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Lara O'Connor Hodgson, President/CEO, NOW Corp.



**“Want to be a Success? Think BIGGER!”** That was the topic of Lara’s presentation to an enthusiastic WIL audience at the 157<sup>th</sup> consecutive monthly Women in Leadership seminar. As a serial entrepreneur, an aerospace engineering honor graduate of Georgia Tech, a Harvard MBA and the first female business owner to be included in a Harvard Business School case study, Lara rose to the occasion as an amazing speaker. She absolutely informed, inspired, and invigorated everyone with her self-proclaimed “contrarian perspective” and 10 tips on how to achieve “SIGNIFICANCE vs SUCCESS.”

By definition, Lara said, “Success is the termination of an attempt” and she wants no part of that definition. Rather she sees “significance” as infinite and that implies having an impact. Clearly making a lasting impact is Lara’s goal in business and in life not only for herself but for others as well.

The following are Lara’s 10 key points:

**#1 Focus on significance:** Think about the attributes of those who have made real history. Sometimes you have to shake things up, not necessarily be liked by everyone.

**#2 Know VS Notice:** Innovation comes not from what people know but from what you NOTICE. Once Lara visited in the home of Shaq O’Neal, the famous basketball player and she couldn’t believe he did not have any of his many trophies displayed. He told her that his father had taught him to focus not on the past achievements but rather on the future. Lara agrees wholeheartedly. “Focus on future goals, and think BIG,” she says. (Incidentally, Lara proudly displayed a reminder of Shaq – his size 34 shoe! Truly amazing!!)

Another illustration of her point was a video Lara shared of a bunch of cowboys on horses riding up to a toll sign. It said you had to pay a dime to go through the cross arm. And each cowboy paid the dime. BUT all they really had to do was to NOTICE that they could have easily gone around the cross arm and never paid a single dime!

**#3 Skill sets VS Mindsets:** Mindsets are IDEAS whereas skill sets are things we have learned. A different / new mindset can present an opportunity that otherwise would be seen as a roadblock. Lara says, “In my experience the greatest ideas happen when you lack resources, vs when you have all you need. It forces you to think about the demand side of the issue vs the supply side. The demand side is more about the solution to a problem. It may very well lead you to a disruptive perspective that will change the game.

**#4 Answers vs Questions:** Dr. Jonas Salk who invented the vaccine for polio once said, “Answers to every question preexist.” What you want to do is stretch yourself by asking questions, the “whys” vs the what, who and when. Lara also shared an experience with her

own son and his love of LEGOS. Today everything comes with instructions telling exactly how a certain thing should be built. She prefers to throw away the instructions and see what he creates on his own / what he can envision without a set of blueprints. Sadly, she pointed out, “Humans typically are at their creative peak at age 5.” As adults we have to challenge ourselves think more creatively and ask the WHY questions.

**#5 What you can do vs what you can't NOT do:** While that may be a double negative, the point is that those of us who live by lists know that there are things that we absolutely must do. We like to spend time on what we like, and we should pay attention to those things that mean the most to each of us – ideally things that make an impact.

**#6 What vs SO What:** There is often a lot of ego in the “what” we’re doing or have done, e.g., jobs we’ve held on our resume. But in Lara’s case when she sees a resume, she says, “I don’t care about the WHAT. I’m interested in the impact of someone’s roles. How did they make a difference, innovate, create value, etc.”

**#7 Excel vs Fail:** Lara advises that we should try and put ourselves in positions where we don’t know everything. “Fail fast and forward,” she says. “It’s not just OK – it’s awesome!” Sara Blakely, the phenomenally successful creator of SPANX and a billionaire, was taught by her father to fail. He would ask at the dinner table each night what she failed at that day. A true learning experience! Lara adds, “Failure can be a gift.”

**#8 More businesses GROW out of business than GO out of business:** She herself has built her current entrepreneurial enterprise – NOW Corp – by thinking about the demand side of a problem faced by most if not all small businesses. That is, having to wait to be paid by their customers – very long waits! As a result she and her business partner came up with a way to help small businesses get their invoices paid immediately and go on to do more business, sometimes 3 times more business! NOW Corp pays the small business owner upfront and takes a small percentage of the revenue. Then they go about collecting the invoice leaving their client to grow by having greater cash flow, etc. NOW Corp. has been successful in creating partnerships with various financial institutions that has enabled them to grow to a level of approximately \$150M in transactions and helped clients add 1200 jobs.

**#9 Be the Boss you’ve always wanted:** A boss Lara once had told her to do everything she could, to stretch herself, but ask for help when she needed it. You don’t need to be micromanaged but you need to know when to ask for help. Lara also doesn’t care much about a title because it’s more important what you actually do especially as a leader.

She mentioned Laura Liswood who founded the Council of Women World Leaders. There were at least 15 women around the world who were the top leader in their own country but they didn’t even know each other so Laura brought them together at Harvard and connected them.

Lara also shared this: when you ask a group of kindergarten kids “who wants to lead?” – every hand will go up. But ask the same question to a group of teenagers and you’re likely not to see any hands.

Lara reminded us that there are at least 8 definitions of leadership in the dictionary. The first 4 are about the team while the second 4 are focused on the individual leader. Lara says, “The first 4 clearly are about significance whereas the second set of definitions are just about success.”

**#10 Be real:** Be authentic, be yourself, be honest about what you can do. “Culture,” Lara says, “is shaped by the worst behavior the leader is willing to tolerate.” (Editorial comment: How true that is!)

She also discussed one of the issue that is often raised around women – about how to achieve “balance.” She says, “Guilt and balance – such a debate around these issues for women. But it’s the wrong focal point. When I think about balance I think about a seesaw and being static, being average. Instead I say ‘Optimize’ your time and energy.”

Q & A:

Lara led a lively discussion around questions and topics on:

**How did you develop yourself as a leader?** She’s had coaches, learned from her teams, and gained insights from others on boards she’s served on.

**Hiring & Recruiting:** She’s very interested in diversity of thought and surrounding herself with those who think differently. She constantly looks for talent whether it’s at the cash register at Publix or wherever. She’s not looking for someone who fits into a particular BOX or job description, but someone who can create his/her own role – like she’s done herself.

**Competition:** I like to do what my competition doesn’t want to do. Differentiate yourself that way.

**Being Present:** Lara says she thinks it’s particularly hard on the next generation – so many distractions. But take a meeting for example, we’ve lost the purpose she thinks. It’s not about communication (that should precede the meeting), but rather, it should be about collaboration.

**Asking Why:** Clearly there’s a time and way to ask the why questions and it should not be disruptive, or judgmental and should be done from the standpoint of getting more information, clarifying one direction or solution vs other possibilities.

