

76. HSS in Review: Leadership Lessons from Women We Admire - Transcript

Leah: Welcome to Her Story of Success, a podcast featuring stories from influential women trailblazers and business leaders who have defined & pursued their own versions of success and fulfillment. We hope these stories, lessons learned, and celebrations inspire you throughout your own journey. I'm Leah Glover Hayes, CEO and podcast host of Her Story of Success Women's Business Collective.

In this week's episode of Her Story of Success in Review, we'll be revisiting some of my past interviews with women who have taught me so much about what true leadership looks like. They'll share some of the lessons they've learned while starting and running companies, including the power of mentorship, the importance of self-care, and why you should always look for ways to give back to your industry.

If you missed our first Her Story of Success in Review, which featured women trailblazers in the food and beverage industry, I encourage you to take a listen to that one as well. And whether it's your first time tuning in or you've been with us since the beginning of this podcast, I hope you enjoy this look back at some of the amazing women who have opened their hearts and shared their stories of success with us.

Sherry: Well I studied what I thought my previous bosses had done wrong and determined I was going to be nothing like them. And so I set out to create a company that would be very employee centric. I thought that if I took great care of the employee, that they would then take great care of the customer, the customer would remain loyal to us and would be willing to pay us more for our services, and that would help me make money. And so, you know, from day one, I created a culture that tended to the employees. And that included fair living wages, that included allowing them to be and their kids and their pets to work, helping them buy their first home, paying for all of their insurance costs, a really unique profit sharing plan, which I think was just the kicker to all of it. And just in general, treating people with respect and dignity and letting them have a voice. So that was all the really underpinnings of the foundation of LetterLogic.

Leah: When Sherry Deutschmann decided to start her own business, she knew she wanted to do something different than other companies at the time. She created LetterLogic out of the belief that putting employees first could be the key to a more profitable business. Sherry grew the company to a \$40 million business before selling it in 2016, and she believes much of her success came from the empathy she had for her employees.

Sherry: As a single mom, there were times when I had to choose between paying the light bill or paying daycare. And so we didn't have electricity. And times when I was literally sitting at my desk at work, counting the pennies to figure out how many pennies I could put in my tank to get home to pick up my daughter on the way home from work. And it was really hard to focus on my job. I couldn't go sell a car cause I was trying to figure out whether or not I could get home that night. And so I wanted employees not to have to think about that whether or not their bills were paid or they could have healthcare insurance. I would just take care of all of that for them. And I'll tell you that in the 18 months following us raising our starting minimum wage from \$12 to \$16, we quadrupled profit. We quadrupled EBITDA. So it wasn't just that, of course there were other things that we did, but our attention to taking care of the employees paid off in a big way, because it had the desired results. The employees were super engaged, they gave extraordinary service, and we were the most expensive in the industry, but still grew enough to be on the Inc. 5000 List for 10 straight years. And that was a direct result of creating an atmosphere, a culture of empathy and caring and our customers rewarded us richly by being so loyal to us.

Leah: To help create that culture of empathy, Sherry implemented the "Lunch with Lucy" program, where anyone in the company could take Sherry to lunch and get to know her as Lucy, not the CEO. Sherry also emphasized the importance of making everyone at the company feel appreciated and as an equal.

Sherry: I think that the most critical thing is listening, and creating opportunities to listen and to treat people like human beings. It's as simple as when you go to the coffee machine, get two cups of coffee and take it to somebody you don't normally talk to. Go out to the factory floor or to the warehouse and take someone else a cup of coffee and just find out what they did over the weekend and find out what's keeping them up at night. Especially in a leadership position, being transparent, letting employees understand how the company makes money and what are the problems the company's facing and letting them really see behind the curtain. So they get a better feel for what you're experiencing, because you want them to feel empathy for you too, right? Those are two things.

An important thing that I learned from Andy Bailey, the founder of Petra, was around giving praise. He talked about how, you know, valuable praise is, and it can be impactful, when I see you and say, 'Leah, you did such a great job on that. Thank you.' But if I approach you when you're speaking to someone else and I say, 'Excuse me, Leah, you killed it. Thank you so much that helped us save the Gundaf account,' or whatever it is. Yeah. Then that has more power. But the best and most powerful way is to talk good about you behind your back. And so I heard him say that and I did that by writing letters to the parents of my extraordinary employees. Hm. And then, you know, writing to spouses to say, you know, 'I know it's hard for you when Kennan's on the road so much, but this company needs him and we greatly appreciate the

sacrifice that your family's making. And we're going to make sure that you, as a couple are richly rewarded for the sacrifice that he's making.' Praising the person to their family was impactful. I believe that's huge. And it costs the price of a postage stamp.

Leah: After selling LetterLogic, Sherry took that same passion for empowering others in a new direction. She created BrainTrust, a company that helps women entrepreneurs grow their businesses to \$1 million in annual revenue and beyond. Sherry also wrote Lunch with Lucy, a book that teaches leaders to maximize their profits by investing in their people. She has some great stories about all those lunches she had with her employees.

It takes a great leader to understand that the best results happen when you equip other people to believe in your vision. Sherry definitely has that gift, and so does another of our amazing mentors: Pat Shea. Pat is the President and CEO of Givful, a tech company that helps employers create a culture of. Before working at Givful, she served 11 years as President and CEO of the YWCA Nashville, where I met and fell in love with her as a leader, as a woman and as a trailblazer here in Nashville.

Pat: We took the idea of a deficit around the domestic violence shelter and made it a vision. And when you created the vision, then you could engage people around that vision. And they really helped me articulate it not as a debt, but 'Can you picture a community that doesn't have support for women who are victims of domestic violence? Do you want to live in a city where there isn't a great shelter?' I mean, we knew how big the problem was. So the theme of the campaign was Women Helping Women Be Safe. And once we established it in that kind of context, women came out of the woodwork to help us pay that debt down, and foundations supported it. It became a movement. It wasn't a deficit anymore. It became a vision. And it worked. It took us about 18 months. We raised, I think it was \$1.7 million, and we paid off a huge deficit right before the market crashed. But once we got out of that debt, then you could start to turn around the organization, but the debt was going to do us in, or we were going to get over it. That was, that was really the first big mountain we had to climb to kind of get the YW back on track.

Leah: For Pat, true leadership happens when you create a vision and then create space for others to join in and make it happen as their own.

Pat: I have learned that you have a problem and you figure out what your solution is, right? And then when you know the solution, you have to build a community that supports the solution. So in the case of the shelter and in that deficit, we knew the problem, that was easy. It was the deficit. We knew the solution, we had to pay it off, but you had to create the vision that allowed people to join. And then you look for people for whom that's their passion. I have never convinced anybody to join something that wasn't theirs to begin with. In fact, I've learned pretty fast, if you sit

down with someone and they say, 'my number one goal in life is to help the symphony.' I would hug him. I would say, 'I'm so glad you're here. It makes the city a better place,' but I never would try to convince someone that if the arts was their calling to join me in violence against women and girls. You know, you really look for likeminded folks. And they are out there. If there's something that the world needs done, there are people who will support it, and you just have to talk to a lot of people.

Leah: Pat also believes the importance to notice when your passions start to change. She made the difficult decision to leave the YWCA because she wanted to find new ways to help others. This led her to Givful, where she works with companies and their employees, helping them donate and volunteer to the non-profits she cares so deeply about.

Pat: I'm lucky because I learn constantly, right? And I loved my time in nonprofit land and I loved my time as leader of the YW, but when I no longer woke up every single day and found joy in going to work, you really do have to ask yourself, 'Am I willing to let something I've built, start to not be as brilliant or do I need to step away?' And I felt like I wasn't the leader that the YW needed to continue to grow and become all it could be. And I just wasn't, I wasn't finding as much excitement and personal joy. And so I had grown it and grown and grown it, and it really needed that someone to come in and stabilize it, give it strength from the inside out. And so I started talking to the board about making that transition.

And I also felt like I had experienced a lot of things about the nonprofit community that were broken specifically, how things get funded. And I was motivated to figure out if there was a way not to make that better for my sister and brother nonprofit leaders. So when I left the YW, I didn't really have a strategy. I took a year off with my husband. I did some consulting. I continue to manage some groups of, I have a women's president's group that I facilitate once a month. And then I do some volunteer work, but I wrote a business plan for my life. I said I would become the CEO of me and my mission statement is to help others help others. Well, it fits with everything I'd done up to that point and that's really what I wanted to do with my future. So looking for opportunities where I could help others who are helping others became the, the lens that I looked at opportunities. And if it fit, then I considered it inhibited and if it didn't fit I wasn't interested at all. So Givful is a great opportunity because our mission is to raise money for nonprofits and to give that money to nonprofit leaders so they can do more of the great work that they do in this community. And we want to do it quickly, and we want to do it inexpensively, and we want to make it fun, and we want to engage a whole new generation of generosity. Because nonprofits need more resources. There are some amazing leaders in this community and around the country, that if they had the resources, they could solve hunger, right? They could fix homelessness, they could help with the education

system, but they're so bogged down in having to raise money constantly. They don't get to do their work.

Leah: Just like Pat realized the importance of shifting her career path to better achieve her goals, Sharon Reynolds also embraced the idea of staying flexible and open to new opportunities. That mindset allowed her to start four successful companies, and each one is helping to make the world better in its own unique way.

Sharon says entrepreneurship runs in her family, but even more importantly, her Aunt Gloria taught her to never take no for an answer, even when facing difficult obstacles.

Sharon: She, early on, knew what challenges we would have coming up, especially during the early Civil Rights Era. I was young and a part of it, and in the South. And so she knew we had to be strong and we, me and my sister, my mother was incredible too. We had seven siblings and she was very busy with all of the children. So my Aunt Gloria would spend a lot of time with me. And so she would always say, never take no for an answer. If it's your passion and you feel like it's going to be your purpose, then find the power of yes. Make sure it's the right thing to do all the time. Even when no one is looking, she was always filled with all those neat little sayings and she was really my She-ro along with my own mother. And so that was the power of yes. And I always remembered that and carried that forth with me in my life. So being intricately involved in predominantly male dominated industries, I knew I had to learn and use the power of yes, all the time.

The entrepreneurial vein runs deep in my family. We're five generations Nashville. My father was one of the first African American fireman in Nashville, I want to pay homage to him. He's since passed away about four years ago, but he gave 35 years to the city. He gave his life to the city, I always like to say. And so, his father, my grandfather was one of the very first successful African-American, uh, body shop owners, T H Williams and Sons Body Shop. And back in the late fifties and sixties, he was an entrepreneur and it was very successful. And so, um, when I was a senior in high school, my Aunt Gloria taught me how to sew. She is my rock and my foundation of a lot of things that, uh, she's given me. She taught me the power of yes. And so by the time I was a senior in high school, I had 30 customers and I was making their clothing.

Leah: Shortly after her first company, DevMar Products, Sharon realized she would need to delegate and take time to prioritize her own self-care. She explains how knowing when to hire someone new can make your own life easier, giving you more capacity to keep growing while also taking time to rest.

Sharon: I said, look, this is what I'm going to do.

I'm coming in and I'll take care of some of your human resources initiatives that you need to have done and handle some of your clerical things that need to be done

within the office in exchange for you allowing me to build my business where I don't have to pay rent. And you're going to be my first customer because he needed to buy janitorial supplies.

So I got to a little push back because he was buying from some of the major distribution companies in Nashville. And I said, 'no worries. I'll go to them and we'll come at a deal and we'll make it palatable for you to buy from DevMar.' So I was able to do that. And shortly thereafter, we received a contract from Metro Nashville's airport authority. We were the first woman to have a janitorial and paper and tissue contract in the airport's at that time, 75 year history. So that helped me to grow. And I was able to use the staff within Reynolds and Reynolds to help me with a lot of the initiatives that I needed to grow DevMar products. So that was some delegating right there. And then as we continued to grow, I added a staff member at a time we're still in the same office. We still share space, but I do have a separate staff. So the dedication is important.

But also, so I don't get burned out. It's important to take some me time. It's extremely important for women to realize that you can't be all things to all people all the time. I do have several companies, but I do have them compartmentalize so that we know who's doing what and in the meantime, I'll just go and chill and relax and find myself again before I get started with the companies. I have to admit, I did learn it later in life and sometimes I cheat on my sleep, but I am intentional about trying to get as much rest as I possibly can. And there are days when I don't meet the mark, like we all do.

And so we're, we're growing, uh, one of The goals that I have for DevMar products is to add two key positions. And we're already looking for those key positions. I want to add someone in business development, uh, that can help me grow in some other areas. So, uh, you know, two key people will help me. Yeah. They get to that next level so that I can have more quality time because, you know, what's it all about if you're not healthy? And, uh, you know, I'm blessed to have good health and I think I want to keep it and I tell all the women out there that, uh, you know, you, you can't keep it if you don't do something about it to keep it.

So I know we spend a lot of time talking about this, but it is really key. It's critical. It's key to be able to make sure that you're doing things that will sustain your life.

Leah: Marcie Allen also acknowledged the importance of taking care of herself while running MAC Presents, an experiential music partnership agency out of NYC. I imagine that must be even more important for her now. Since we had our first conversation, Marcie also started a successful coffee and luxury CBD shop in Nashville called Anzie Blue. But no matter how busy she is, Marcie believes giving back to the industry she works in has helped her to stay motivated.

Marcie: Well, I think a couple of things, first and foremost, soul cycle,

Ellen: I did one in Miami over the weekend

Marcie: That saves me, um, kicks, kicks my, you know, what, but it saves me. Uh, I think also what has really gave me peace is teaching, and being able to help inspire and craft the minds of the future generation in the music industry, especially the young women. And they keep me grounded, just like my girls and my husband keep me grounded. You know, I love the story, but I remember calling my husband and saying, 'I got hired. I'm doing the Rolling Stones tour sponsorships.' And he was like, 'That's great. But are you going to miss parent teacher conference at Harding Academy?' And I said, 'No, I'll be home.' But that's good. You need that.

I tell people, you can have all the money, you can have all the success. You can have all the, you know, artists, relationships, music, industry, relationships, awards, but you can't cuddle up with that at night. Like that really doesn't mean anything, unless you can share it with someone.

Leah: Working in the music industry is known for being a demanding career, especially for women executives who typically find themselves in the minority amongst their peers. Because of that, Marcie is especially passionate about mentoring and hiring young women coming up through music business.

Marcie: I think that if you don't love what you do and you're not excited to get up every morning, you don't get goosebumps when you close a big deal, then you're in the wrong field. We're not curing cancer. This is sex drugs, and rock n' roll, I always tell people. Well, and you have to love it. And I am so inspired by. By the artists. I'm so inspired by my employees. I'm so inspired by my students. I'm an adjunct professor at NYU Steinhardt and Clive Davis, and have been at Steinhardt since 2013 and teach a 14-week class every semester, two classes back to back.

And it's very difficult, but it helps me keep my finger on the pulse, on what's going on with the future leaders of the industry. Um, as well as it's an outlet for me. And it's still about music. And I think that's one of the things that people don't really understand, and there's a lot of different ways you can be involved in the music industry, but I think one of the most important ways you can be involved in the music industry in addition to being successful is to give back.

And I mean, if you look at like the USC Annenberg study that was released a couple of months ago , only 12% of the industry is female. And so we have to really be the ones that make that change. We can't sit around and complain about it. We have to say, 'okay, what are we going to do to make sure that there's more producers, there's more managers, there's more, brand agents that are female?' And so that's, that's a goal of mine after being in the industry for 24 years.

Leah: Whether you're looking to find a mentor like Marcie who can help you take your career to the next level, or you want to be a mentor yourself, Randstad USA Senior Vice President Laquita Stribling had some practical advice about how to make the most of a mentoring relationship.

Laquita: So I always ask, 'what is it you hope to gain by our spending time together?' So that I can determine if I can deliver on that or not. And the second thing is, 'Can you take what I might have to say?' Because if I'm going to invest the time, I'm not going to blow smoke, I'm not going to sell you any wolf tickets. You know, I'm going to be totally honest, empathetically and passionately and lovingly, but I'm going to be honest with you. And then, you know, I always ask the question, you know, 'where are you trying to go? What is it you're trying to gain?'

I heard a quote a couple of days ago that I said, 'let me think about that for a minute.' And after thinking about it, I agreed. It's that if you're a good mentor, you're also a mentee. And what I got from that as well, I'm happy to impart the little bit that I know with other people, but I have found that as I've mentored other people, I've learned along the way also. So it's been a win win.

And that's why I ask the questions. 'Where is it you're trying to go, and what is it you want to ultimately want to accomplish? And what void do you think I can help in filling for you?' But really, I kind of do a prescreen on the front end because it may not be a good fit. I might not be able to, I might not be the one that's the right fit for you. I may not have the right answers because really the mentee should come with knowing they're going to do the most work. And I think a good mentor listens more than he or she speaks, giving you the opportunity to share where you are, what you're thinking and, and we interject. I don't think a good mentor is one who then starts getting on a soap box and preaching, and you do all this listening. So I really do think it, you know, the mentee has to really understand that, 'Okay. I'm kind of in control of this, but I need like someone to just check in with, run this past. They may offer me some advice.' And sometimes I've found with the mentee, just having someone to talk through it and every now and then I'll ask a question and based on them having to think through the answer, they've come up with what they need to do on their own.

Leah: Laquita has built an impressive career for herself, working her way up from an entry level position at Randstad to become a senior vice president. She was also the first Black woman to become District Governor for Rotary International in Tennessee. But even with all of her success today, Laquita believes it's important to remember where she came from and lead by example in both large and small tasks.

Laquita: When I joined rotary, I was a young, 20-something year old Black girl, and I joined this club, the average age was probably 70, and primarily old white men. And so of course it was uncomfortable for me because, you know, in my upbringing it was primarily African American. Most of my teachers were African American. The

community I lived in was primarily African American. I left there, went to a historically black college or university where mostly everybody was African American. Then I enter the world of work and it was totally opposite. And so most people don't get connected, because in order to get connected, you got to go where it's uncomfortable and unfamiliar. So I would go to rotary every week and I'd sit at a table, not being sure how I would be received, how I would be treated, but I'd decided I was not going to let that stand in the way.

And you know, some people were very welcoming, very open to my presence. Some people didn't even acknowledge and some people I could tell just wasn't interested, and it was okay. But I had to push myself to do that because I knew as a leader to my teams at Randstadt, I needed to be connected to people who they couldn't get to. I knew that that was important to build a professional business network so that I could be an asset to the people who were working for me.

It really means just that, you know, your responsible for this thing or this group of people, really your success and their success is tied together. And really, I look at leadership as leveraging my skill and ability and experience so that we all get to where we need to go. And so for me, when I'm in one of my offices, I'm answering the phones. I'm probably sitting out on the floor, I'm greeting talent, I'm engaging with clients. I may be entering payroll because I don't ever want to lose sight of what it takes to do the job that's closest to how we make money. And so for me, that leadership is really about leading by example, not being too big to do any job, um, and then helping my teams by removing barriers that are getting in the way of their success by my being able to impact that thing that's in the way for them.

Leah: Thank you so much for joining us today. Laquita, Marcie, Sharon, Pat and Sherry are all incredible leaders and businesswomen and personal mentors. And I hope you are able to apply some of their wisdom and advice to your own career.

At Her Story of Success, we are on a mission to help women-business owners, leaders and professionals build your tribe and reach your next level of success – connecting you to one another, equipping you with resources and empowering you along your journey.

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The Her Story of Success Podcast is produced by women and for women. Our executive producer is Claire Bidigare-Curtis, and our production coordinator is Bronte Lebo. And I'm your host, Leah Glover Hayes. Until next time, have a great day.