



Women in Leadership Seminar Highlights May 29, 2015

Topic: May 29: “What I’ve Learned about Leadership in the Railway Industry”
featuring Deborah H. Butler, EVP of Planning & CIO – Norfolk Southern, Norfolk, VA.



Deborah (Deb) Butler came to speak at Women in Leadership on “What I Learned about Leadership in the Railway Industry.” Deb is a trailblazer in the railroad industry, and for many years, she was the only female EVP at Norfolk Southern. She shared a variety of her career experiences in a business in which most people aren’t too familiar. Deb’s exciting career path and insights were just what we needed to motivate us to stay on our own tracks!

At the time when Deb graduated from Agnes Scott College with a major in English literature, she felt that she had four choices: go on to grad school, go into retail, sell insurance or teach. Her choice was to embark on a career in retail.

Running a jeans shop at Lenox Square in Atlanta gave her a good opportunity to test this choice. As she simply stated, “Retail didn’t work for me.” Moving on, Deb went to work for a non-profit called Friendship Force, which paired people with similar careers in sister cities abroad. She loved the job and the work, but unfortunately, she said, “I had trouble paying my bills!”

Looking for other opportunities, she decided to increase her “hire-ability” by pursuing an MBA at Georgia State. One of her professors had worked at the predecessor of Norfolk Southern, and as he was impressed with her academic ability, he offered her a job working for the railroad company. You could say that the rest is history!

Clearly proud of her industry and knowing that most people don’t know much about it or its complexity, Deb shared a lot of very interesting information. For example, in addition to bulk materials like grain, rock, and coal, railroads also carry 70 percent of North American manufactured cars. Additionally, the biggest customers of the railroad industry are trucking industry partners like UPS and FedEx. The railroad is often used by the trucking industry to expedite the shipping and transport process. Currently, the railroad is in a growth stage and is the best option for a more sustainable transport of goods.

Deb also shared some interesting human capital statistics, i.e., only seven percent of Norfolk Southern’s workforce industry is female. Because of the demands of the field operations’ roles in particular, she said, “We have a hard time recruiting women. However, in administrative jobs, the female percentage is in the teens.

She went on to share some really good news: “Eighteen months ago,” she said, “I was the only female at the senior executive level but now we are 50% female - three of our six senior executives are women.” That’s progress indeed!

Taking time to share some significant lessons she’s learned during her 3+ decades of experience, Deb pointed out that she’s had the opportunity to work in many departments, from Accounting to Operations to Information Technology. Some key takeaways include: :

- “Take your job very seriously, but never take yourself too seriously. Find a way to get your point across with humor and do good work. Performance matters.
- Figure out what you can do for women in your organization and work to fill the pipeline with a gender diverse group.
- Find a mentor who throws you in the deep end of the pool. They have a lifejacket for you, but they want to see if you can learn to swim really quickly.
- Take personally challenging and career risking opportunities.
- Assume responsibilities outside of your normal job duties – these are opportunities for growth, visibility, and the chance to learn new skills.
- Don’t actively plan your career – part of my success was being willing to take lateral moves to learn more.”

Deb completed the Harvard Advanced Management Program and said she learned a few things from that program that are applicable to just about anyone. Those lessons were:

- Read [True North](#) by Bill George. This is the idea that people who seek your leadership can see your authenticity. She respects people who are fair and tough, who can be depended on and will do what they say they will do.
- A good leader is not necessarily the person with the most followers but the person who has developed the most other leaders – good leaders - along the way.
- It’s not that leadership is not required, but it is incumbent upon leaders to develop leaders.

Deb wrapped up her talk by explaining that SPIRIT is Norfolk’s value system. SPIRIT stands for Safety, Performance, Integrity, Respect, Innovation, Teamwork. Deb has used this as a framework for how she works in her job and how she works with others. She said, “Leading by caring and leading by giving is the way to make an impact on your community and others. We have an obligation to our communities and our people.”

Q&A

Q: Why do you think passenger engagement isn't there?

A: One of my roles at Norfolk Southern is passenger rail policy. The short answer is we don't have a high-speed passenger rail system in the U.S. because with a few exceptions, like California and the Northeast, the distances between cities are too great and there is no public transit system to get people from the train station to where they need to be in the city. To build a high speed rail system is outrageously expensive and passenger rail doesn't make money. That's a problem unless you have the political and social will in your country to invest in it. You can't charge passengers enough to maintain the rail and have it be sustainable. A lot of the intercity passenger trains that run today run on freight rails, and we often get in each other's way.

Q: One of the things we're working on at AT&T is a power summit called "Men as Allies." How did you get to 50% of your executive team to be women at Norfolk?

A: I love the title of Men as Allies because every single one of my mentors was a man. With the culture of Norfolk Southern, we were able to encourage bringing up women through the pipeline and give great experiences to women. We were also fortunate enough to have women who were great and well qualified to fill those positions.

Q: We don't see the strength of the unions in other places as we do in the rail industry. Why is that?

A: There are some natural but sometimes adversarial conversations that will happen such as talking about healthcare, benefits, job safety, technology, etc. This is what has allowed the unions to thrive and continue having a place at the table

Q: How did you feel Agnes Scott prepared you to work in a male dominated field and industry?

A: One of the great things about the all women college experience is that you are in a friendly environment, and you can take chances that allow you to gain confidence. I walked out of Agnes Scott with a little bit of a swagger thinking "I did well here, and I can do well anywhere." What happened with me and what a liberal arts education did for me is to give me communication skills. I could distill complex issues into bullets and be able to explain it thoroughly. It's really tough to see the beating that a liberal arts education is getting now. It can be hard for you to get your foot in the door for your first job with a liberal arts background. But when you're looking at promoting candidates, the person who gets promoted is the person who can communicate. The ability to get in front of a large group of people and be articulate, poised, and communicate well, that makes the difference.

Q: What are the demographics from the age groups and what is Norfolk Southern doing to attract new talent?

A: The next affinity group after the women's group was a result of the older workforce. We started bringing in a huge group of younger workers, and a new affinity group sprung up called Young NS. It's 40 and under, and they do a lot within the company. Another affinity group that popped up is called Generation NS – this is for people who are 60 or older who have valuable experiences to offer.

Q: How have you balanced the career and family?

A: My children would say I balanced it pretty well, and my ex-husband would say not so well. I subscribe to that great philosopher Oprah Winfrey when she said you can have it all but not all at once. There were sacrifices and it's always hard.

Q: When you look at your organization going forward, are there enough women coming up to maintain that 7% or is your goal to have more?

A: We now have a much less significant age distribution issue so bringing in women to work as track laborers or as field operations supervisors is the next big challenge. It's hard to keep women in those positions because they feel isolated and alone - as if there's no one to talk to. There is a lot of outreach to keep bringing people in and establishing a female presence. The jobs in the rail industry are great but we just have to get people in the pipeline. Many successful women in the rail industry, we've found, have supportive spouses who either don't work outside the home or can be flexible.

Q: Can you get an executive job at Norfolk from the outside or do you have to come through the ranks?

A: Until about a month ago, I would have said you have to come up through the ranks. We have a strong culture of promoting from within and we have a deep bench. But our Chief Marketing Officer retired last March, and our board encouraged us to look outside. We interviewed people from outside, which surprised some people. Though we ended up promoting one of the internal candidates, it was a good reminder that there's a lot of great talent out there to be aware of and keep an eye out for.

Q: You mentioned behavior-based leadership - do you have any recommendations to improve our leadership practices?

A: There are a lot of different models but the idea is to lead in a way that changes behavior by shaping, supporting, affirming and reinforcing the desired behavior.

Q: On the topic of leadership, I find that when people make selections for senior level positions, they use the leadership ideals they grew up with as their standard. What are some of the ways organizations can help remove that obstacle?

A: That's a tough issue, but there are a lot of great articles about the benefits of having women on boards and what that brings to the table. I don't want to oversimplify, but I think women do have a more collaborative style of leadership. We want to make sure we understand all of the different points of view. And we do tend to manage through our relationships and contacts.

Q: How do you handle negotiating with the different unions?

A: That is handled by a labor relations department at Norfolk Southern. There are a lot of well established collective bargaining procedures, and we're making progress. But it can be hard to break down walls that have existed for decades. It always boils down to relationships and trust, which is why our behavior-based leadership initiatives are so important.