



## Women Designed to Move an Industry

By Kristin Killgore, P.E., S.E., LEED AP

**T**here are questions in life that become routine. *Where do you live? How old are you? What do you do for a living?*

There are also questions specifically directed to our profession. *What is structural engineering? Does that mean you are an architect? What type of structures do you design?*

As a female structural engineer, I routinely receive additional questions that open the door for self-reflection. These questions are honest, real, discussion-worthy questions specific to my gender. They are not intended to be offensive but are based on continued gender stereotyping in our society and a real need for conversation at all career levels within the structural engineering workplace.

I have been asked; *Can you be a mom and be a structural engineer? How do you balance home and work life? How do the men in the profession treat you? How many women structural engineers do you know? How many hours do you work in a week and how many hours are you expected to work in a week?*

These questions came from mentoring sessions with young high school women and early career engineers. Our conversations begin with general professional questions regarding how I chose my career path, but then quickly move to the treatment of women and integration of work and home life. It frustrates me that even with a full generation of women in the workforce, these young women already have perceived a struggle for women in the engineering profession and workplace. The good news is that most of the ladies are not derailed by honest answers and perceive the conversation as a tool to effectively overcome any hurdle they may encounter through their careers. Young engineers today, both men and women, yearn for answers to career development questions while maintaining a desire to create a life and identity for themselves outside of their career. How would you answer such questions?

Cheryl Sandburg wrote the book *Lean In – Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, encouraging women to advocate for themselves as they progress in their careers. Sandburg argues that young women, with

the expectation of one-day forming families, may not pursue as many opportunities for advancement as their male colleagues, even years before they become mothers. The “lean in” mentality is one of pursuing every opportunity available until a conflict prevents you from doing so.

Leslie Gallery-Dilworth, FAIA, the author of *Luck is Not a Plan for Your Future*, argues that work-life balance does not exist. She stresses integration.

Integration is a realistic approach for managing the life of a spouse, parent, and career. In my career, I have struggled to come to terms with the notion that a balance between work and life does not exist and integration is HARD. I continually feel as if I am failing in every aspect of my life and a good week is the week that I feel I have hit mediocrity. For most people, I know this family expectation of balance is unrealistic. This constant dichotomy is a struggle for families.

I believe most men and women in today’s workplace environment desire an understanding from their employers that integration of personal time and professional time must be respected and encouraged. The profession of structural engineering is plagued with stereotypes of long hours, impossible deadlines, low pay compared to other engineering disciplines, and high expectations. People desire enrichment, personal and professional; our industry provides that enrichment for most who enter it, but often at the cost of burn out and dedicated talent leaving the industry. Discussing gender sheds light on a person’s story and priorities, and it advocates for all people in an organization to develop a positive team environment, crucial to company success. Gender, though, must not be the defining factor in determining expectations for employee performance or position.

Mentoring in all professions, and through life, is a powerful tool to appreciate wisdom, avoid pitfalls, and provide accountability. Mentoring has enriched my life, but at times I have often felt isolated by my profession. Someone once asked me, “Do you know any women older than you, with children,



currently practicing structural engineering full time and in a leadership position?” I immediately felt my gut wrench and my brain spin as I raced through female engineers that I knew. I knew of some, but did I have relationships with them, no. Most didn’t really live close, and I could not attest to their level of leadership. It was with this question that I realized I might have had professional women mentors outside of the industry who provided guidance, but I did not have a mentor who understood the structural engineering profession. The difference, though small, feels tremendous. A woman structural engineer and mom in a leadership position to glean any advice and knowledge from seems like a simple request to me, a 21<sup>st</sup>-century woman.

I hope that current and future professional leaders, both men and women, develop work cultures that erode employees’ incorrect perceptions about the engineering profession. In doing so, the gender line will become a gender sieve parsing ideas and influence. We need to assess our business practices and decide if we are encouraging our engineers to invest in themselves. As changes in practice infiltrate the engineering profession, students contemplating the start of a career in engineering will experience the long-term support they desire from their chosen profession.■

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