

‘AS LEADERS, WE WANT TO MAXIMIZE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF OUR TEAMS’

WRITTEN BY SUSAN BARRETO

Amy Wierenga, chief risk officer, BlueMountain Capital Management

Early on in her career Amy Wierenga was a bank examiner for the Federal Reserve, but ultimately decided to sharpen her own quantitative skills by entering the hedge fund industry.

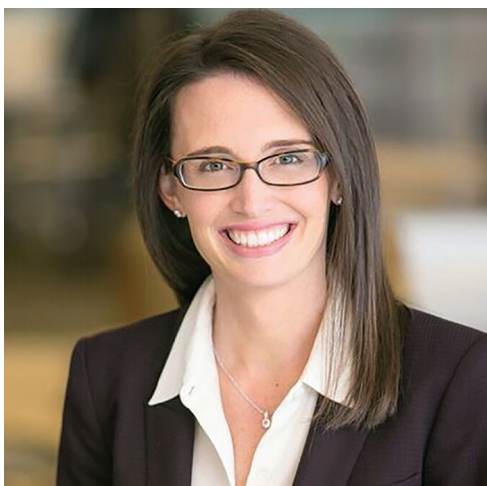
Initially after graduating from University of Chicago’s Booth School of Business, she was responsible for market risk in the global rates and FX trading businesses at Merrill Lynch. She joined BlueMountain in 2008.

Today as chief risk officer at the \$20 billion firm, she works closely with CIO Andrew Feldstein in helping shape every capital allocation and portfolio construction decision. She is the chair of the risk committee and is also a member of the valuation committee.

Wierenga though has noticed that fewer women are taking on senior roles in the hedge fund industry. Over the last four years, for instance, about a third of the hundreds of candidates interviewed for roles requiring less experience on the firm’s risk and portfolio construction team were women, she says.

As for the current staff, BlueMountain may be an outlier when compared to the rest of the hedge fund industry. Three of the firm’s 14 partners are women. Besides Wierenga, the other women partners are Louisa Church, who is the CEO of Europe and head of client advisory services and Sarah Dahan, who is the head of global volatility and a senior portfolio manager.

Still the numbers overall in the



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hedge fund industry are less encouraging as Wierenga cites a recent report she read from PricewaterhouseCoopers that found more than 20% of female millennials do not want to work in financial services based purely on the industry’s image.

“While there is a precedent for the industry’s image issues, there are also plenty of firms that genuinely reward merit and value the cognitive and style diversity that women bring to the teams,” says Wierenga. For her, BlueMountain has proven to be one of those firms.

She points to the inherent company flexibility when it comes to balancing work and family life, and has found that a relatively integrated

work-life rhythm keeps her highly productive and works for her career and family.

Being a woman in finance though also comes with battling stereotypes, and this is a challenge Wierenga is keenly aware of as she discusses the investment process. Women and men on average approach investing differently and that can be beneficial.

“Gender is one of several dimensions correlated with cognitive diversity that can improve portfolio outcomes, and thus a more diverse portfolio management team should be attractive to Sharpe-minded investors,” she says.

For women in leadership positions, the idea of embracing gender differences has some value as well. Leading with awareness and adaptability within a team of people with diverse backgrounds is a challenge, but not one that requires giving up on being yourself at work, she adds.

“As leaders, we want to maximize the effectiveness of our teams and build strong relationships with our clients,” she says. “At times, accepting that we all bring diverse backgrounds – including conscious and unconscious biases – and understanding how to modulate our style to achieve our goals is the best approach.”

Her advice to the next generation of leading women hedge fund managers is to align themselves with organizations that demonstrate meritocratic values and with roles that maximize their ability to learn and have an impact. ■