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**Lara Abrash, CPA**

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The accounting profession is one with endless possibilities – our profession is filled with creative, innovative, brilliant professionals and offers amazing economic and career mobility. While relevant for anyone, I specifically reinforce three things for women in the profession:

- **Harness the power of relationships** – Relationships are so important in your life and in your career. There are different types of relationships and identifying the type you need at different stages is important. Regardless of where you are in your career, deepening existing relationships and developing new ones is essential.
- **Differentiate yourself and always continue learning** – Have a clear vision of where you want to go, then identify and nurture the things that uniquely and authentically make you different from others. Celebrate what gives you energy and encourage those around you to do the same.
- **Be bold** – Own your career and take risks. A few years ago, I raised my hand and led a significant audit transformation effort for our business. At the time “audit” and “innovation” were not words that commonly appeared together. I was asked to create a new vision from scratch and bring it to life. It was one of the biggest risks of my career, but also one of the moments that gives me the most pride. Owning your career and taking risks that highlight your strengths is necessary for success.

**What steps would you offer to employers to be more effective in retaining and advancing women?**

In our current environment where diverse organizations consistently outperform others, it is more important than ever to focus our efforts on advancing and retaining women in the workplace. A lack of attention means we risk losing women in ways that drive increasing levels of current and future women leaders. We have an opportunity to make a significant investment in building a more flexible and empathic workplace to support women and provide keys to succeed. A few suggestions:

- Champion advancement – A passion of mine is the advancement of professionals. I

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~~I never knew about early stage in my career and I wanted to be a leader here~~  
but when I looked around there were few women leaders. It was important to me to be a role model, coach, and sponsor to those women that came after me. Regardless of what your aspiration is, take ownership as a leader to make sure women have the ability and allies to realize their potential.

- Alternative or flexible work arrangements – Understanding the needs of individuals is important. That said, women often have different needs and experiences due to societal norms, personal choices and organizational culture. We need to be open to other ways of doing things than were done in the past. We need to listen to all points of view and put in the hard work to make sure women have a voice and flexibility regarding what works best for them in the workplace.

### **Why did you choose to work in – and stay in – an accounting related field?**

I was bitten by the accounting bug early on in my life. I knew I wanted to enter the profession since I was in middle school when my class learned how to do the accounting for Firehouse 123. Very few kids know what they want to be when they grow up and fewer know about the world of accounting. At the moment I started working on Firehouse 123, I knew I wanted to be an accountant. It just made sense to me and made me happy. My path to pursuing my dream took time and dedication.

I put myself through my undergraduate degree with the intent of applying for my masters. I was accepted into Baruch College to earn my Master of Business Administration. I took the train over an hour and half each day from my job at a local accounting organization to Baruch for my night classes, often getting home well into the night. Over 25 years later, the accounting and audit profession still energizes me. This profession is much more than number crunching and debits and credits. It's about helping people, thinking outside the box, bringing innovative solutions to a problem, teaming with fellow professionals, and constantly learning. It has always

been a focus of mine to share my passion for this wonderful career with other

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and womanhood spoke to me. Specifically, her quote, "If you don't get out there and define yourself, you'll be quickly and inaccurately defined by others." Defining my vision and having the confidence to speak up is one of the main factors that led me to where I am today.

**McKinsey & Company issued their [2020 Women in the Workplace study](#) that basically says that the current pandemic is starting to impact the strides women, especially women of color, have made in the profession. What advice would you give to employers to support women during this time so that the future of our workforce isn't negatively impacted?**

The past several months have taken on a different tone, offering lessons I would rather have learned through different circumstances. Our organizations and our communities have faced a concerning combination of a global health pandemic, economic uncertainty, and social unrest, all of which have disproportionately affected under-represented members of our communities.

As I try to make sense of all that's going on and determine my path forward, the need to take action regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in our society and our workforce has never been clearer. Women in particular are selflessly taking on extra responsibility both in the workplace and in the home. As a leader, it is my responsibility to take ownership and hold myself accountable for ensuring women succeed. Below are a few elements to achieving this success:

- Draw outside the lines – When the COVID-19 pandemic impacted us all, I called upon my ability to innovate and transform. Our Audit & Assurance business was equipped to seamlessly transition to a virtual workforce largely because of decades of investments in digital transformation and innovation. Thriving in a virtual environment is difficult and presents its own set of challenges. In my role, I made it a priority to equip and support women during this time. That ranged from

providing flexibility to the traditional working hours, assisting the build out of

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Bringing joy, which has a significant impact to your team. For me, hearing people's stories of adapting to working from home, hosting virtual team building events, or having success in a client pursuit are all things that energize me. I made it a priority each day to hear the joys of others. Their smiles are contagious and spreading that throughout our community is a priority.

- Inspire through relating – I am a wife, a mom, a daughter, a friend, a colleague, and a leader. I use all my experiences to relate to my fellow colleagues. The pandemic and shelter-in-place is not something that impacts a select group of us. I believed it was more important than ever to be open and transparent with our people. This meant increasing my connection to our business through weekly video calls – showing parents that it is more than okay to have a child running through a call or a dog barking in the background. I also launched a social media campaign to bring a sense of virtual community across the business.

**What advice would you share with young women CPAs striving to achieve similar success in this profession?**

I have been very fortunate in my career as I had and still have amazing mentors who guided me to this position. Through my experience, I have the following three pieces of advice:

- Connect with people – Each person has a unique perspective and communicates, leads, or collaborates and teams differently. Sharing our stories create valuable connections that build strong relationships. It is these strong relationships that we lean on during the difficult times and lift us up during the best of times. No one can succeed alone and identifying the people you connect with to take along the journey is vital.
- Bring your authentic self – In the past, we would delineate what was office appropriate and what remained personal. In the current environment, it is even more important and appropriate to bring forth your authentic self. Whether that

be sharing stories of your children or hardships with aging parents, it is our shared

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### **how that person helped shape the direction or focus of your professional life.**

My mother has been the most influential figure in my life. She instilled values in me that have shaped me and positioned me for success in my life, both personally and professionally. She is present in the way I approach motherhood, leadership, advocacy for things that matter to me, and relationships. She raised me to believe I could be anything I wanted to be. She was my first role model and one thing she did was surround me with other powerful women so I could see that anything was possible. Witnessing the strength and support of other women, especially my mother, taught me to dream big and pursue my goals with passion. She taught me that dreaming is important, but a goal isn't a goal until it's said out loud. I've taken that to heart and throughout my career I have shared my goals with people who were able to help. Through this, I've raised my hand in numerous instances to launch significant, never done before initiatives. It was a risky move but one of the moments that gives me the most pride. I encourage all women to speak up, be bold, and take charge of their career.

### **Please share a personal rule or principle that you follow.**

Embrace our amazing differences – whether it is gender identification, race, age, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability, political views, or any other characteristic that shapes our human perspective and experience and strive to achieve diversity of thought. I've often analogized my vision of our future to a mosaic that brings together pieces of all shapes, sizes, and colors to form a beautiful picture – one that is brilliant and remarkable *because of* the differences that complement one another, not despite of them.

Read more about the [2020-2021 Most Powerful Women in Accounting Winners](#).

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