

Forbes

Ditch The Power Suit: How Executive Women Are Finding New Ways To Make Deals



CEOs and Founders enjoying a pajama party at the inaugural PowerDown2PowerUp executive retreat, May 6-8, 2024, The Ranch Hudson Valley [-] NICOLE BERNS

It wasn't your typical Monday night.

Tucked away in the living room of J.P. Morgan's refurbished 52-room estate, nestled in 200 forested acres in New York's Hudson Valley, sat 34 of the country's most successful female CEOs and founders - in their pajamas and slippers.

"Amidst the hustle and bustle, we found peace and self-discovery surrounded by nature's embrace," shared Dafna Mizrahi, CEO of [Curamia Tequila](#). "These past two days have been a journey of connection and inspiration, surrounded by incredible women who have become family."

It's this very sentiment that underlies the newest iteration of the industry conference - PowerDown2PowerUp, a sort of summer camp experience for executive women. The brainchild of [DealmakeHers](#) co-founder Stacy Berns and Marie Claire Power Trip and Start With a Good (___) founder Nancy Berger, the 2-day get together at The Ranch Hudson Valley brought C-level women across industries together - but in a very "non corporate" way - to bond, learn, discover and break down the barriers that often lead women to compete rather than collaborate. And yes, that included a pajama party!



The Ranch Hudson Valley NICOLE BERNS

"The retreat experience differed from other professional events I've been to in its departure from formalities and typical panel discussions," said Sandra Campos. The CEO and president of [PetMeds](#) appreciated the emphasis on relationship-building. "I found it more meaningful as it organically led to learning opportunities and potential

business connections."

Large Industry Conferences are Giving Way to Intimate Retreats

The women arrived on a Monday morning, still buttoned up, connected to laptops and mentally juggling career changes, corporate crises and family responsibilities.

48 makeup-less hours later, after 6 am stretches, guided hikes, sound baths, ear seeding, communal meals and bear, wild turkey and snake sightings, these same women left in yoga pants decoupled from the stressors of their jobs and connected to a new community of women all genuinely interested in supporting each other.



“It was an unbelievable experience - the best 48 hours I’ve spent in a very long time,” says Deirdre Quinn. The cofounder and CEO of Lafayette 148 felt the energy among the women was truly authentic. “The difference between this and the many other conferences I’ve attended is that no one was there *expecting* to do business or a deal. There was no expectation that you had to perform.”

Lessons from a Pajama Party

Even if you can’t host or attend a small executive retreat like PowerDown2PowerUp, the lessons gleaned from the event can be used by anyone looking to create space for professional women to authentically connect.

#1 Dress to Express

Wearing a power suit evokes “girl boss,” but also sends a strong message - I’m in work mode. And work mode can create barriers and expectations that prevent true collaboration.

To help your guests learn about each other as people and not just as CEOs, encourage them to dress in yoga pants or jeans - or however they feel most comfortable expressing who they are outside the boardroom. That may also mean no makeup. PowerDown2PowerUp guests spent 2 days in workout clothes and ponytails!



#2 Bond Over Discovery

Relationship psychologists encourage discovery as a tool for building friendships, which is the foundation of any relationship. Trying something new together provides a unique opportunity to connect over a shared experience.

Guests at PowerDown2PowerUp were the first group to take over The Ranch Hudson Valley and exploring the house and property together (and sharing amazing pictures on social media!) created great ice breakers. The women also tried other new experiences together - like ear crystals to balance hormones and a breathwork class for relaxation.

“Many of us arrived as complete strangers,” said True Beauty Ventures cofounder Christina Nuñez, “and left as friends.”



#3 Make it Personal

Allowing guests elements of choice - not only in terms of content, but also activities and food - creates excitement and leads to increased engagement.

On the first day of the retreat, for example, women could chose between hiking or yoga. Even choices at dinner (zucchini ravioli or shepherd's pie?) led to lively conversations about family recipes and traditions.

Berns and Berger also took time to carefully curate and personalize gifts for each guest. Sneakers and hiking boots in the correct shoe size, pajamas complementing each guests' skin tone and appropriately sized athletic wear and apparel were waiting for each guest in their rooms.

“The only stressful part of this trip,” joked Stephanie Horton, Google’s Senior Director, Global Consumer Marketing, “was trying to figure out how I was going to get all of the amazing gifts home!!”

#4 Eliminate the hard sell

One thing I hear on repeat is that industry conferences have become too sponsor driven. “Whenever I go to a conference, everyone is trying to sell me something,” said one senior financial advisor. “At the retreat, everyone was trying to give, not get.”

While the retreat had numerous sponsors, they were in the form of products that enhanced the onsite experience. The group gifts (and resulting Instagram pictures) helped create a real feeling of community.



#5 Put Diverse Women in a Room and Watch the Collaborations Grow

There is real value in bringing diversity of thought and experience into one room. When that happens, collaborations form organically.

“How can we as business owners take lessons from you creatives,” Tai Beauchamp, Chief Brand Officer of [BROWN GIRL Jane](#) asked actress and director Melora Hardin. And Amy Shecter, incoming CEO of [Cast Jewelry](#), offered to use her business background to help Hardin write her business plan.



Immediately following the retreat, Curamia's Mizrahi teased a collaboration with Nutritious Life founder and president Keri Glassman. Strangers before the retreat, the two women quickly bonded and will soon collaborate on Glassman's podcast.

Aliya Sahai, a principal at Bernstein Private Wealth Management, was recognized at the retreat for her work with [Sanctuary for Families](#) (a not-for-profit supporting survivors of gender-based violence.) Mizrahi stepped up and offered to provide the tequila at the charity's annual benefit.

Berns and Berger have tapped into a new way to create space for senior executive women to literally let their hair down and connect authentically with other women across industries. "It didn't matter what you had accomplished professionally," said Nuñez. "Whether you were at the top of your game or in the middle of a major pivot, we all left feeling supported, inspired and grateful for the deep connections we made."

[Skin](#) founder Susan Beischel shared that sentiment. Posting on Instagram about the most powerful pajama party of the year she said simply, "Thank you for the privilege to be in the room!"