



Women in Leadership Seminar Highlights

January 23, 2015

Topic: “Building an Infrastructure and Ecosystem for Women’s Advancement” featuring Debbie Storey, SVP-Talent Management & Chief Diversity Officer – AT&T/Dallas, TX.



Debbie Storey’s engaging and honest discussions at the Women in Leadership seminar centered on building a system for women’s advancement. With insights from her past, she highlighted how she got to where she is today, her current work at AT&T and her plans for the future.

In her role as Senior Vice President-Talent Development and Chief Diversity Officer, Debbie is responsible for identifying and developing future leaders at the company, employee engagement and diversity management.

Debbie joined AT&T in 1983 and has held numerous positions throughout her 32 years with the company – including roles in customer service, sales, operations, network, M&A and HR.

From her first days with BellSouth in Atlanta, Debbie has felt fortunate to work alongside leaders who put integrity above

all else.

As her career progressed, she was drawn toward opportunities to help women advance. She joked that there are three signs of a stressed woman – eating too much, shopping compulsively and driving too fast. “Sound familiar?” she asked the audience.

With Debbie’s guidance, AT&T has created an ecosystem for support and advancement of women. “We call it that because it takes an infrastructure of programs and a culture to support the advancement and promoting women,” Debbie said. “We create an environment where women can thrive and grow.”

Debbie defines a mentor as “someone whose hindsight can become your foresight.” To that end, she suggested four keys to success:

1. Make Great Coffee
2. Get In Way Over Your Head
3. Take Big Risks and Fail Publicly
4. Put Family Ahead of the Job

Lesson One: Make Great Coffee – After graduating from college with a degree in psychology and criminal justice, Debbie worked for a printing company as a clerk in the customer service department. When she showed up the first day, her boss said, “Let’s start by making coffee.” Debbie had never made coffee (not being a coffee drinker at the time), but she learned how to make the *best* coffee. She then began delivering it to people to get to know them and the organization. She joked, “How can they resist talking to you when you just delivered great coffee?” She began asking people how she could help them improve their job. Within six months, she was promoted to customer service representative. She also learned from people who were not considered front-runners because she respected their wealth of experience. Soon, Debbie was promoted to customer service manager. From this, she learned that no matter what job you’re given, do it better than anyone else. Look for the white space around you that allows you to do more than is expected.

Lesson Two: Get in Way Over Your Head – Debbie appreciated having a boss who also would serve as a mentor. Her career grew at the printing company. She spent a good bit of time figuring out how to make things more efficient in customer service and other departments – especially sales. Her boss soon offered her a job to take over the sales organization. This was intimidating to Debbie since printing was a male-dominated industry, and she was asked to take over a team of men who had sold printing for 35 years. Due to her young age and gender gap, she struggled hard to quiet the voice in her head saying, “I can’t do this. I don’t have enough experience.” She told her boss and mentor she was considering turning down the offer. But he convinced her that she not only had the leadership skills and capabilities to make it happen, but that he believed in her and would have her back. She took the job, made it clear to her staff that she had a lot to learn and over time found ways to make their jobs easier. She got in way over her head but learned so much from that one experience. “In order to grow, you have to get out of your comfort zone,” Debbie said. “You don’t learn by doing the same comfortable thing you’ve been doing.”

Lesson Three: Take Big Risks and Fail Publicly – Debbie continued to work hard and collaborate across the business, and she wanted to bring others along with her. At this point, she was a senior manager at the printing company, and the president asked her to present the team’s business plan for the year. She jumped right into PowerPoint mode – dumping every idea, issue and resolution into the deck. Debbie had never delivered a presentation before and had only seen one business plan outlined, but she dived into hers headfirst without asking for help or guidance. Debbie’s slides were filled to the brim with information. She was five minutes into her presentation when she realized she was still on the first of many slides with only 15 minutes left. She began talking very fast and loud to try to get the information across as quickly as possible. But no one would make eye contact with her, and she could tell she should just stop. To wrap up, she joked that there was no elegant way to finish and then asked for anyone to visit her office for additional information. Debbie hadn’t asked people for help before her presentation, and it caused a public failure. “Afterwards, I was down and had a choice to stay down or get back up,” she said later. “There was no way I could let that moment define me as a leader.” She apologized to her boss, told him she should have asked for help and guaranteed it wouldn’t happen again. She took a public speaking course and went back to prove that she could present in front of

others. The lesson learned here was to seek input from others – that it not only makes you smarter, it gets you in the boat with others. Failing is not falling down, it's not getting back up.

Lesson Four: Put Family Ahead of Your Job – A few years later, Debbie was an executive at the printing company – its first female at the leadership table. At 4 p.m. every day, the leaders met to discuss what was going well and what needed work. Debbie was a single mom, and at 5 p.m., she would start to worry about picking up her son by 6 p.m. No one else had that sense of urgency to end the meeting by 5. Each day, Debbie had to decide to wait and see if the meeting would end by 5 or whether she'd have to call someone for help. Finally, she met with her boss. "Nobody is more committed than I am," she said, "but when that meeting ends at 5:30 or 6, I wrestle with how I care for my son. If you know the meeting will run late, I can handle it ahead of time. What is hard for me to manage is not knowing." She added that if known in advance, she could work late during the week but that she'd like to spend her weekend time with her son. Her boss agreed to end the meeting every day at 5 p.m. and have anyone with additional comments come to his office to discuss. By simply raising the issue in a direct and respectful manner, she changed the behavior of the whole team, and everyone acknowledged and respected her needs. "There are always tradeoffs that must be made, but you have to stay grounded in your values when you need to," Debbie said. "Most importantly, you have to make time for the things that are important to you. We're all juggling balls every day. Some of those balls are rubber, and they will bounce. Some of those balls are crystal, and when you drop them, you can't get them back."

Debbie added a couple of additional lessons that aren't taught in business school: Don't ever underestimate the value of being the new guy. The beauty of being new is that you are able to ask those dumb questions, and those questions may have the biggest insight. Also, don't undervalue the ability to build a great network. Treat every person as if he or she is the CEO – people you don't anticipate can have great influence, so don't dismiss anyone who is seemingly unimportant.

Debbie ended her presentation with four dares for the audience. (1) Be yourself. Be authentic because there is no mold that you should aspire to be. The real you will always come out, and there is a way to fit yourself into those concepts of executive presence and abilities. "Fake it 'til you make it" is about faking confidence, not who you are. (2) Take responsibility for your attitude. Life is about 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how to respond to it. Nobody is just lucky; people who are successful are resilient and keep getting up. When you face obstacles, let friends, family and faith inspire you about the possibilities that lie ahead. Be conscious of your attitude and how you approach life, and be careful about the things that keep you going. (3) Give up the guilt. Stop being a perfectionist. It's a busy world, so be willing to let go of things and ask for help. Think early on about the support system you'll end up with and who will surround you to help you. The need to be perfect is a confidence killer; just have the confidence to be you. (4) Pursue your passion. Life is too short to invest time in the things you aren't passionate about. In the course of your lifetime, things will catch your eye and your heart – focusing on those will help your life and work become so much more meaningful and giving.

For Debbie, one of her strongest passions now is ensuring that AT&T is a great place for women. She wanted to pave the way and ensure that people can achieve success. There are so many books and speakers on the “secret” to women’s success. But Debbie says there actually is no secret. Sponsorship is one thing we can do to support women, but it’s not the end-all. Educational programs are also important. Women come to the job with the same skills and capabilities as men and have the same ambition. However, women tend not to get as much of the three E’s:

- Education – broad education about business
- Experience – women don’t tend to ask for their next job, so ask for it and tell people what you want
- Exposure – women aren’t as effective at building a powerful network, and they don’t like to ask for favors. Make sure business leaders know you and that you can leverage their networks. It’s about getting a lot of different sponsors.

As Debbie wrapped up, she left us with one final thought. She stated that when people near the end of their lives and are asked what they regret most, they consistently cite 5 things:

- Not being brave enough to pursue more dreams
- Caring too much what others think
- Working too hard
- Not spending enough time with friends/family
- Not taking time to make more of a difference

Debbie encouraged us to not look back on our lives with regret for the things we didn’t do. Instead, look back on your life and know that you pursued your dream, you spent time with the important people in your life, and you made a difference.

Questions & Answers:

You have quite a few programs at AT&T – how did you get them started?

- When I came into this role, I didn’t think there was too much that I needed to fix. I spent the first couple of months looking at data and projections and was figuring out what we needed to do. At the rate we were progressing, it would take 46 years to accomplish the goals I had in mind. Then, my boss asked me to fix it. I always try to surround myself with people who can help me learn, so the first thing I did was launch a women leaders’ council. It included women on all management levels and places across the U.S. The 20 women selected for the council were thought leaders in the business, so the meetings allowed for a wide range of input and influence. We identified what we could do to move forward and overcome little obstacles. The first thing these women said was, “We don’t see enough role models, and I can’t even envision a path for how to get higher up.” In response to this, I created a role model campaign. I joked that

it was our own Dove campaign – women talking openly about how they accomplished things and what it took for them to advance to their positions.

Have you had women who want to help bring up these managers?

- Absolutely, in observing the women who have had the opportunity to participate, I've seen them so incredibly passionate about what they can do and how they can create an environment to cater to the challenges of women.

What does AT&T do to develop people?

- We try to get people exposure across business units and have conversations with leaders within the business. It helps to have people talk to higher-up leaders to understand their role and how they can use leadership skills to increase effectiveness.

Do you use assessment center methodologies?

- Yes, we do, but only to develop. We don't share them with leaders or anyone else, and we don't select based on assessments. But we do use them for development.

Working across generations, I'd love to hear some ideas about using your resources and developing people -- from baby boomers to millennials.

- We've worked to attract baby boomers and other generations. We wanted to see what people gain from knowing others' expectations and cultural needs. We have to compete with Silicon Valley for some jobs, and we've found it fascinating that new people in the business care less about retirement programs and incentives and more about company culture. I always say don't get hung up about having to manage the next generation differently, it's just situational leadership. You can't generalize about employees based on generation – you have to manage people.

How can you be authentic while looking at executive presence?

- Executive presence is more about the ability to communicate in a way your audience can connect. It's OK to be quirky or different, but you have to communicate in a way that's effective and relevant. You want to gain respect through your capabilities, speaking, and dress, and there's a way to do that and still be yourself.

You mentioned some obstacles you've overcome. How can we help others and learn how to be better supporters of people going through difficult times?

- What has helped me, and to me this is so logical, is when someone is going through a challenge or hard time, people are so afraid to say something because they're afraid the person will break. For me, the worst thing people did was ignore when I was going through a hard time; the best people were the ones who genuinely asked me how I was doing and let me talk to them. Don't

be afraid to talk about it because the person going through it can't stop thinking about it. I so appreciate when people are willing to talk about things that are difficult because it's part of getting better.

Is there still something on your career bucket list?

- I still think we can accomplish more for the women at AT&T. We are a leader in corporate America, and the long-term goal for me is that at every level of management, every aspect of diversity should be represented at the percentage people are represented in the general population. I don't know if we'll ever finish looking for improvement, but that's what I'd like to accomplish in my lifetime.