

Women in Leadership Seminar Notes 7/28/2006

Topic: Leading with Your Own Voice

Guest speaker/discussion leader: Krista Tillman, President / BellSouth NC

BellSouth officer since 2000; Masters in Industrial Management from GA Tech

Highlights:

Krista shared some key leadership lessons through four vignettes - real experiences in her 27-year corporate career.

1. New Jersey Experience: When she was promoted to her first mid-level management position, it required her to move to New Jersey. She had not only had to relocate herself, but also her husband – who had to find another job – and her 2 ½ year old son. She remembers thinking “I don’t know anyone in New Jersey and the position I’m filling is totally different from my previous assignments! Everything was a bit risky. One day she met Bob, a high-ranking manager and someone you might refer to a “Bob the bear” based on his intimidating size. (“I didn’t even know he knew my name,” she said.) Bob told Krista he needed to tell her something. Naturally, she listened eagerly as he followed with, “You need to quit smiling so much.”

“I thought a lot about this advice and a lot I’ve gotten since that time. I believe you must **know yourself and be yourself as a leader.** You have to learn to filter even the most well-intentioned advice. Some things you can and should pay attention to and change. In this case, however, I realized that smiling is part of who I am – it’s as natural for me as breathing. I didn’t want to change and probably couldn’t change that part of me.”

2. Atlanta Experience: A few years later, after Krista had returned to Atlanta and was in another assignment, she encountered an ethical dilemma. Her personal code of ethics told her she should speak up, but to do so, she would possibly be seen as a “whistleblower.” She didn’t know how the company would react or the impact on her career, but she knew she had to do what she thought was right, and she did. **“No matter what, you have to stick to your moral and ethical standards. You have to be prepared and willing to do whatever you must, even if your career suffers.”**

3. Officer Experience: When she first got promoted to officer level, Krista said she was sure she would open the desk drawer in her new office and find ‘THE PLAN: How to be an Effective Officer.’ Imagine her surprise when it wasn’t there! Krista decided to talk with some other officers and asked them about what they did. She learned from this and subsequent experience that – in reality – you have to ask yourself the question: **What do I want to do and how do I want to go about it? “For me,” she said, “I believe leadership is about having the right people in the right job doing the right things. It’s more about focusing on “the next big thing” than overseeing or micromanaging day-to-day business.**

Take the example of a symphony conductor. The conductor isn’t just seeing that the music being played is correct, he or she is really telling the musicians where the music is going.” Another example: Krista took over a position in which she had a direct report whom her predecessor said probably needed to be let go. Upon looking a little deeper, Krista found out that this was actually a manager who had been a top performer in every previous assignment. Krista decided to put her in another assignment rather than get rid of her. The person immediately returned to her days of top performance and began making a huge contribution. “The right job made all the difference.”

4. Move to Charlotte, NC: When Krista stepped into the state president's role, no other women were in that officer position – and only one had ever been in it. She looked forward to adding to the role to help the company. A large part of the job is external - legislative affairs and regulatory. Krista also knew she would have an opportunity to be involved in many different things but she also knew she needed to be somewhat selective, i.e., choose areas where she could have the greatest professional impact AND where she had a personal passion.

“You have to **redefine success for yourself** and for me, making the community and the world a better place is what I'm committed to. **Take the skills you've been able to hone in the business world and use them in the community.** Personally one of my passions is education, educating citizens of the world. My association with education projects has helped me personally and professionally.

Overall, Krista said she's learned many lessons in leadership along the way, and many she's had to relearn. The learning continues today.

Discussion / Q&A:

When you reflect on your career, can you give us an example of what you might do differently?

I once worked for a boss who clearly didn't want me in the job. I certainly would do some things differently, but sometimes, this can happen. For me, moving on to a different boss / different job was the best solution in the end.

Can you share your next career goal? When you started out, did you think you would become an officer?

I've now been able to integrate my professional and personal goals to a large extent so that what I do is what I want to do and what I love to do. The work I do for BellSouth and the work I do in the community are very meaningful to me. This is the way I define success at this stage of my career and life. Did I have a clear goal of making officer, NO! But, I'm starting to really enjoy it.

Of course, AT&T has acquired BellSouth and I don't know what the new structure will be so we'll have to see. We're all continuing to deal with change – and the best we can do is not to stress out about things that are out of our control.

How do you describe influence?

Well, it's not necessarily about title or position. I think it's about being connected – networked – internally in the organization and outside – and that can lead to an aura of power. You develop a network of contacts by helping other people accomplish their objectives. You also develop influence by getting results, demonstrating what you can accomplish.

Recently I met a technician who is extremely articulate and well-versed in our industry. He also has connections in the political arena. I made a note that this is someone who I would like to call on as a person of influence - who might speak on our behalf re certain legislative or regulatory issues.

As for confidence, I certainly haven't always felt confident in every situation or role, but what I've tried to do is just 'push through' – It takes courage to do that sometimes, but that's a part of leadership.

Work-life balance?

As you know, this is not just a women's issue and in fact, more and more men (Gen X for sure) are taking responsibility for being a bigger of their children's lives. Companies too are trying to be more aware of this issue. For me personally, I think that balance is really about pursuing things you love, integrating work and the rest of the your life to the maximum extent possible. With my background in education (I taught high school math after college), and my life-long commitment to improving our schools, it is a natural for me to want to have an impact in that area. Whether I am representing BellSouth or just participating as a citizen, this type of involvement gives me a sense of balance.

I am also fortunate to have a husband, a life partner, who has always been supportive of my career. And while he has his own interests and is his own person, he has moved with me for specific job opportunities and has been very involved in our son's activities. One thing we have always done when my son was growing up is to have dinner together. I may have been delayed getting home and not always able to leave the office at 5, or 6 but when I did get home, we ate dinner as a family.

Women's advancement?

I believe we're at a point where special treatment for women is over and I think that's a good thing. Every group and every person have issues, and while women are clearly under represented at certain levels in the corporate world, I believe we are recognized as strong leaders. The glass ceiling has been shattered in most cases.