



***Julia (Judi) B. North***  
***Board Member of Winn-Dixie, Acuity Brands,***  
***Mapics, and Simtrol***  
***Former CEO – VSI Enterprises, President of***  
***BellSouth Consumer Group***

### ***Born to lead***

Judi North's name may not be a household name but perhaps it should be. For the thousands of people who know her – have worked with her and for her over her stellar career – Judi is the best example of leadership they have ever seen.

Intelligent and self-effacing, confident and humble, courageous and reserved, strong and feminine, neither intimidating nor intimidated, accountable and fair – Judi North is a woman of character who “oozes” with inspiration in a very genuine and low-key style. To emulate her as your role model would be a very smart thing to do, but first you need to understand what makes her tick.

For the making of this leader, it started in Atlanta over 50 years ago. Judi was one of four children – older sister (“the artistic one”), younger brother (“the jock”), and one younger sister (“the athletic and musical one.”) Of herself, she said, “I became the news editor, I liked to dance, and I loved bridge even in high school.” The family moved to Jackson, MS when Judi was in eighth grade.

The fact that Judi's grandfather and father were “telephone men” – both worked for the phone company and had successful careers in management – surely influenced her growing up. However, there was no specific talk of her following in their footsteps. More significant were the factors of a good family life, high standards for academic achievement (“You didn't make B's in our family!”), and hard-working parents who instilled a strong work ethic in all four children. While Judi's mother didn't have a job outside the home, Judi said, “I always felt she worked equally hard - if not harder - than my father. Truthfully, where I grew up, I didn't know any women who worked outside the home. It was just the times and way it was.”

Always good in school and particularly in math, Judi entered Baylor University after high school. Although she did well in college, she admits that academics weren't her only focus.

“I wasn't overly concerned with grades and really just wanted to have a good time, be president of my sorority (which she was), and get ready for the rest of my life.”

Steve North, Judi's high school sweetheart, was a major player in her future plans. They married right after college and Steve entered medical school at Ole MISS while Judi got a

job teaching. Changing career paths three years later, Steve decided to relocate to Atlanta and Judi began looking for a teaching job, but none were available.

Instead, Southern Bell was hiring bright young college grads - especially engineering majors and math majors whom they could train to become telephone engineers – and Judi answered the call. Her life would never be the same, but she could not possibly have known just how far she would go within the company.

### *A path is engineered*

Hired as a “junior engineer” one of a small number of females at the time – Judi knew that she was not “the boss’s choice.” However, to his credit – and to Judi’s credit for demonstrating just how capable she was and how hard she would work to learn on the job – her boss became a strong mentor.

Over the years, Judi would gain the support and mentorship of all of her bosses and earn the respect of all those she worked with and who worked for her. Chief among her advocates were Dick Snelling, Executive Vice President of Network and Frank Skinner, President of Southern Bell.

Both of these men were officers of the corporation and knew leadership talent when they saw it. In Judi, they definitely saw it...and together they set a path for Judi’s upward mobility. Snelling would help her learn more about running large organizations and about the technology that was revolutionizing the industry. Skinner would help position her as a future officer – in fact, the first female officer of Southern Bell.

One of the most challenging and developmental experiences to which Judi was exposed was going to MIT (the Massachusetts Institute of

Technology) to pursue her masters degree. Sponsored by Southern Bell (which later became BellSouth), Judi was the first woman recommended by the company for MIT’s Management of Technology program. Moving her husband and young son, Zach, with her to Boston for a year wasn’t easy, but she did it. About the experience, Judi said, “MIT helped me realize what I had already learned as a leader as well as being a tremendously broadening opportunity. Coming away from it, I think I was able to put everything in perspective and to really see the big picture.”

### *Family and leadership*

After MIT, Judi’s career would only accelerate. But something else was also going on from a personal standpoint. Judi and her husband made a decision that he would stay home with their son. This would give Zach at least one full-time parent, and it appeared that Judi’s career would sustain the family financially. Judi credits becoming a mother with helping her management style and keeping her grounded (she was actually married 11 years before her son was born.)

She also acknowledges that having a supportive spouse – in her case a stay-at-home spouse—was also beneficial. But Judi is quick to point out that this is clearly not possible or necessary for all working women. What is important for career-minded women and men is that good day care is available and affordable. Quoting Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, Judi said, “Whatever the price, having good day care is more important than your salary and is the only way for a parent to have peace of mind.”

Judi knows she missed out on some of her son’s activities, but doesn’t think it was a problem for him. He and his friends came to understand the North family as one in which the dad drove the carpool, not the mom! No big deal!!

#### *Career progression – establishing a legacy*

In 1989, Judi was promoted to an officer position with Southern Bell / BellSouth, a position she would hold for 10 years. During her officer tenure, she would serve as President of Consumer Services, the company’s largest business unit with as many as 22,000 employees before restructure, \$8 billion in revenue, and \$600 million in expense.

It was Frank Skinner who talked her into taking this position because of his own experience in the business office environment. Judi was reluctant at first, but was quickly won over by Skinner and later by the different type of leadership that was required and by the people she would lead. Her older sister once told her, “I’ve been a service rep and you better treat those people right!”

Armed with her sister’s admonition and influenced by Skinner’s own style of leadership – charismatic and caring –Judi became one of the most admired officers in the company – following in the model of her mentors, Skinner and Snelling.

It was BellSouth’s loss, and Video Conference Systems, Inc. (VSI)’s gain, when in 1999 with her career at an all-time high, Judi decided to step away to enter the entrepreneurial world and run a company of her own. With her she took a successful leadership style, years of earned credibility, a strong track record and impeccable credentials.

As of fall, 2002, Judi is no longer working for any company, but she’s keeping quite busy with her board of directors’ position in at least four companies and with travels, reading, and time with family and friends. Reflecting on her life so far, Judi is her usual self-effacing self – not one to brag on her many achievements and awards, which include membership in the Committee of 200, an exclusive organization by invitation only of some of the nation’s top female executives; member of the International Business Fellows; guest speaker at MIT for 12 years.

What's she proudest of? "Getting Zach grown." In addition, she says, "I hope that in my business career, I've made money for the companies I've worked for and that I've made work life more enjoyable." She feels good about how women she worked with supported each other, but also remembers when there was a "female and a male list of promotables."

One of Judi's regrets is that she was not able to push the concept of "job share" for women and men to more acceptance and success. She believes that it is clearly possible for job share to work to the benefit of the organization and the individuals involved. "It could help ease some of the tension and stress that leads people to complain about 'work-life balance.'" Judi's personal advice to high-potentials: "Keep your own life balanced as it's not up to the company to do that."

Another salient piece of advice comes from another "regret" – "I wish I'd been more aggressive in the right way to push harder for certain things. Once you've established your credibility and have good credentials, you can do that very effectively."

Judi would also tell the next generation of leaders to listen up: "If your style doesn't fit the company culture, it doesn't mean that you're wrong. You may have the right style and can help change the culture...or, you might have to go somewhere else where your style does fit."

"Women are setting the bar these days in many corporations."

"Having had the experience of both large and small business, I'd say a mix is the best...preferably small, large, and small again. You can take a lot of what you learn in the different settings and use it in the other to great advantage."

"As for serving as a member of the board of directors for a public or private company, my experience is that it's reinforcing...of what you know...and it also allows you to learn from other leaders with whom you ordinarily would not come in contact. I've learned different approaches to problems and situations, different questions to ask, etc. If you are the only one of a kind on the board (male, female, minority, etc.), I believe it helps a board by your being there. It brings clarity. It also helps women in the organization if they see a woman director...and I've found that many of the male executives want to introduce me to the female managers in their companies. Serving on a board is not just a position for me...I do it because I want to make a difference on that board."

According to those who know her, there's absolutely no doubt that having Judi on your board or on any project you're involved in is an asset. Everyone can benefit from her integrity of character and amazing insights. If only all next generation leaders – male and female – could have a Judi North as their mentor!!

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By Susan B. Hitchcock