

More Women Cracking The Auto Industry's Glass Ceiling With Skills, Thick Skin

When Mary Barra was appointed General Motors Corp. CEO in 2013 shards of the proverbial glass ceiling fell on the auto industry and cracked open the window to advancement for women in an industry dominated by men.

Six years later, Ginger Butz and Florence Acuna are prime examples of how much Barra's appointment helped change the auto industry's otherwise turgid culture, opening an increasing number of opportunities for women to take on leadership positions.

Florence Acuna joined Kuka Robotics in Fremont, Calif. as a technical account manager last June after spending about eight years at Tesla. Acuna said she loved working at Tesla but felt her "path had ended" there, so it was time to move on. But, she said, the cultures at both Tesla and Kuka are fairly gender-blind when considering whom to promote.

"At Tesla I worked with a different age range who learned how to respect women and actually treat them fairer," said Acuna.

"Kuka is a mixture of old and new. I feel like I'm not getting

held back at all. I feel like I have a stable ground."

Carol Lempert is a former professional actress based in Secaucus, N.J. who now uses her skills to teach people in various businesses, including automotive, how to best present themselves in order to gain respect and consideration for promotions.



Carol Lempert, speaker and coach

"The bigger challenge for women, especially in an industry that has historically been male-dominated, is the picture of what success looks like. It often looks like someone wearing a suit or a hard hat. Or, someone wearing steel-toed boots," Lempert explained in an interview.

She said GM's Mary Barra has been able to change that perception with some key attributes.

"Mary is a wonderful combination of someone who is direct, warm and confident. Also, she is someone who is able to manage her own emotional inner workings. This balance of being able to be direct, warm, empathetic and confident has really differentiated her. Both the men and women who work with her trust her."

Gaining trust and respect also comes from asserting oneself in meetings and other group settings, said Lempert. It's a tactic Ginger Butz said helped build confidence in her leadership abilities.

"I always make sure I participate in those activities so they can hear a female perspective," said Butz. "I always make sure my presence is heard. If there's a working team, we need to make sure we're taking leadership roles. I always make sure I volunteer to lead groups at work."

Florence Acuna said she was inspired to stand her ground as a student at an all-girls Notre Dame High School in San Jose, Calif. "Attending an all-girls high school taught me from an early age that it's

important to surround yourself with a strong group of women to support you,” she said.

“I’m thankful to have women in my life who helped build up my confidence, and I encourage other women—particularly those who are in male-dominated industries, such as the auto industry—to identify women who will challenge and support them.”

Ginger Butz feels women are in a better position for promotions, especially in technical and manufacturing industries because more female students are studying subjects those companies value.

“I really think we’re going to start seeing a shift, because now 47% of the workforce is female, but we’re going to start seeing a shift in businesses like automotive or manufacturing because more young females are getting excited about engineering and math and science.

I think that when I was in school it was still not that case.

We were more driven to be teachers or nurses,” said Butz.

In the end, though, gender parity in the auto industry is still a long way off so Ginger Butz says women “have to know our business going in, that’s how we’re going to move up. We have to listen and learn from everybody and just have to work hard.”

Florence Acuna advises women aspiring to move up the ranks to take on another important attribute; “have a thick skin. There is that predominately boys club in there. It definitely is a male-dominated environment. You will get passed up in opportunities and your manager has certain views about you. You have to make the decision. If you want to stay there, stay there. If you have a goal to aspire to be a leader.

If your company is not going to let you take that role get as much as you can, then move on.”