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My Name is Steve
by Cecilia Boggi
Commentary[1]

Women in Project Management Leadership

"My Name is Steve"[1]

Cecilia Boggi

"Leadership has masculine traits"

"Technology is not for women"

"Entrepreneurs are men"

Women still today continue dealing with prejudices, stereotypes and difficulties in our professional development. What has been metaphorically referred to as "Crystal Roof", "Crystal Labyrinth" or "Sticky Floor", is still valid in the XXI century.

However, we could not complain if we compare it with what the courageous women who preceded us have had to fight for to open a path for us and make great advances.

One of these brave women is the talented Stephanie Shirley, who had to change her name to "Steve" to be received in the business world of the United Kingdom in the '60s.

At that time, women couldn't even drive a truck or open a bank account without their husband's permission. Imagine the difficulty to enter into the workforce. Those who achieved it have had to survive with the fear of sexual harassment on a regular basis.

Stephanie Shirley, who was born in Germany, terrified at the age of 5 years old, in 1939, arrived in England as a Jewish refugee, escaping the Holocaust with her 9-year-old sister Renata. Having escaped from Germany to Austria, his parents raised the two little sisters to the Kindertransport program, famous for having saved a large number of children from the terrible fate that would await them in the Europe of the Nazis. Stephanie and Renata were received by a kind couple who resided close to London.

In her book "Let it Go," [2] Shirley says that being a refugee and saving herself from the Holocaust marked her life in such a way that she decided to make sure that each day was worth living. According to her own words: "*I was determined not to allow other people to define me, to open my way by myself, to build something new and not be discouraged by the conventions of the day*."

Being that she liked math very much and, at that time the most scientific topic being taught in schools for girls were biology, she decided to enroll in a boys' school, which was not easy for her. She had to start dressing as a boy as a way to not be noticed.

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[2] Shirley, S. (2012). *Let It Go: The Memoirs of Dame Stephanie Shirley*. https://www.amazon.com/Let-Go-Memoirs-Stephanie-Shirley/dp/1782342826

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When she finished her high school she started working; at the same time she began her evening studies to graduate with honors with her Mathematics Degree, 6 years later.

In 1951, being only 18 years old, she was hired at the Research Station of the Post Office in Dollis Hill, at the northwest of London, the place where they had developed World War II decoding machines.

She worked on transatlantic telephone cables and on the development of the first electronic telephone calls, among other projects.

Although she liked his work a lot, she was frustrated to see that she never received a promotion, unlike her male colleagues, who, with less merits and qualifications, obtained the promotions.

In those years Stephanie Shirley married Derek, another employee of the Post Office, making things even more difficult for her. One of them had to quit the job, and while they both had the same hierarchy at the organization, given Stephanie's frustration to see that she could not thrive in that place, she decided to try something different.

Thus, in 1962, at the age of 29, she founded her company "**Freelance Programmers**", with the mission of giving jobs to women, avoiding misogyny in the workplace and providing them with fair compensation, without the wage gap by gender that at that time was far worse than now.

From the table in her dining room and with a minimal investment, **Stephanie Shirley became a pioneering entrepreneur in the software development industry.**

Another novelty aspect of her enterprise was the flexibility of schedules and the possibility of working from their houses that had their programmers, allowing them to balance the work with their dedication to home and family.

Dame Stephanie Shirley, in the '60s implemented the Home Office concept!

All the technology available for remote work at that time was the ground telephone line, and that was the only requirement that she asked of women during the job interviews.

It is difficult to imagine right now, at the communications revolution era, that those women wrote their programs with pencil and paper, then sent them by post mailing to the processing center, where they drilled the code on tapes or cards, to then process the first execution and debugging after that.

Stephanie tells in her book "Let it Go," that when her son was born, he sometimes cried while she was answering the phone and talking with clients. So they would not realize that she was working from home, Shirley put the recording of a typewriter in the background so that the noise covered the crying baby.

Obviously, it was not easy to break through in a world dominated by men.

When she sent cover letters, offering consulting and programming services to potential clients, she did not even receive an answer.

She realized then that using her own name did not give her credibility and at the suggestion of her husband, she began to sign as "Steve", which gave her good results and they started receiving her at business meetings, generating great surprise when "Steve" introduced herself as a woman.

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"**Freelance Programmers**" started to take off, employing mostly women with only three men. One nice anecdote is that when in England in 1975 the law of gender discrimination was enacted, Shirley had to hire more men.

Her company grew up rapidly and, in the 1980s, her thousands of programmers, mostly women, wrote software for the best companies in the United Kingdom and developed projects, such as the programming of the flight recorder of the black box of the Concorde plane.

In 1996, the company was listed on the London Stock Exchange and came to be valued at 3 billion dollars. Since Shirley had distributed more than 50% of her shares to her employees, at no cost to them, seventy women became millionaires at that time.

Upon retiring, Stephanie Shirley began to dedicate herself to philanthropy through the Shirley Foundation, which is dedicated to the research and treatment of autistic children. Having had an autistic child herself, she supported the advancement of science about this disorder.

Shirley was part of the founding members of the British Computer Society in 1957. She was appointed Officer of the Excellent Order of the British Empire and promoted to Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2000. She was also Ambassador of the United Kingdom for Philanthropy and has received other multiple recognitions.

I think we have much to learn from the story of Dame Stephanie Shirley, who was not stopped by the "glass ceiling" or any other of the many difficulties that she had in her life, using all her means to enforce her work and the work of thousands of women who became part of her company.

I propose to you that, the next time you face a difficulty in your profession, remember Stephanie "Steve" Shirley!

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About the Author

Cecilia Boggi

Buenos Aires, Argentina

Cecilia Boggi, MBA, PMP, CSM is founder and Executive Director of activePMO, giving consulting services and training in Project Management and Leadership skills in Argentina and Latin America.

Graduated in Computer Science from Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina, she has managed software development projects and PMO implementation projects for more than 25 years both in the government and private sector, in different countries in Latin America.

Cecilia has an Executive Master's degree in Business Administration from the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, Spain and also has graduated from an Executive Program in Business Management at Universidad del CEMA, Argentina.

She holds the Project Management Professional (PMP®) credential since 2003, is certified as SDI Facilitator from Personal Strengths©, is a Professional Executive Coach accredited by Association for Coaching, UK, PMO-CP from PMO Global Alliance, Certified Scrum Master (CSM) form Scrum Alliance and alumni of the PMI Leadership Institute Master Class 2012.

Ms. Boggi is Past President of the PMI Buenos Aires Argentina Chapter, and is a founding member of the PMI Nuevo Cuyo Chapter and PMI Santa Cruz Bolivia Chapter. She was PMI's Mentor for Region 13, Latin America South, for the years 2014-2017. Cecilia participated in the development of PMI's PMBOK® Guide 5th Edition, leading the Chapter 9, Human Resource Management, content team; she is professor of Project Management and Leadership in some Universities and Business Schools in Latin America.

Cecilia can be contacted at Cecilia@activepmo.com and www.activepmo.com

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