

August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014

**Topic:** *“Starting at the Bottom, Making It to The Top: Insights on What it Takes” featuring Angela Dotson, Partner, Habif, Arogeti & Wynne, LLP and a 2013 Leadership Character nominee.*



**Angela Dotson** joined us at the August Women in Leadership seminar to discuss her background, achievements, and goals that have driven her throughout her career. Angela works Habif, Arogeti & Wynne LLP, the largest accounting firm in Georgia and one of the 100 biggest accounting firms in the United States. She has made it a goal in her career to help non-profits and women-run organizations have solid financial background and standing. Despite a self-proclaimed dislike of public speaking, Angela braved a pack room of women and led a great discussion on how she made partner at Habif, Arogeti & Wynne and what she plans to do next.

The first point that Angela made was one that she asked everyone to remember – where you start doesn’t matter, it’s where you end. Angela grew up in Statham, Georgia, a town that was about 13 miles outside of Athens and, at the time, had a population of about 2,000 people. Both her parents grew up in Statham alongside their large families. The median household income was under 40,000 dollars, and most households had two adults.

Angela’s parents were high school sweethearts. After graduating high school, her dad began working in a factory in Statham while her mom started college. While her mom put aside her collegiate career for a time, she finished with a degree in social work. Angela’s dad worked his way up in the factory business of Statham and at the same time ventured into entrepreneurship with his own cleaning business that he began to supplement the family income. His hard work ethic and can-do attitude led his business to grow and become very successful. At a young age, Angela and her sister were put to work helping with cleaning jobs after school hours and on weekends. By the age of 16, Angela got her first management assignment – she managed cleaning a building with two adult employees and was responsible for all interactions with the building manager and making sure the job was well done. This truly taught her about respect, responsibility, and using good leadership to help and influence those around you.

As Angela graduated high school, she continued forward with her education and attended the University of Georgia. Her parents had always stressed education and confidence, but she quickly realized what an adjustment she would face as she entered a school with a population of 30,000 people who were all as educated, if not more educated than she.

School proved to be more challenging than she expected as school had come easily to Angela until that point. However, taking her work-hard mentality, she changed her approach to classes and studying and continued on in the Terry College of Business. Angela set her heart on a career in Accounting because she saw what a significant difference a CPA could make to a company. She found that accounting is the financial language that any business needs to have, so it was a valuable asset.

Angela stated that one of her favorite things about the Terry College of Business is that they work very hard to promote their students. The accounting students were encouraged to go to one of the “Big Six” accounting firms, spend two years there, get their CPA licenses, and get out. Even after interviewing with people from the largest six accounting firms, Angela still felt like it wasn’t right for her. She chose to take an interview with a smaller firm for the extra interview practice, and to her surprise, she ended up feeling like it was the right place. She was

interviewed by Bob Greenberger, who to this day is still a mentor and close friend, and since he made her feel so comfortable, she decided to accept an internship with them.

Going into her internship, Angela still felt as if she should work for two years and get out. However, two years came and went, and she still felt like she had a lot to learn. She stayed at the firm and decided to always focus on the next position up. She continued to learn with every position she held and never coasted or settled into one spot.

In her career there, she felt lucky enough to see the first woman breaking the glass ceiling in her firm and becoming a partner. Along with this, she also saw the challenges, but this was both inspiring and educational.

As the small firm combined with Habif, Arogeti & Wynne, Angela felt as if she lost her goals for a moment. Since it was a much larger firm, she wasn't sure if she would still want to be a partner. After some contemplation, she realized that if she became a partner, it would also mean her becoming the first black partner and she shouldn't leave behind her career goals with a change of company. In becoming the first black partner, she realized it wasn't any longer just about her, but about someone having the courage to accomplish something that had never been done. She could become the example for others to follow, and she wanted to be an example of what could be accomplished if decided upon.

### **My Views on Leadership and Being Successful**

"First of all, we all lead. We lead ourselves, then we lead our family and friends. You don't have to be in a leadership position to be a leader because we're influencing people whether we realize it or not."

"I believe in quiet leadership, and when it comes down to it, I like to let my actions speak for me. If you're introverted, you can lead just as effectively as someone who is more extraverted and outgoing. It's most important when you're leading to remember that you're setting an example by keeping commitments to people whether they're higher or lower than you in your company. Everyone's time is valuable, and people will realize if you're not valuing their time as much as others."

"Also, leadership helped me be courageous. A good friend of mine once said 'You have to feel the fear and do it anyway.' I think he got it right, you have to do things that are uncomfortable and not easy, but you have to be willing to take that step and go for it. If you mess up, the best thing you can do is to admit mistakes, learn from them, brush them off, and keep going. When you make a mistake, that's when you should really press in and pay attention because that's where you'll grow. People will look to you and see how you handle adversity, and your character is developed by how you handle those problems. You won't be successful every time you try something new, but take ownership of your wins and losses."

"I'm sure it won't come as any surprise, but it's incredibly important to simply respect other people. Be careful about how you speak to others and what tone you use. I treat my staff like they're my teammates and colleagues because I know I couldn't do what I do without them. They're just as important as I am because we're all working together. People do a better job for you if they feel like you're there with them and supporting them. Remember, it's even more respectful to be kind to others when they make mistakes. They'll be harder on themselves than you will be on them, so the best thing you can do as a leader is be empathetic and supportive."

"The two things that will make you more successful than anything will be handling adversity and mistakes. You should always own up to it when you make mistakes. Once I made a mistake on a big account, and I didn't realize it until it was too late. I immediately went to the partner in charge of the account, and he offered to call the client for me and explain what happened. I told the partner that I felt like it was my mistake to admit and discuss, so I called the client, let him know what I did, and told him what I was doing to correct the mistake. He didn't yell or scream at me like I expected him to. The client was kind and patient and he told me he really appreciated me taking the blame for my mistake. Just as importantly, the Partner I was working for found it invaluable that I stepped up to

the plate when I didn't have to. Always remember, don't be afraid to step out because a mistake was made in the past.

"Second, the times in my life in which I have faced significant adversity really let me know how strong I am. In a short time, I dealt with divorce, the loss of a parent, breast cancer, and two major surgeries as a result of my cancer. At the time, it felt like it was back to back to back dealing with challenges, and it really didn't feel like anything positive could come of it. My breast cancer journey was a year and a half, and my turning point was about 3 months into that journey. I realized I had to figure out how I was going to react to this situation. Luckily, I decided to fight instead of checking out of the world. I learned to press forward even harder. We can't always determine what happens to use, but we can determine how we react to what happens. Breast cancer gave me a new way to approach my career and my own strength and determination to get through times of adversity."

### **Question & Answer**

You have achieved tremendous success at a young age which can dampen enthusiasm. How do you keep your direct reports and people around you inspired?

- There's always more you can achieve, I've always been goal oriented. Always be energetic around what more can be accomplished. I never feel we fully reach where we could be. There are so many things out there to learn, and I'm always excited about next thing.

What is next thing you're working toward at work?

- Becoming an equity partner is the next step at work. That comes with building up and the size of my practice and helping others build business.

You have an achiever mentality. Are there times when it's taken you longer to bounce back and start again?

- There are times when it's taken longer to accomplish my goals, and there are times when I've had to scratch a plan and start over. It took me a while to realize that I could throw away a plan and start over, and it was okay to do that. I like to check with myself, make sure I'm doing good things with my time, and eliminate things I don't like doing. I'm a firm believer in beginning again. I'm a planner, but some of the best things that happened to me threw me off my plan. I've learned to be flexible in that way.

What kind of reactions do you get when you tell people to own up to their mistakes?

- Sometimes I can get resistance. I always encourage people to own up to their mistakes, and you can help them through it and do it with them if they're apprehensive. Sometimes it's hard for people to see the solution to fix the mistake. Try to turn the negative into a positive, some of my mentors showed me not to focus on what went wrong but to focus on redirecting the path, and I found that to be especially helpful.

How do you use same skills in your personal life?

- In my family, I try not to use my leadership skills. I try to stay in the background and let them lead, but they all look to me to lead because it's my personality. I try to wait until I'm looked to or asked for my opinion. My family does tend to look to me, and as much as I try not to be the dominate voice, they seek me out.

What do you do for fun?

- I like to travel to new places. Every other year, I try to take a major trip with friends. I like to exercise, because I always was an athlete growing up. I've started making more time to read for pleasure. I think it's important to recharge – I want to start taking yoga as my next fitness challenge.

You're a leader in business and community, how did that come about?

- I have to give credit to my dad. He would volunteer for things, which really meant he would volunteer us for stuff. He was always involved and really big on giving back. He would always have us in the background helping him. It was part of how I grew up, we were always giving back. After I finished school

and established myself, I immediately started looking for ways I could contribute and give back. There are always things you can do to help those less fortunate.

One of the aspects of being a great leader is self-awareness and focus on growth. What are you working on now?

- Growing my practice, more public speaking, being more known in the Atlanta community, spending more time with my family. When making my big push to make partner, I didn't spend as much time with family as I'd like. So I like to make sure I have more of a work/life balance.

With the success that you've demonstrated in how quickly you've become partner, did you have people try to put you back in your place and how did you overcome?

- I still have that happen today. One of the things I didn't touch on is my faith. I have a lot of faith and confidence in myself, so when people try to slow me down, I have to set that aside and let it be another chance for me to lead. You have to learn to do what you should do instead of relying on your feelings. I have safe people who I can talk to about anything and get honest advice on any topic. Having people to have open and honest conversations with and get good feedback is critical.

Outside of your father, who is your biggest influence in stages of your life?

- Bob Greenberger. He was the partner who came and interviewed for internship. Bob started mentoring me right away, he is great about mentoring everyone he can. It took a long time for me to recognize what he was doing, but then I started going to him for help and guidance. He was my advocate, he helped me through my organization, and he helped me get to where I am. He's been in accounting for a long time, and started at Peat Marwick.

What advice do you have for current college students?

- I would encourage you to do an internship before you graduate to get a feel for what you think you're interested in. I wanted to make sure that I was going to like accounting, so I did an internship right before I finished my bachelor's. You want to know that you like it and know what you want to do to the extent possible in college. Be open to change and know if you find out that you don't like the path you chose, you can always find another one.

How did you overcome the periods of high stress in a short time?

- It was honestly one of those forced "trial by learning" experiences. Somewhere along the way, you have to decide that you will overcome it and hope that the next day will be better. You have to know that nothing lasts forever and things will be better. What helped me to quiet those voices was getting massages, you have to find a way to relax and break away from your thoughts. You also have to learn not to focus on what's going to happen, but wait and be patient and deal with the moment. One thing I would do is I would give myself 24 hours to be sad and depressed and not leave the house, but after that, I had to get back out and not stay on that downward spiral.