

Women in Leadership Seminar Highlights

March 28th, 2014



Topic: *“Learning on the Fly: Key Insights in Change Management, Strategic Planning, and Leadership”* featuring Paulette Corbin, Executive-in-Residence at North Highland.

Paulette Corbin greeted every Women in Leadership attendee as they walked in to hear her speak on March 28th. Her warm, inviting nature created instant interest in the topic and story about “Learning on the Fly.” Paulette is the Executive-in-Residence at North Highland and former SVP of Delta Airlines. As Paulette spoke about her life and professional success, the audience was swept away with stories of her journey.

Paulette was born in the Midwest, but spent most of her childhood in Ohio. Her father, in her own words, was quite the “wanderer”, so she moved frequently as a child. When it was time for Paulette to go to college, she chose the then girls’ school, Hollins University. After a couple years at Hollins, she decided to continue her education at a coed school, Allegheny College, and graduated with degrees in dramatic arts and psychology.

By the time Paulette graduated from Allegheny College, her family had moved to Macon, Georgia. She moved to Georgia to join her family, but it didn’t take her long to realize that Macon was not the place she wanted to call home. A friend told her that with her great people skills and love of traveling, she would make a great flight attendant. With that recommendation in mind, Paulette relocated to Atlanta to join a small, regional company, Delta Airlines.

Once her flight attendant training was complete, Delta offered a number of places for flight attendants to work from, and Paulette had her heart set on Boston, Massachusetts. She worked as a flight attendant and was promptly promoted to the lead flight attendant who organized the staff on the flights. As a leader, Paulette filled out diligent reports after each flight explaining what could be done to improve the flying experience for the flight attendants and customers. After completing and handing in many reports to her supervisor, she was finally called in by a supervisor to talk about her reports. Eager to be a part of positive change, Paulette went into the meeting ready to discuss how to implement her suggested changes. When she walked in, her supervisor simply said, “You use too many staples in your reports. Don’t use that many staples, it’s wasteful.”

Paulette considers this to be the tipping point in her career. She was shocked that the staples holding her report together would be a more significant topic to her supervisor than the issues of real and productive changes she recommended. After thinking about her reports and the staples in them, she decided she wanted to be in a better position to make change, and she requested a supervisor position.

After that, Paulette quickly worked her way up in Delta earning 8 promotions in 10 years. She attributes this to her ability to solve thorny problems, see links that others don’t naturally see, use the motivation and inspiration of those that inspired her and passing it onto others, listening well, and having a passion for excellence. Paulette also said her biggest strength as a leader was that she was curious and she always wanted to help others grow, and because of that, her employees were receptive when she had to have difficult conversations with them.

Paulette's first challenge as a leader occurred when she started working with the Delta Reservations Sales employees. At that time, the department was highly regulated and everything was measured and tracked – lunch breaks and bathroom breaks were timed! Paulette worked to rebuild the department into a more friendly, efficient, and flexible environment.

Both the employees and customers were markedly happier with the improvements in Reservations Sales, so Delta sent Paulette to work with baggage performance. At that point in time, Delta was in last place for baggage delivery according to consumers, and Paulette was charged with fixing that issue. After researching the issue, listening to employees who worked with baggage, and a couple rounds of trial and error, she solved the issue simply by focusing on allocation of resources to improve Delta's baggage handling. Delta was #3 in airline baggage handling by the end of the project.

Paulette's next challenge came in the form of building an airline within an airline. She was asked to join a new project, the Delta Express Core Team, and she agreed to go in order to learn about strategy. The team came together in March of 1996 with directions to launch Delta Express by December 1st. Luckily, for this team, a short time frame led to great innovation. Pilots, flight attendants, airport agents and maintenance engineers joined together to train and learn collaboratively about how to lower costs and make the release run smoothly. The team managed to allocate resources appropriately, stay within their budget, and use the project as an opportunity for development – all in a matter of 8 months!

After her multiple successes, Delta offered Paulette the position of Executive Assistant to the Chief of Operations. Excited for the chance to have a mentor, she accepted the position and worked with a man who, she confidently says, was one of the best mentors she ever had.

After her period of growth and personal coaching with the Chief of Operations, Delta asked Paulette to return to the Delta Express team as the Managing Director. She helped to train new leaders who were brought in and continue to grow this highly profitable airline within an airline.

Paulette's offer to work with Delta on the west coast came with the title of Vice President – Airports West. She was relocated to Salt Lake City, Utah where she was responsible for 57 airport operations for Delta. This meant a lot of traveling between airports to improve the operations and customer service of Delta at each respective airport. At this time, the culture of Airport Customer Service was very militaristic, and Delta was in need of good leadership to drive innovation while maintaining a strong focus on safety.

Paulette was at the point of brainstorming ways to incorporate better customer service when the Twin Towers were struck on September 11, 2001. After this, many Americans were scared to fly and people working in airports were afraid to come to work. Paulette and her team made it their mission to make flying a safe and comfortable experience. Delta began to place check-in kiosks in airports with staff at the kiosks to teach customers how to use them. Delta employees worked to integrate customer service with the TSA security standards to ensure that there were as few problems and complaints as possible.

By 2002, Americans felt safe flying again, and Paulette was faced with a new challenge – Salt Lake City was hosting the Winter Olympic Games. Delta successfully created a program to have employees handle baggage from the flights to hotels to minimize the hassle for travelers. By the end of the Olympics, Delta was one of the best reviewed companies due to their customer care.

After her success in Salt Lake City, Delta asked Paulette to take the position of Vice President of Flight Attendants, Catering and Provisioning. With her years of experiences and success stories, Paulette

politely refused. She explained that in order to move, she wanted a promotion as opposed to moving laterally. Delta accepted this, and made her an offer to become the Senior Vice President.

Her first challenges in her position as Senior VP included overcoming catering problems across airports and handling the international growth of Delta. However, in 2005, Paulette encountered one of her biggest challenges yet. Delta filed for bankruptcy and was searching for ways to keep customer satisfaction up and show their employees that Delta did have the opportunity to create a strong future. To do this, Paulette and the Delta team created the Velvet Rope Tour. Every flight attendant in Delta came in for training. They discussed why Delta was in bankruptcy, how they were going to overcome it and become a stronger company, and how to manage customer expectations during the times of difficulty. The tour created the goal of reducing customer service complaints and improving flight experiences – and they did!

At this point in time, Paulette was working 3 different jobs. While her title indicated that she was working with flight attendants and provisions, she was also conducting the Velvet Rope Tours and helping the corporate Delta offices with issues relating to bankruptcy. After many years of promotions and experiences with Delta, Paulette decided that she needed a bit more balance in her life and retired from Delta after 33 years of service. She took a year off and then began exploring options for her future.

While looking for a job in Atlanta, a friend mentioned to Paulette that an interesting company, North Highland Consulting, wanted to hire someone to join their team and help with Delta as a client. Paulette then joined North Highland, and she hasn't looked back since. She currently enjoys working at a company with good, honest people, and, as she stated, "North Highland solves thorny problems, too, so I feel right at home working there!"

Paulette's Last Word:

For Your Consideration

- What fuels your passion? Find it and a way to integrate it into your career
Every day and in countless ways
- Are you articulating optimism and a way forward? Great leaders relate to their people and believe in them
Listen hard...show you care about her/him
- Do you actively demonstrate that you are someone who will do what you promise?
Integrity, Resilience, Simplicity, Rhetoric
- Do you show people that you actually deliver and that you will dive in and try something else?
Show progress through measurements and pull up your sleeves and participate
- How often do you thank people? Whatever it is, it is not nearly enough!

Q&A

- **You were noticed throughout your career by people higher up than you, how can people position themselves to be noticed?**

I was able to move so much in my career because of a handful of women at senior levels with Delta and several male leaders who valued my skills. And –this is REALLY important - I drove high performing results for the business. Drive top notch results, ask for feedback and find sponsors in the organization who can help get your name into succession conversations. If you are authentic and want honest advice on how to position yourself for promotions, you will find individuals who will help you.

- **How did you manage so many changes in positions? How did you prepare for each one?**

Honestly, there wasn't a lot of preparation or training in businesses at that time. I took the opportunities as they came and learned a lot by trial and error. I believe that employees are the best brand representatives a company has; it's the differentiator. So, for me, it was always important to be able to engage and bring the best out of people. The most helpful thing in changing roles and positions was to be honest, ask questions, outline the goals and the business reasons for the goals and ask employees for their help. You don't always have the answers and you shouldn't be expected to. It makes you more human as a leader and it is important to show that you are human.

- **You had a somewhat non-traditional education, how did that affect you professionally?**

My education helped me mostly with relating to people and leading. The dramatic arts helped me with empathy, understanding and confidence. Psychology helped me understand that people are different, and that's okay – you just have to learn how to work with different people.

- **How did you adapt to the different positions you were assigned?**

I found that once you take the first jump into an area that you don't have a lot of background in, and are successful, the next jumps aren't as scary. Maybe it's because I began to understand the skills I had and the value I could bring to an organization. I knew not everyone would like me, but I wanted to be respected for doing the right things. When moving into a new area or organization, it's really important to do a lot of listening and assessing. Goals are pretty clear; it's the things that inhibit being successful that aren't always clear and that's what you have to uncover as a leader. I believe 99% of people come to work to win and it's problems in "the system" that interfere, so I would have discussions on what to do and how to be effective. Understanding and trust are the basis for success with any employees.

- **How did you balance the personal and professional sides of your life?**

I will be honest with you, I flunked life balance. I didn't have any children (well, we do have four legged children), and my husband was a business man as well. I guess because of our busy lives, children never happened, so we worked on our careers and rescued animals. My husband is an amazing individual who sold a business, built another business, mentored people trying to start their own business and continues to be my best friend and partner through all of my career choices and leadership endeavors.