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From the San Francisco Business Times:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/news/2021/10/07/inspire-award-amy-chang.html>

INSPIRE AWARDS

Inspire Awards: Amy Chang drove DEI change in the tech world

Oct 7, 2021, 1:00pm PDT **Updated: Oct 7, 2021, 1:31pm PDT**

Editor's note: As part of our Most Influential Women in Bay Area Business publication, we are pleased to introduce this year's Inspire Award winners — three Bay Area female leaders who have been champions of issues surrounding diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion. All three work to make their companies boards and industries more inclusive and support the next generation of women leaders as mentors. Click [here](#) and [here](#) to read about our other honorees.

Amy Chang is a force to be reckoned with. The Stanford grad — she received both her bachelor's and master's in electrical engineering at the university — held positions in product management and engineering at top tech companies including eBay, Intel and Google, where she was responsible for launching Google Analytics. She left to start Accompany in 2013, a platform that harnesses artificial intelligence to develop databases of people and relationships at companies. That venture was acquired by Cisco in 2018 for \$270 million.

After the deal she led a team of 6,000 as executive vice president and general manager at Cisco's multibillion-dollar collaboration business and, just last year, retired from the position to devote more time to serving on the boards of Disney, Procter & Gamble, Marqeta, SambaNova and Pragma. "I don't miss commuting or flying every week," she says. "It's been fantastic."



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Amy Chang, Inspire Awards, 2021



How did you meet your mentor? There's one person in particular, Lorrie Norrington, who's been so phenomenal and so influential in my career, and she's my dearest friend. We met at a directors conference as I was getting ready to go onto my first public company board, while she was already an experienced board member.

I want people to understand serendipity and why they should reach out to people. We were sitting next to each other and during this session, she asked one of the most striking questions. Then we happened to be in the ladies room washing our hands at the same time, and I introduced myself because we didn't know each other and we ended up getting into an animated discussion. That was the beginning of our friendship. She is my best friend in the world now and has been instrumental for me every step of the way while I was an entrepreneur and a CEO. That position can be lonely, but she was my confidant and mentor.

We've been there for each other as we make decisions on whether or not to take certain operating roles, the acquisition offer for our company, new board roles, etc. She's my top partner, and everybody needs one. But until I met her, I really never had a mentor/sponsor/friend to that degree.

That really echoes what a lot of women say. How have you paid it forward to others coming up through the ranks? I have been in a

very lucky position to have a lot of high potential women and diverse and inclusive team members in my teams. At Cisco, for example, my team was 6,000 humans, so of course in a population of 6,000, you're going to have a lot of high potentials. I got the opportunity to get to know many of them and to sponsor them in a way that was much more personal.

I will say this though, because I think this is an important point: If you are only looking for mentors who match your gender or any certain aspect of you then you are leaving out an entire huge spectrum of people who could be wonderfully helpful. I think it's all about chemistry.

A mistake I see people make is thinking, "Oh, I only want to ask someone to be a mentor if they're much further along in their career than me." That's a mistake.

When I was at Google, one of the most amazing things was being surrounded by people who were better than me at so many things. So my thinking was, I want to learn something from one of these people I don't know well yet. Every single week I want to ask someone to lunch who does something way better than I do it. I want to learn about how they do it and I want to help them in any way I can.

In your experiences in engineering and product management, rising through the ranks at Google, and now serving on numerous boards, how have the conversations around diversity, equity and inclusion changed? I feel like it's a board-level discussion now, and it wasn't always — it wasn't 10 years ago. The gender piece might have been a little bit more amplified, but I feel like gender is way richer than it was before now because we've recognized gender as a spectrum, not a binary.

I do think the discussion has moved into the boardroom and metrics are being tracked at a macro/CEO level. That's a change and I love it because you're never gonna change what you don't measure. So measuring it is the first step to identifying where we can change it.

There have to be efforts that thread throughout the company at every level — for example, training interviewers not to allow unconscious biases to enter into the interview process, doing simple things like handing a resume off and not showing the name or gender of the person, as they're analyzing for fit. All of these things help remove unconscious bias and help the right candidate surface.

When you started out in your career, did you see DEI issues as something taboo to mention, or just wasn't spoken about in the workplace at all? When I first started managing, and, let's say, I needed to take my child to the doctor. I wouldn't say to the whole team, "I'm taking my child to the doctor." I would say, "I have a conflict. I can't make it." But I would keep it private.

I wouldn't come out and say this is for my child because I didn't want to make it seem like I was taking time out from work or couldn't make something happen for personal reasons. It didn't feel OK to do 20 years ago.

Maybe that was just me, but I didn't feel like I could say that. And so, I didn't. I still didn't say it when I started in leadership and that's wrong. Because when I was leading, I was communicating the message to my people that you can't say it either. You should just say you have a conflict, too. You shouldn't be real about what that conflict is.

So now if I can't make something happen and it's because my daughter has something I just say, "I have something for my daughter and I can't make it, but I could make it these three other times, do any of those work for you?" I'm still accessible and available, but not every hour and it's a perfectly legitimate reason that I have a family commitment, and that's why I can't make something. That's the message I'm trying to send.

Modeling is so important, especially for those who might not feel comfortable speaking up because of the stigma workers face.

That leads me to my next question: How have you found balance with your working life during the prolonged pandemic? Taking time for yourself is really hard when you have children who are in virtual school and you have all these stressors coming into play.

I've tried to do simple things like incorporate exercise into my day. If I know somebody, and we're not looking at slides, instead of getting on Zoom with them, I say let's just get on the phone together and go walking.

In what ways have you had a reset over the past year and a half, whether in your career or personal life? I actually retired from my operating role a year ago and have been doing board advisory and investment work. That's been a big shift because not having an operating role means not having 6,000 human beings to worry about every day. That's a pretty big reset. That, and not being on a plane three or four times a week.

What do you see as the biggest challenge in the current moment in your board roles? One of the things that I feel like has been such a phenomenal shift over the last — let's call it five — years has been this new emphasis for private and public companies and nongovernmental institutions to really start to think about corporate and social responsibility. That includes thinking about climate change and about sustainability. Also, to think about impact from a global level, meaning every company can have net zero initiatives and real sustainability goals. I love that.

I'm on the nominating and governance committees for most of the boards I'm on and I'm asked to be part of that committee because I want to be part of that effort to help define and influence our corporate and social responsibility policies. I'm loving that work.

What drives you every day? Curiosity. There's so much that I know nothing about and so much to learn. I find my brain is on fire six to eight hours a day, and that's exactly the right amount because there's so much to continue to learn and so many fantastic entrepreneurs to help.

I'm really enjoying the kind of beginner's mind aspect that you get in approaching new industries and just understanding things that you didn't know before, I love that. It is definitely what drives me.

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