Meet Inspiring EIT Community Women Leaders and Entrepreneurs

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Tell us a bit about yourself.
Aside from being an EIT Governing Board member, I’m currently the Director of Biocenter Finland, an umbrella organisation which supports the entire Finnish life-scientist community. I am also the chair of the Board of Technology Academy Finland. We award the Millenium Technology Prize, one of the world’s largest innovation prizes. This one million euro prize is awarded to radical innovations that have changed the world. So far, 2 of the 8 prize winners have gone on to receive the Nobel prize, highlighting the connection between research and innovation.

What was the most rewarding moment in your career so far?
I have had several rewarding moments, and they have one common denominator: creating something new. Firstly, I created a graduate school for PhD training in life sciences, which became one of the best in Finland. Secondly, I had the opportunity to create the Institute for Molecular Medicine Finland, that now is a driver of personalised medicine. You can see why I’m so passionate about the EIT; it is a completely new concept enabling the translation of research findings into practice and modernising education in the sphere of innovation.

How and when did you get interested in entrepreneurship?
This happened around 2008, when we were establishing the Aalto University. We saw opportunities for universities to provide education and research that will have a positive impact on society. During this period I began to see, understand and fully appreciate innovation and entrepreneurship.

What is the most important advice you would give to women who would like to become innovators/entrepreneurs?
I’ve been very worried about the number of women in academia and in the innovation scene. Even in the Nordic countries, a leading region in terms of gender equality, only 24% of professors are women. Things are getting better though; prizes and competitions such as the EU Prize for Women Entrepreneurs are a great means of highlighting successful entrepreneurs and inspiring others. So my advice: Just go! Be brave, and make yourself known.

Currently, some people talk about there being a ‘gender gap’ among entrepreneurs. Do you think this is true?
Yes, this is true, but again this is improving. Many European countries are interested in the Norwegian model of a gender quota on the boards of private companies. Having women participate at all levels is not the aim, but rather an instrument for diversity. Diversity increases collective intelligence. And that’s what we need.

Who is an inspirational woman in your field?
Leena Peltonen-Palotie, a professor of genetics and extremely resourceful researcher. She clarified the molecular and genetic basis of Finnish genetic diseases. She had a fantastic ability to popularize science and increase citizen’s trust in it.