



PHOTOS BY MARK MULVILLE | *The Buffalo Business First Women at the Table event hosted by Phillips Lytle LLP at their offices in Buffalo on Thursday, July 31, 2025.*



WOMEN AT THE TABLE EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP FORUM

Women leaders effectively navigating business in times of rapid change

Buffalo Business First and Phillips Lytle LLP recently invited women leaders from an array of industries to share their thoughts and insights on the challenges and opportunities regarding rapid innovation, workforce evolution, economic shifts and global challenges that continue to reshape the way Western New Yorkers work and lead.

Sharon Prise Azurin, partner at Phillips Lytle LLP, moderated the panel that included:

- Tara Ellis, president and CEO, FeedMore WNY Inc.
- Leecia Eve, board chair, Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center
- Jillian Jones, deputy director, Buffalo AKG Art Museum
- Kelly Marks, partner, Phillips Lytle LLP
- Siobhan Smith, co-president, Catapult Executive Consulting

WHAT IT TAKES

The panelists, having worked their way to the top of their organizations, are finding they landed in their leadership role during one of the most complex and uncertain times in history. To lead at this time takes extraordinary skills to meet today's dynamic business landscape, be it in the public, private, for profit or nonprofit sectors.

To meet the demands, leaders need to be extraordinarily nimble, innovative and proactive, Eve said.

"Being static means you lose, and you can't afford to do that," she said. "Effective leadership means constantly growing as a leader and having the organization constantly innovating and moving together in collaborative fashion, constantly learning and being able to respond to external forces that are beyond your control but that can have a very serious impact on your business."

Leaders also need to be humble enough to recognize and accept the contributions of others, whether from the best, brightest, most experienced individual in the organization or the most junior person with a good idea.

"Most importantly make sure that you take care of yourself physically, spiritually and emotionally, whatever taking care of yourself means to you," Eve said.

Ellis reiterated the need to lead through external forces that might be working against you. Let your team know that you are aware of the miscommunication, misperceptions and misunderstandings that are swirling externally, and assure them they should keep plowing ahead, doing the right things for the organization.

Also, mistakes are inevitable, she said, and it takes a certain amount of honesty and vulnerability to attend to them. The

team needs to have those conversations about mistakes and together figure out how to address and move beyond them.

Ultimately, a leader is a cheerleader for the team and works side by side with the team members, Ellis said.

TEAM BUILDING

As executive leaders, especially in times of rapid change and uncertainty, the panelists acknowledge the importance of building high-performing teams that can stay grounded and move forward.

The most important role on a highly functioning and productive team is always the team leader, Smith said.

"The team leader really has to be someone who knows herself," she said. "It's very important for that person to be aware

of who they are, what their values are, what their brand is, how they want to exude their executive presence. People are looking and watching so that awareness is really what will make the team not only effective and cohesive but high-performing.”

Smith said team leaders need to know their own values and their authentic selves as they try to lead effectively.

She said that the leader needs to get the team composed of the people with the necessary strengths and then ensures that the group as one fosters each individual contributor.

“In order to team effectively, you need to have psychological safety,” Smith said, “have that space where people can team effectively and also be themselves, their authentic selves. That is where the results can happen. The team leader is the person that makes sure that environment is healthy for that.”

Jones thinks of the AKG’s art-preparatory team as the ideal. The team is made up of professionals whose job is to move the pieces of the collection in and out of the museum. They are all accountable to each other and have close professional relationships as each one has an important role to play as a Monet or a Picasso is taken off a wall.

Everyone must perform their role, and if not, the whole operation falls apart, “and we can’t have it fall apart, literally,” Jones said. “That’s one of the teams that I look to for inspiration when I’m feeling how do we more broadly bring all of these teams together toward the same mission

of welcoming audiences to inspiring exhibitions.”

Culture and positivity are critical for any team.

“Culture is so important for teams. Just think about the norms and values that lead you and why and how you do the things that you are doing,” Jones said. “One of the biggest indicators for whether or not a team is going to be successful is how positive they feel about their work and how well that team leader is able to be a cheerleader for everyone else.”

COLLABORATION

Marks, as a team leader, takes the saying “knowledge is power” to heart.

She said a team is effective when its members are proactively provided with the information, strategies and goals of the client they are working for so they can understand their role and what they will contribute to the case’s conclusion. Then she makes herself available and takes interest in each team member’s work.

It is worth reinforcing in the current polarized environment that one of the most important attributes of working in a team is to treat members or colleagues in general with respect and kindness, Marks said.

Polarization does come into the workplace where differing political or cultural views can collide when serving clients and solving their problems.

“We have attorneys with different views



and different risk tolerances on how that should be done,” Marks said, “so I try to make sure to treat all of my teammates, experienced partners who are few years older than me or our most junior associates and our support staff, with respect and kindness because they all have value to add and have really important roles in making the team be successful.”

STAYING GROUNDED

The leaders on the panel have found those systems that help them manage stress, stay grounded and connected to their purpose amid the flux and flow of their professional and personal lives.

For Eve, her relationship with people comes down to a familiar, simple rule.

“At the end of the day, it goes back to core values and treating people with respect with kindness as you would want to be treated,” she said.

She also is intentional about taking better care of herself after losing two members of her immediate family in the past year.

“I want to live as long, as healthy and as fulfilling a life as possible. I’ve made taking better care of myself physically a top priority,” Eve said.

Connecting with friends and family, walking, meditation and yoga are all part of the plan, as is daily journaling first thing in the morning then again at night.

“Having just five or 10 minutes of utter quiet with zero distractions to start has probably been, in addition to movement, the single most effective thing I have done to improve my life and to reduce my stress,” she said. “It costs nothing except for five to 10 minutes of your time and a sheet of paper with a pen or pencil. Don’t make it complicated.”

THE PANELISTS:



TARA ELLIS
President and CEO
FeedMore WNY Inc.



LEECEA EVE
Board Chair
Roswell Park
Comprehensive Cancer
Center



JILLIAN JONES
Deputy Director
Buffalo AKG Art Museum



KELLY MARKS
Partner
Phillips Lytle LLP



SIOBHAN SMITH
Co-president
Catapult Executive
Consulting



SHARON PRISE AZURIN
Partner
Phillips Lytle LLP

THE MODERATOR:

For Smith, it is important to operate from a place of honesty, understand who you are, what energizes you and what depletes the energy. Then find the things that boost who you are, what you want and how to get there.

“You, in different parts of your life, are in some women’s groups and some boards and you have people that you work with. You have these different tribes that you’re accountable for,” Smith said. “Let them know who you are and transcend to them the kindness, the listening and the being there. All of that is so important to truly live the life that you say you want to live.”

WOMEN’S STRENGTHS

Women’s and men’s brains are wired differently, which explains the variation in communication and memory, Jones said.

Women have communication centers in both hemispheres and have connective tissue linking them, she said. As a result, women intuitively are able to draw people out and connect with them. They have an inherent and organic skill to understand, speak, summarize and get people to communicate.

“We actually are scientifically proven to have a little bit of a leg up in being able to do that. We’re good communicators, so let’s lean into that skill,” Jones said. “Let’s be careful about not putting people into stereotypical boxes and letting them off the hook if they happen to be of one sex or another, saying that we can or cannot do a skill. We also both equally have the ability to learn.”

Men generally have better short-term memory, she said, while women have richer long-term memory, which gives



them the ability to be crafters of powerful narratives that can relieve the turmoil of the turn of current events.

“A lot of people forget we’ve been through these times before as humans,” she said. “We’ve been in these isolationist periods and it’s our job to give people the tools they need to recall those times and to understand what our predecessors and our ancestors did in those moments.”

Ellis noted that much progress has occurred in her lifetime, from the year she was born, when women could have their names alone on financial documents, to her professional life, when she led a nearly all-female team.

She said she was puzzled by things that happened along the way, such as the women leaders who routinely promoted men over women, though they shared strengths and professional experiences.

“Women are people-centered creatures. We care about the people we’re working with,” Ellis said. “We have an amazing opportunity to leverage those strengths that we bring to the table as women, and

also to help the men succeed, too.”

She said, however, a team dominated by women, like the one she led, is not the ideal.

“I don’t think that made us stronger or better,” Ellis said. “I thought it certainly was an interesting culture and dynamic, but we have infused both genders, different personalities, different skill sets, different backgrounds, and that is what is making us better, stronger and richer as an organization. That comes back to what we can bring to the table as women.”

AI

Artificial intelligence has arrived in all industries, and the panelists said they are making inroads to using it intelligently in their industries. They urged everyone to develop at least a basic understanding of it if they don’t want to be left behind.

Marks had a few cautionary notes regarding using AI, including being aware of biases in the results of a query. The information in AI is drafted by humans who come with their own implicit biases. If AI is

being used to assign tasks, the biases of the coder may infiltrate the assignments.

“You always have to have that human overlay and not just pass everything off to AI,” Marks said.

She also warned to be judicious about using AI to record meetings because whatever transpires becomes stored in the ether of AI, and suggested carefully crafting a recording policy about how AI is to be used.

Marks recommends that clients pilot their use of AI with a small group and evaluate it after a period of time to see what works and what doesn’t work and make necessary adjustments before testing it again. Once the small group is confident of its usefulness, AI can be rolled out more widely in the organization.

“It is important to note that in the grand scheme of things we are still in the early stages of deploying AI,” Marks said.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

The panelists mentioned several books that have inspired their professional and personal lives, including:

- *The AI-Driven Leader: Harnessing AI to Make Faster, Smarter Decisions* (2024) by Geoff Woods
- *Atomic Habits* (2018) by James Clear
- *Becoming You: The Proven Method for Crafting Your Authentic Life and Career* (2025) by Suzy Welch
- *Dare to Lead* (2018) by Brené Brown
- *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom* (1997) by Don Miguel Ruiz
- *The Infinite Game* (2019) by Simon Sinek





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Shining a light on women leaders. That's The Phillips Lytle Way.

Phillips Lytle was proud to present the 2025 Women at the Table Executive Leadership Forum, where accomplished women leaders shared strategies and best practices for how they are navigating business in these changing times.

Celebrating highly respected women from across industries as they offered real-world perspectives on leadership, resilience and innovation has been inspirational and illuminating.



Phillips Lytle LLP

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