.



"We do a lot of things together, even outside of the business. It's pretty phenomenal working together. You get to know each other in a completely different way than just as a sister, brother, or mother," she says.

Little also grew up seeing her mom as a powerful woman in business carrying out leadership roles. Due to that, she says she's never been afraid to walk into a boardroom full of men or allow herself to think they think less of her.

"My mom never saw barriers for herself so I never saw barriers for myself," she says.

Both Saroka and Little agree that running a business is about the people, not just the product, marketing or finances. That's what makes diversity so important.

"We're not installing glass for ourselves. There's a customer at the other end. How we produce products and design and construct buildings is done with the customer in mind," says Little. "The more perspectives and opinions you have tackling a problem, the better the solution. We all have very different experiences and points of view."

"When we support each other together we become successful, and that comes back tenfold. We must help people be successful inside and outside of our organization," adds Saroka. "The more support and help we give each other, the better for all of us."

"I hate the word bossy. There's nothing wrong with being assertive or competent in a role, being able to make decisions or expressing opinions," says Alex Oanono, president of Blue Star Glass in North Brunswick, N.J. "There's a stigma about women who are powerful, and there needs to be space made for women to be more assertive."

At the same time, many women in the glass and glazing industries have found success by adopting what's traditionally thought of as male leadership qualities. Nataline Lomedico, CEO and president of Giroux Glass in Los Angeles, says she has a more traditional masculine leadership style, which has helped navigate the industry. She encourages the women at Giroux to take up space confidently.

"As women, we're often hard on ourselves. We can be our own worst enemies. We shouldn't feel like we need to ask for permission or apologize for taking up space," she adds. "Don't apologize for stepping on someone's toes. That implies that one person owns that space. You always have something unique you can bring to the table. Words are

powerful. You're not stepping on toes but stepping forward. Don't be your own no."

Value Added

Being a woman in a male-dominated industry also has its benefits, according to women leaders in the glass industry, from having a unique perspective to being allowed to be more vulnerable and empathetic.

"Being the only woman in a room can be intimidating, but it can give you a unique voice," says Helen Sanders, co-general manager for Technoform Glass North America in Twinsburg, Ohio. "If you're the only person in the room who is different, people are more likely to remember you, and it can help your voice be heard."

Oanono says women can juggle more and think in several different directions at once. "It makes us more prepared for anything that comes our way. We're able to anticipate issues and respond quickly," she says.

Lomedico says that women offer several beneficial

Technically Thinking

Having women in leadership makes a difference. Just ask Alexandra Blakeslee, market team manager for Technoform North America. Though Blakeslee says that not all companies in manufacturing, construction and related industries have women leaders, Technoform North America does.

"I have been extremely fortunate to have incredibly strong women and men who have been my champions in everything I do. I have always felt treated fairly by my managers and mentors at Technoform," she says. "As a company, we believe strongly in giving people the opportunity to chart their path. I've greatly benefited from that and been able to be a better team member because of it."

One of those leaders is Dr. Helen Sanders, co-general manager for glass insulation in North America. Sanders finished her Ph.D. in chemical catalysis in 1994 during a recession in the U.K. There weren't many jobs available, but Pilkington was hiring a research and development scientist to develop and improve glass coatings. Once she took the job, she became permanently entrenched in the glass industry. She spent four years there before moving to Minnesota with her husband and taking a job at SageGlass.

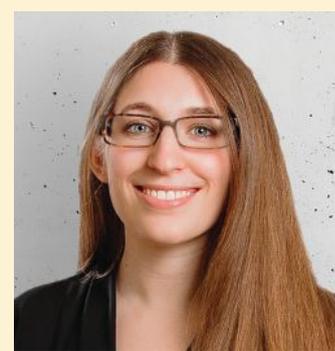
Of Sanders' greatest achievements, the greatest is her work in developing the dynamic glazing market and her work in industry organizations.

"If you get involved, you can have a voice, help shape the future and give back to the industry. That's a big learning for me that I didn't know early in my career," she says.

Blakeslee was one of ten women in her undergraduate



Helen Sanders



Alexandra Blakeslee

program class of 300 mechanical engineering students. She remembers being in group projects where she was the only woman and being ignored when making recommendations or challenging her classmates' viewpoints. She heard many similar experiences from other women in the program.

"Later in my career, I've been at trade shows and had men make inappropriate comments. Once, someone tried to come back to my hotel room, even though we were clearly having a professional conversation about business. The list is long. Comments and behaviors like these dehumanize you and make you feel as if you're not worthy enough to be at the table," she says. "There's a culture that can naturally occur where you don't want to speak up because you feel that people will think you're being too soft or sensitive. There have certainly been times in my schooling and career when I wanted to quit because of those experiences, but ultimately, I am glad that I stuck with it and found a supportive culture where I work. I'm grateful for the thick skin I have from it, and I hope one day, we get to a place where the environment doesn't require that to such a degree."

qualities in the workplace, such as not being afraid to ask questions to get the right answer. She also believes women often have higher emotional intelligence and put more thought into how their actions will impact others. They care about not letting down their team or families.

"You have to care to make a difference. Because women are more naturally prone to nurture others, they care. They're able to make people feel heard. You can't fake that," she says.

However, Lomedico says the women who are more likely to prevail are the ones who don't let themselves conclude that something isn't working out because they're a woman. She says being a woman shouldn't define how a person sees herself on the job.

"Now, there are so many incredibly strong, talented and intelligent women in the industry, and the industry is benefiting from that. We're all here because of the work done in years past," says Cathie Saroka, co-founder and executive chair of Goldray Glass in Calgary, Alberta.

She explains that a diverse workforce helps the industry get stronger. Bringing together people with different backgrounds, experiences and viewpoints, she says, allows companies to be more creative and inventive.

"There's nothing not good about it," says Saroka.

The Makings of a Leader

When it comes to the different leadership styles of men and women, it's common to assign qualities such as directness, confidence and strength to men and qualities such as compassion, empathy and teamwork to women.

Vockler says that men and women generally come to the table with different leadership styles.

"A lot of men are taught to use a command-and-control leadership style, whereas women have an inherent ability for compassion," she says. "However, men and women working together make a winning and great combination."

According to 2019 research from Zenger Folkman, women rated slightly better than men on several key leadership capabilities, including taking the initiative, resilience, practicing self-development, driving for results, displaying high integrity and honesty, developing others, inspiring and motivating others, bold leadership, building relationships and championing change. The data showed that men outscored women only in technical or professional expertise and developing a strategic perspective.

While many may believe this to be true, Sanders says the dichotomy isn't black-and-white.

"Whether male or female, people fit into different ➔

Lessons in Leadership

Casey Anderson, marketing manager for ICD says she's lucky to work for a company with two strong women in leadership roles: CEO Kris Vockler and CFO Trisha Vockler.

Larry and Trisha Vockler established ICD in 1986, and daughter Kris took on the CEO role in 2016. Kris Vockler initially didn't want anything to do with the family business.

"I didn't want to join the family business until I needed a job. My dad said no, and I was shocked. He didn't want to deal with nepotism," she says. "I got a part-time job instead to show that I could create value."

Vockler started off working on organic glass coatings as a chemist. Eventually, she says she realized, "What better opportunity than a company like ICD to make clean, green products for the glass industry?"

She worked her way up the company with that thought in mind and got involved in the Glass Association of North America (GANA).

She says graduating college is one of her top achievements since no one thought she'd be able to go since she has dyslexia. Not only did she earn her undergraduate degree, but also an MBA. That, as well as serving as president of GANA, are major achievements.

Anderson, who joined ICD in 2017, says that while she hadn't worked as a marketing manager before, she believed that her out-of-the-box approach built from years of work in a diverse range of fields, including theater, film, project management, brand management and product design, could provide a new perspective.

"Once I met Kris Vockler, and discussed the current state



Kris Vockler, Trisha Vockler, Casey Anderson

of the company and their vision for the future, I was hooked. Thankfully, they felt similarly," she says. "I reaped the benefit of Kris growing up in the industry and being so well connected. She made sure I was entrenched from the get-go by familiarizing myself with publications, subscribing to every industry email newsletter, learning who the key players are, recounting the history of the glass industry to know how we arrived at the present and attending association meetings."

Anderson says there have been challenges, though.

"Someone had underestimated my capabilities in reviewing architectural drawings, I assumed, because I was a woman in marketing, so I let them know I learned how to draft theater sets by hand while getting my theater design degree. And that more recently, I drew the plans so well for a large shop outbuilding for our property that the engineer who reviewed them told my husband to compliment the architect—he said he always had notes to provide for revisions, but they were perfect," she says. "I'm not affected by people's limited viewpoints; I know what I'm capable of."

The Women of Giroux Glass

Giroux Glass was founded in Los Angeles in 1946, but it took on a new life in 1991 when Anne-Merelie Murrell bought the company. She had purchased several buildings around the University of Southern California, but one of the conditions was that she took the glass shop.

Nataline Lomedico, CEO and president of Giroux Glass, joined the company in November 2000 when Murrell was looking to expand the business into Nevada. Lomedico started as a controller but was essentially doing the work of a chief financial officer for half the pay.

"It was tough doing the job for half the pay. I had to work hard and prove myself," she says. "I felt like I had to run circles around the men to get noticed by Anne-Merelie."

Lomedico became CEO in January 2015. She was terrified on day one but quickly realized that she had already been doing 75% of the job. Since taking on the leadership role, Lomedico says her biggest accomplishments are converting the company to a 100% employee-owned business and "opening the doors for diverse thinkers to come together and bring out the best in each other."



Barbara Kotsos, director of marketing at Giroux, says Lomedico has had much to do with the company's growth.

"We recognize the benefit of her leadership style and how well it works with the company. That's why we have so many women on our board of directors, which contributes to our success," says Kotsos. "It's so different being at a company led by women ... It's why I've been here so long. It's an invigorating and stimulating environment." 

Lynda Nishimoto Lax, President, Pulp Studio

Lynda Nishimoto Lax founded Pulp Studio with her late husband, Bernard Lax, in 1996. The company started in the basement of their home after 15 years of leading a garment business with more than 400 employees.

“When we were building our home years ago, we wanted some of our doors to look like traditional Japanese shoji screens. We found a glass we wanted, but to purchase it we had to buy a container of 15 square feet. There was no way! We moved onto plan B,” she says. “We tested Japanese washi to laminate. It took three years to get the glass we wanted, and we still have the lites in our home today.”

Pulp Studio started with eight decorative laminated glass samples, but demand grew fast thanks to Lax’s salesmanship.

“Bernard would come back from a trip, and I’d have to figure out how to make what he’d sold. My team and I would test this and that,” she says. “That was the beauty of building the business. We were constantly pushing and trying new things. So many people said you can’t. However, we weren’t glass people but design people, and we didn’t have restraints.”

behavioral style categories,” she explains.

Sanders says that the people who say the most aren’t always the ones with the best ideas. She’s learned that the people with the best ideas are usually involved in the work and process. Being a good leader involves figuring out how to bring out those voices to find the best way forward.

“I think the best leaders, male or female, are empathetic. It’s important to understand the people you work with and not jump to conclusions,” says Sanders. “I think most people are coming from a position of goodness. If they’re missing things or messing things up, it’s our job to find out why and how we can help them.”

Good leaders also build diverse teams, according to Sanders, who says diversity is essential to creativity and problem-solving. “If people have different perspectives, histories or situations, they think differently. Without diversity of thought, you don’t get the best solutions,” she says.

Women Supporting Women

Vockler says at ICD Coatings she encourages both men and women to go for promotions when she feels they need more encouragement, so they don’t miss out on opportunities. She recommends that women adopt a growth mindset to advance their careers. One way to do so is by joining peer-to-peer groups inside or outside the industry. One can become a better leader by understanding other industries and learning from others.

Oanono recommends young women in the industry find a mentor who they respect and find inspiring.

“We have mostly women in our office and women on our production floor. We give women the opportunity to work wherever they want. If they think they can do it they can go for it,” says Oanono. “It’s important to help someone find their niche early on and give them the freedom and confidence to try something new.”



Lynda Nishimoto Lax

Running the business with her husband was a positive experience. Still, Nishimoto Lax says she went by only her maiden name, Nishimoto, for more than 40 years.

“Although Bernard and I ran the business together, I always felt that people had less respect if it was the ‘wife’ working in the business. As we grew, even many of our employees did not know we were married,” she says. “We handled our business as partners that were good at different aspects of the business.”

Nishimoto Lax advises women entering leadership roles to forget gender and do what needs to be done.

“If you are put in the role of leadership, surround yourself with the right people. With the right tools and people around, you will succeed,” she says. “Sometimes you’ll make mistakes—acknowledge them and figure out how to proceed. If it were easy, the world would be perfect, and that isn’t going to happen.”

Lomedico started her career in the construction industry nearly 30 years ago, when women mentors were hard to come by. While she was hired by former Giroux Glass CEO Anne-Merelie Murrell, who had purchased the company from Louis Giroux in 1991, Lomedico says Murrell was hesitant to hire her because she thought the experience of being a woman in a predominantly male industry would be difficult.

“As we’ve hired more women over the years, we’ve created that environment. Now I have women and men around me who come from different backgrounds and perspectives,” she says. “We recently had a strategy meeting where the management team included 30% women, and our board is 50% women,” she says. “I want people who are driven, work hard and roll up their sleeves. A lot of those people are women.”

While Lomedico says women need to support other women in a male-dominated industry, men must also be comfortable mentoring women. “Men could make a difference in getting more women to join the industry,” she says.

Sanders says she had the benefit of amazing mentors and industry colleagues, both men and women, who have supported her through her 24 years in the glass industry in the U.S. She believes women in the industry need to continue to support each other, especially as the younger cadre of women professionals join the industry.

“We need to be purposeful in how we support our newer female members of the industry. We must help connect them with people to build their network and confidence. We need to give them opportunities outside of their organizations to help position them even better within their organization by demonstrating leadership,” says Sanders. “That’s our job and role as women veterans of the industry.”

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➔ **Jordan Scott** is a contributing writer for **USGlass** magazine. **Ellen Rogers** also contributed to this article.