

what we heard

& Leaders 2017
Daughters

Leaders & Daughters

“Visible advances within a generation”

Istanbul

March 9, 2017



EgonZehnder



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With a clear appeal to follow your passion, Egon Zehnder's Leaders & Daughters event in Istanbul featured a father-daughter pair who are individually corporate leaders in their own right. Nihat and Ebru Özdemir, both executives in the Limak Holding group, inspired an audience of about 75 people March 9 at the Swissotel on the Bosphorus by sharing their experiences and the challenges they faced. And, in a unique, personal twist to these global events, the hosts – Egon Zehnder partners Murat Yeşildere and Ayşe Güçlü Onur – brought their own daughter and father to the stage, respectively, to relate their own experiences.

Follow your passion wherever it leads

Turkey's Limak Group started in 1976 as a construction company, an industry widely regarded as a bastion of macho attitudes, but co-founder and chairman Nihat Özdemir told the Istanbul gathering of leaders and their daughters that women should not let preconceived notions stop them from pursuing their passions in any industry.

"I feel proud when I see our female employees are working in the fields, in construction, and in plants," he said. Mr. Özdemir, whose group now includes interests in tourism, energy, and infrastructure, spoke avidly about his love for engineering.

"He spoke so passionately about being an engineer that the daughters in the audience were taken aback by his passion," said Egon Zehnder consultant Ayşe Güçlü Onur, one of event's hosts. "When they started the firm 40 years ago, it was really rare for a woman to be working in the industry."

One of those rare women was his daughter, Ebru Özdemir, a trained engineer and now founder and chairperson of Limak Investments. "When I first started in my father's business, no one knew how to speak English and they were not used to seeing a woman as a manager. As the time went by, more and more women employees were retained within our organization." She added, "I never felt uncomfortable for being a woman in business life. My brother and I were raised in the same circumstances and were offered the same opportunities."

Ms. Özdemir recalled how when she was nine-months' pregnant Limak was in the midst of building Istanbul's second international airport. Despite her imminent delivery, she insisted on attending routine site inspections, and on one visit she joked that if she had a girl, she would name her after the airport's own namesake, Sabiha Gökçen, the country's first female combat pilot. Soon after, she delivered a son. "The story just really resonated with the audience," Onur said. "If you want to be successful as a woman in this world, this is what you have to do."

Overcoming internal obstacles

The speakers emphasized that while obstacles remain for women in business, it is most important that women forge their own path and recognize that some of these hurdles are internal. "I try to impress the idea upon women that the only barrier they have is their pre-conceptions, and they are the only ones who can raise [themselves] beyond those barriers," Ms. Özdemir said.

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But women should not feel alone in their efforts, she said. “They also need a role model to support them in their career and social lives, which brings out the importance of sisterhood,” Ms. Özdemir continued. “I visualize a business environment in which women give a hand to their sisters.”

Mr. Özdemir added that colleagues and supervisors must also recognize that women face competing priorities that most men don’t. “Women’s burdens are heavier since they are responsible for household issues, raising a child, and performing at the office at the same time,” he said.

But he added that it is important to strike the right balance. “You should never stop being active in the social life, even while prospering in business life,” he said. “One should maintain the balance. Always keep doing your business, but never forget to take part in social initiatives.”

The younger generation is leading the way

Toward the end of the discussion, Egon Zehnder consultants and event hosts Ayşe Güçlü Onur and Murat Yeşildere brought their own father and daughter on stage to add a personal touch to the issues. Mustafa Güçlü noted how the country

is changing, and much of this is to the credit of young, ambitious women.

“Turkey experienced a turning point in female executives participating in business life. Back in the day, there were just a handful of women trying to survive in the arena, and Ayşe’s generation of internationally educated, bright women with drive boosted that achievement,” he said. “Ayşe has always been decisive and influential. Even when she was a teenager, she knew which school to choose and was quite confident that she would get accepted.”

Su Yeşildere talked how he gave her room to be ambitious, even from an early age, but also his charms. “I love the most my father’s funny side. He knows how to make me laugh,” she said. “From the age of six, I aspired to be a legal counsel. Being fair and just was very important for me. Also, I knew my resilient and even stubborn side, which would ensure ‘success’ for all my clients.”

After the dinner, Mr. Yeşildere said it was quite moving to have his daughter on the stage with him. “I felt proud of my daughter,” he said. “It was kind of the climax of the event for me. It was really very emotional.”



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Hosts



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About Leaders & Daughters

To mark International Women's Day, Egon Zehnder conceived Leaders & Daughters, a global series of events that bring the world's most admired leaders and their daughters together to uncover the motivations, challenges and opportunities that face the next generation of professional women.

In 2017, we went further. In celebration of International Women's Day, we hosted Leaders & Daughters events in more than 40 cities worldwide – bringing together the voices of more than 3,500 participants to share their stories of success as well as the obstacles that are preventing progress. We share one common goal: to collectively pave a better future for the next generation of women leaders.

In addition to the events, we have also launched a campaign, "To My Daughter," in which leaders write letters to their daughters about their hopes and dreams for the future. To participate, please visit www.leadersanddaughters.com.

Visit Leaders & Daughters at
www.egonzehnder.com

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