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She's sharp, witty, gutsy — the coach you wish you had. Shelley Zalis started a company, sold it for \$80 million, and then went into the business of equality. *Here's why.*

the Gap

"It is amazing when you follow your heart and you bring something to the world that is filling a need," says Zalis.



Real Leaders: You worked in media, research, and marketing, and you founded successful companies before you shifted your focus to the business of equality. Was there a specific life event that led to this shift?

Zalis: I pioneered online research — so if you’ve ever taken a crappy survey on the internet, I’m sorry, not sorry, because that was me. And I built that research company into a big success. We were profiled in some high-profile media, and my former statistics professor read an article and called me up and said, “How is that possible? You were terrible at statistics.” But I actually mastered how to tell stories from data. It’s all about storytelling. That’s how marketers use research. Before we hung up, I asked my professor if he’d like me to do a guest spot in his class. I told him I’d be happy to rescue his students, and we had a good laugh. That’s the feminine, by the way. Women are contextualizers and storytellers. Men are linear and analytic.

RL: Why did you start The Female Quotient?

Zalis: I was the only female CEO in the top 25 market research firms. While it felt isolating, it didn’t stop me — it motivated me. After I sold my company, I realized it was time to give back and create the support I wish I’d had throughout my career: girlfriends in business. At that time, there were so few women at the top, and we often competed with each other for limited spaces. I’m not going to pass that down to other generations of women. I wanted to shift that scarcity mindset to one of collaboration, where there’s room for all women to rise together. I also wanted to rewrite the workplace rules, which were written over 100 years ago by men for men. I was tired of being the exception — I wanted to help set a new standard.

RL: Were you able to preserve the culture of what you had built?

Zalis: When I sold my company, I had 250 employees operating in six cities and an incredible

culture. Overnight, we became a publicly traded company of 16,000 employees. So now I’m sitting on the board of a publicly traded French company — 23 men and two women. I had just sold my company and given them a five-year commitment — and we’re talking about my employees and integrating my beautiful little company into their organization. The new executives are discussing my team as if they were chess pieces, and here I am with tears coming down my face.

After the meeting I was pulled aside and told there’s no room for emotion in the boardroom. So I had two options: One, agree — that’s what your head says you should do, your cognitive reasoning. The other option is what I call a heartbeat moment, where you follow your heart — and that is how all my best decisions have been made. My heart knew that was wrong, and I made the decision to speak up. That’s when I began publicly advocating for empathy in leadership. Emotion, compassion, empathy, and genuine care should have a place in leadership. That experience solidified my belief that leadership must evolve.

RL: Why is empathy so important in business?

Zalis: Empathy is the heart of leadership. Without it, you can’t connect with or inspire your team. After that boardroom experience, I realized that my next focus was going to be on changing the gender equation and closing the gap. Empathy is at the core of this mission. We need companies that have equality in their DNA and CEOs with empathy, and both of those things are truly missing. When I received an invitation to the World Economic Forum, it came with the disclaimer, “We want you to come, but you might not feel welcome.”

Wow. My head said, “Who wants to go to a place you might not feel welcome?” My heart said, “You have to go.” At what point do we take the responsibility to break a pattern? How do you change the status quo at the World Economic Forum? Gender equality wasn’t on the agenda, so I decided to bring it there.



That's why I founded The Female Quotient — to create spaces where women feel seen, valued, and equal, even in the most male-dominated environments. We bring together leaders — both men and women — who understand that conscious leadership isn't about gender; it's about choice. Once you're conscious of inequality, you have a choice: act or don't. We bring together leaders who choose to act. Conscious leaders recognize their influence and use it to drive equality, proving that change begins with intentional decisions.

I had no idea if it was going to work, but it did. It is amazing when you follow your heart and you bring something to the world that is filling a need. I did it because it was something I wish I had had as a female CEO.

The Female Quotient focuses on three things: We have The Equality

Lounges, which are experiences at pretty much every industry conference across 30 categories from cybersecurity, technology, and finance to sports, music, and entertainment. Our content and social media struck such a chord that we grew to 6 million women in business following us, so now we're one of the fastest-growing media businesses. And the third area is transformational thought leadership.

RL: What kind of thought leadership?

Zalis: The World Economic Forum estimates it will take 131 years to close the gender gap. Why should it take 131 years? We've achieved the "impossible" before — it took 10 years to send people to the moon, and we created pandemic vaccines in record time — so why not gender equality? Gender equality is a human-made problem. In fact, it is the only one of

“I break the rules. Old patterns need to be broken to change the equation and close the gender gap.”

Zalis's first equality-focused business started as a company creating a safe space for women at predominately male, big industry conferences.

the UN's 17 global goals that a CEO can achieve in the lifetime of their leadership. They can't fix climate, they can't fix hunger, they can't fix education, but they can actually close the gender gap in their workplace. It's the only legacy they can leave in the lifetime of their leadership.

At The Female Quotient, we call this the Flipping Point. We are partnering with Fortune 500 companies to tackle gaps in workforce, leadership, pay, care, data, and procurement. Companies take intentional, measurable steps to close the gender gap in just five years — “flip it in five,” we like to say. It's not just a dream — it's a commitment. All it requires is intentional action for change and a conscious mindset and prioritization. Good CEOs don't want to leave the pay gap data sitting on their shelves. Equality is possible if you want it.

RL: What can fixing the gender gap actually do for a company?

Zalis: We call it the business of equality. It's about closing the gender gap in the workplace, not as a “nice-to-have,” but as a business imperative. Equality impacts everything — from talent attraction to market success. Today, CEOs know that equality is essential for sustainable growth and innovation. Equality isn't an option; it's a necessity. The business of equality is good for business. CEOs must be accountable and responsible for equality.

RL: How did most companies receive that message 10 years ago?

Zalis: Women are labeled as too aggressive and too pushy and too assertive, and everyone's

always trying to fix the women. Stop trying to fix it. We're not broken. Why is it that women are the ones always getting the leadership training? Men don't get leadership training — they get management training. We should all get management training.

Women subconsciously are like, “Oh, I'm not a good leader because they say I need leadership training.” And the men are thinking with bravado, “We don't need leadership training because we're not getting it. So we're the leaders and they're the followers because they need the leadership training.” For 10 years I've been in the business of equality, but first I had to get women to support women.

It's OK to own your passion, your compassion, your empathy. Own it. You're not too aggressive, you are just passionate. When you have tears coming down your face, it's not because you're weak. It's because you care, and caring is a good thing. You don't have to hide that.

RL: Do you think the leadership training for women sometimes falls under the guise of a company saying, “Look what we're doing for women?”

Zalis: Yes, but everyone should get leadership training, and everyone should get management training. Whoever needs it should get it, but it tends to be only the women getting it, so that's a stereotype.

RL: What are the non-negotiable qualities that a real leader must have?

Zalis: Compassion, empathy, collaboration, kindness, support. Real leaders tend to eat last.

“Gender equality...is the only one of the UN's 17 global goals that a CEO can achieve in the lifetime of their leadership. They can't fix climate, they can't fix hunger, they can't fix education, but they can actually close the gender gap in their workplace.”



“For 10 years I’ve been in the business of equality, but first I had to get women to support women,” says Zalis.

They push people up. They listen to hear. I hire for passion, train for skill.

RL: What are your thoughts about female empowerment?

Zalis: I recently wrote an article and posted it on LinkedIn, and it went viral. It was about getting rid of the word empower. I realized that we talk a lot about female empowerment, but you never hear about male empowerment. You talk about empowered women, but you never hear about empowered men. And if you actually look up the word empower, it means someone gives you power. Why do women have imposter syndrome? We have always been waiting for someone to give us permission, for someone to give us a seat at the table, for someone to give us that voice. We’re always waiting. We’re always waiting for what? We’ve always had power within us. Men have not been waiting for anything. They’ve taken it, they’ve used it, they’ve owned it.

Let’s create a new word: We are not empowered; we are “inpowered.” Let’s stop waiting for a permission slip to do things. It’s about women recognizing their inherent strength and using it unapologetically. We don’t need male allies — we need leadership allies — people in power who value equality and act on it.

I don’t care if you’re a man or a woman — if you’re in a position of power, use it. We don’t need to take power from men to give it to women. We can all have it. We just use it differently.

There’s the masculine and the feminine. And by the way, plenty of men have the feminine, plenty of women have the masculine. I don’t call them soft powers. I call them essential, critical skills. Empathy, compassion, and passion are critical skills. They are strengths.

RL: You were one of the creators of the “See It Be It” movement in media. How does what we see in the media impact female emerging leaders?

Zalis: Media shapes how we see ourselves and each other. During the Paris Olympics, despite achieving gender parity among athletes, the only ad in the Opening Ceremony showed only men and male athletes — even though women were the stars and also brought home more medals. These aren’t minor oversights; they send powerful messages about who deserves recognition. We work with companies to address these biases constructively, making intentional changes to reflect equality. After I sold my company for \$80 million, *The New York Times* ran the story on the front page — but in the Style section, not Business. If I were a man, where would the story have been? I want to change that narrative for all women.

RL: Would you agree that some gender balance issues are unintentional or a result of ignorance?

Zalis: There’s not always some agenda behind it. It may be sloppy work. It may be thoughtless.

The most important thing is first to make people aware. I'll make you aware, but I'll do it quietly. Once you're aware, you have a choice to do something or not, but I'll first give people the benefit of the doubt and then make them conscious of the imbalance.

RL: You call yourself the chief troublemaker. What is your favorite kind of trouble?

Zalis: I break the rules. Old patterns need to be broken to change the equation and close the gender gap. I left the traditional workplace because the rules didn't work for me; I was tired of being the exception. I believe that if you create rules that work for the exceptions, they'll work for everyone. Lived experience is key to understanding how to create these rules — it's not in a textbook. I disrupt norms, challenge patterns, and set new standards so we can all thrive at home and work. It's not about causing trouble; it's about creating progress.

RL: Looking back, is there anything you'd do differently? Any advice you'd give to others?

Zalis: Follow your heart. I am 62, and I actually think I'm at the best part of my life — I really do. This is such a great chapter. Every chapter is a new chapter. I don't think that 60 is the new 40, or whatever people say. 60 is 60. I think I'm better than I've ever been. Be ageless. Live life with no regrets. Age is a mindset. Live at the moment. I'm bold and getting bolder.

I want to look back and know I tried everything I believed in. My advice is simple: Take risks. Don't let fear of failure hold you back. Every movement I've started came from a risk I was willing to take. Age is just a mindset. Whether you're 20 or 60, it's about having the courage to follow your heart and pursue what matters most. The best is yet to come. ■

Carla Kalogeridis is editor of *Real Leaders*.

Zalis says she has replaced the concept of failure with how much risk are you willing to take? "Are you willing to take a risk, or are you willing to have a regret?"



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