



EXCEPTIONAL WOMEN'S COACHING

The Tiara Spotlight

Shining our light on inspiring women around the world.



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Van der Laan & Company is an executive search firm with a mission of inspiring and connecting people.

What is your story?

I was born after the Second World War in that generation that had the expectation that they would succeed at everything they tried. Three pivotal decisions I made – on gut feeling alone (nothing rational about them) – have shaped the course of my life.

First: My family – my Dutch parents, myself, and two brothers – immigrated to the US. We went to live in Syracuse, New York, became US citizens, and grew up in a suburb. Family values were centered around being intelligent and intellectual. Physicality was OK, but more important was the life of the mind. I was all set to attend an East Coast women's college, but at the last moment my father was offered a board position back in Holland and I, being given the choice, thought it would be more exciting to move back to Europe. This was the first life-altering decision. I hadn't a clue of course, how much that would change me and the rest of my life.

Second: Back in Holland I had to spend another two years in Dutch high school, learning the language and the culture (BIG culture shock) and went on to study law, as my mother had before me. The second life defining moment was to decide, after working some years as a Dutch lawyer, that I needed more education and that I wanted to go Harvard Business School. I didn't even apply to any other school. I was accepted – oh joy – but found, again at Harvard, that there was another big culture shock in store for me. My tried and true methods for academic success: read, understand, remember, and regurgitate; didn't work with the case method; you had to figure out what was really going on and then decide what to do. I had to learn to think for myself.

Third: After graduating with an MBA, I went to work for McKinsey in Amsterdam and then spent a long time (25 years) in various executive jobs in corporations and in smaller companies and as a consultant. I worked hard, was not unsuccessful, but had nowhere near as much success as I would have liked. I didn't quite understand why. When I eventually wound up with two friends in a small consultancy practice, I was rendered somehow invisible to the broader Dutch business community. Only the people with whom I had worked were fans. At one point a partner at an executive search company had said to me, "There is no demand for women."

All this became crystal clear one day when I read an article in the newspaper; an interview with Kleisterlee, then CEO of Philips. He was cited to have said: "There are no capable ambitious Dutch women." This hit home: not only because it was so patently untrue, but because evidently *no* Dutch women were being considered for top positions. This was a turning point. Within a year I set up an



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executive search firm for women, my third momentous decision. It was astoundingly successful in a crowded field.

What are you passionate about?

The mission of this consultancy practice and the mission of the company I would eventually launch: to promote the appointment of women to top executive positions for which they are eminently qualified. Not only because it is a social and a moral issue, this explicit or implicit discrimination against women in Board positions, but because I believe we will only be able to change the hierarchical systems and structures that no longer serve us if we have different leaders, and some of these must be women. Women inherently have many of the leadership qualities we need at this point of our evolution.

What are you doing (up to) in your life right now?

Last year I left the consultancy practice purely because there was no other way to 'divorce' from a partnership that was no longer working. I have not looked back, but started a new company, and this one bears my own name: Van der Laan & Company. An ex-colleague (and ex-competitor) recently said to me "It stands for quality and content: your name is the brand."

What's next? What are you committed to?

Every day I am committed to *the cause*: to change the world by facilitating new leadership, and to my personal ambition which is: to be strong, powerful, and free. This is the essence of what I want to achieve in my life, now at age 62.