



Women Leaders for the New Millennium: Profiles and Perspectives

From Welfare to Technology Visionary

Sherita T. Ceasar

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Sherita Ceasar is a senior executive officer with Scientific Atlanta with an extensive performance record spanning new product development, manufacturing operations, quality assurance, and service business management in the high tech and high growth telecommunications industries. Her career also includes work experience and significant accomplishments at Motorola, Northrop Defense Systems Division, and the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) where she received her Masters of Science in Mechanical Engineering in May 1984.

She is the past National President and a Senior Life Member of the Society of Women Engineers, on the Alumni Association's Board of Directors for IIT, a member of the Board of the Women in Engineering Programs Advocacy Network, Honorary Life Member of the Women in Technology International, and member of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers.

As impressive as these excerpts from her resume are, one has to understand her roots to truly appreciate Ms. Ceasar's influence and impact. She is a true business and technology role model. Born and raised in Chicago the oldest and only female of 5 children, Sherita learned at an early age "how to fix things" and "how to be a leader of men." These lessons, and growing up with a single working mother on welfare after her parents divorced, would prepare her for the tough road ahead. Citing no regrets or excuses, she worked hard to help her mother and set her sites on getting the best education she could. Her primary motivator was a love of math and science.

In school, Ms. Ceasar remembers being called a "smart mouth" by one of her teachers and coming to the quick conclusion that "being different is cool." Standing out in school, as both aggressive and forceful, positioned her well, as she soon was recognized for an "early ID" program in pre-engineering. In the summers, while others were hanging out, she was a part of experimental testing and project teams. She and her peers even won a contest for one of their projects called "The Streaker" – a case for a special

kind of rocket. And even though she liked chemistry, she realized that chemical engineering was not to be her career choice.

Sherita was admitted to IIT – and later graduate school – on early admission and continued to take part in programs where she could work and learn, e.g., the GEMS program. One critical point in her life came when she decided not to go to Stanford, but instead stayed at IIT and married a fellow student.

Later, she would also work for General Electric two different summers where she would gain valuable exposure to GE's world-famous quality program. On her first assignment at Northrup, she would learn equally important lessons in the workplace, including lessons in sexual harassment. One primary take-away from that experience was to stand-up for herself, defuse the situation, and to use humor. She also had a wonderful mentor there with whom she still keeps in touch.

While working at Motorola for almost 8 years, Sherita was involved in a turnaround situation, traveled the world, and further developed her mentoring skills. There she took the Quality role and helped the division go from a \$400 million to a \$3 billion producer using the Six-Sigma practices. But not everything was perfect. Her marriage suffered and after the divorce, she moved from Florida to Atlanta. The position for which she was recruited was with Scientific Atlanta.

Today, Ms. Ceasar is living her vision and proudly refers to her organization as “the strongest team in the company.” Involved in supporting customers with digital technology and ultimately, TV-based web access and interactivity, she embraces the entrepreneurial spirit within Scientific Atlanta. One day she'd like her legacy to be “Queen of Digital,” but in her current leadership role, she sees the development of talent as her primary job. That includes overseeing technical training, management and leadership development, and creating the proper culture and learning environment. “My people,” says Sherita, “is what I sell.”

She also sells herself. As an African American woman, one of few at the top of corporate leadership, Sherita is a very confident yet humble leader. She appears to let her life and career speak for itself. What an inspiration, to the next generation, and certainly for women in technology.

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Interview by Susan Hitchcock, Vice President – Client Services – Turknett Leadership Group