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From the Department of External Relations and Communications

Leadership, workplace expert to discuss career journey in virtual Vangermeersch Lecture on Nov. 5

Media Contact: Tony LaRoche <mailto:anthony_laroche@uri.edu> , 401-874-4894 | Share:

KINGSTON, R.I. – Oct. 28, 2020 – Through 30 years with Fortune 150 companies, Debra Boelkes soaked up a swimming pool’s worth of knowledge about what makes leaders so successful that their inspired workers will gladly follow them. Actually, she was taking mental notes even before then.

“While I didn’t realize it at the time, I learned some of this as a senior in high school from my first ‘corporate’ job as a part-time dancer in the Main Street parade at Disneyland,” says Boelkes ’80, MBA ’81, an award-winning author and expert on leadership and workplace culture. “The rest came from some great leadership development training early in my Fortune 100 career, through trial and error, and from role models, both good and bad. I’m still learning every day.”

Since breaking out on her own, Boelkes has used that knowledge to build consulting firms that focus on advancing high-performing leaders and creating successful, inviting places to work.

She will share those insights and her career journey at the 13th Annual Vangermeersch Endowed Lecture, hosted by the University of Rhode Island [College of Business](https://web.uri.edu/business/) <<https://web.uri.edu/business/>>, on Thursday, Nov. 5, at 3:30 p.m. The virtual lecture is free and open to the public. (See details below.)

“My journey has taught me that it doesn’t matter what your family background happens to be. You can overcome any adversity,” says Boelkes, founder of



<<https://today.uri.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Boelkes-2.jpg>>

Debra Boelkes

Business World Rising. “Life is too short to not love what you do. Discover whatever it is that you love and then do that – in an organization that you love, where the culture is a good fit for you.”

Boelkes started her career in fashion design in Southern California before relocating to Newport in 1980 with her husband, a naval officer reassigned to Naval Station Newport. Interested in running her own business, Boelkes went back to school, earning a bachelor’s degree in business administration and an M.B.A. in management information systems from URI.

A URI internship with Raytheon’s Missile Systems division in Portsmouth started a 30-year career leading sales, global business operations and professional service organizations within Fortune 150 technology companies, including AT&T, IBM, and Arrow Electronics. Along the way, Boelkes built a reputation as a passionate, people-first leader who inspired teams to deliver top results.

In 2009, Boelkes launched Business Women Rising, a leadership develop firm dedicated to advancing high-potential business women to senior leadership roles. The company evolved into Business World Rising, which helps organizations create “best-place-to-work” cultures where “heartfelt” leaders inspire their teams to do their best. Boelkes is also the author of “The WOW Factor Workplace: How to Create a Best Place to Work Culture” (2019) and “Heartfelt Leadership: How to Capture the Top Spot and Keep on Soaring” (2020). She’s working on her next book, “Women on Top: What’s Keeping You from Executive Leadership?”

“Leadership development,” she says, “can happen through trial and error, by observing and learning from role models (good and bad), from coaching and mentoring, and organized training. All of it is important if you wish to be a good leader.

“There are also many ways to create a successful workplace culture. It can happen by accident or it can be created and nurtured. What may seem like a great workplace to some, may not be so for everyone. Because life is too short not to love what you do, it’s important to find a workplace culture that suits you.”

Boelkes, who lives in Florida with her husband, Chris, is active in numerous organizations, including founding and serving as chair of the Florida-based civic group, We The People, and as chapter president for P.E.O. International, a philanthropic organization that promotes the advancement of women.

Boelkes’ lecture, “Soaring Beyond Roadblocks: A Heartfelt Leader’s WOW Factor Journey,” is open to the public. Go to the Vangermeersch Lecture [webpage <https://web.uri.edu/business/news/2020-vangermeersch-endowed-lecture-series/>](https://web.uri.edu/business/news/2020-vangermeersch-endowed-lecture-series/) to register; you will be emailed a link to watch the lecture when it is presented.

The Vangermeersch Lecture was established in 2008 with a gift from URI alumna Deborah Ciolfi ’80, endowing a series that honors former accounting

Professor Emeritus Richard Vangermeersch, who retired in 2004 after 34 years at URI.

Media Contact:

Tony LaRoche <mailto:anthony_laroche@uri.edu>

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University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI 02881, USA 1.401.874.1000

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