



“A High Energy Journey: Corporate and Civic Leadership” – featuring Suzanne Sitherwood, the first woman in 95 years to chair the Georgia Chamber of Commerce. Four other roles include SVP of Southern Operations for AGL Resources; president of AGL; president of Chattanooga Gas; and president of FLA City Gas. Known for her political acumen and technical knowledge, Suzanne led the chamber’s Environment & Energy Committee to secure the passage of the first statewide water plan in 2008; serves on the Governor’s Energy Policy Council, the Children’s Healthcare Bd., the New Century School

Advisory Bd., the Carter Center Bd. of Councilors and the Atlanta Dream Advisory Bd. In 2009 she was honored as a YWCA “Woman of Excellence.” Suzanne holds an engineering degree from the Southern College of Technology and is an honored alum.

Key points in her story:

- Suzanne began by sharing her perspective on the Gulf oil spill and the role of natural gas in our country’s energy future (very informative). On another day, she said, “I could give a day’s talk on energy and technology!”
- Reaching a mid-point of her life, Suzanne feels she’s earned her confidence with a solid professional track record. (She’s absolutely right!) However, she also admits that she has had to learn to talk about herself and now she enjoys sharing her story with audiences like WIL.
- Grew up as part of a military family that moved about every 2 years. Father was a chief petty officer and she learned a lot of valuable lessons from him: about leadership, trust, respect.
- Living on military bases, she always was around a diverse group of people (a virtual melting pot.). The outside world may have been segregated but within the military, there was much more equality.
- Moving around as much as she did helped her learn to quickly get engaged, make friends etc. As an athlete, she found that sports enabled her to integrate into a new school more easily. Also a great way to learn about team work, determination, competition, etc.
- After graduating from college with a degree in engineering, she was hired as the “first female engineer” at AGL. She had also been a co-op there. During her initial screening interview, she was asked “What if someone cussed at you? What would you do?” She replied, “I’d cuss right back!” And she was hired.
- Since the organization was predominantly male and hierarchical, it reminded her of the military and she felt she fit in even though she was a woman.
- Early in her career, she rode on the utility trucks with the guys in order to learn from them...and she said it was where she learned the most about the business. Employees

have been her strongest mentors. “They knew I cared about them, and wanted to learn from the ground up.”

- Now, in a senior role, she still makes a commitment to visit every work group at least once a year. She also purposely drives her own truck (a Tundra with a few years on it) which gives her the opportunity to blend in. One work group said, “We’ve never had a president come out to talk with us before!”
- She is proud of many things in her career including her 5 Year Business Plan which is built by her team – it’s their input she said, “I just implement it.” She’s equally proud of the fact that 5 ½ years into her current position, she has achieved 76% diversity in her team (Up from only 20% when she took over.)
- Also, recently received a 73% return on survey which is a good indicator of trust and openness.
- AGL is also the only publicly traded company in their industry without collective bargaining – and she credits this to the fact that her organization has achieved a strong, open, and collaborative culture. She believes one of the strengths she’s developed is the art of LISTENING.
- Suzanne has also gone beyond the “call of duty” to get involved in volunteerism. Alana Shepherd of the Shepherd Center inspired her early community engagement. While her involvement is very diverse, she especially enjoys the intersection of business and politics - and is less interested in party politics and much more concerned about good policy. (Is a run for a high public office in her future?? We’ll have to wait and see!)
- In her current role as the first woman in 95 years to head the GA Chamber of Commerce, she sees opportunities to suggest more participation by women – all the while – respecting the men she works with. Nonetheless she says, “You have to call the question. There’s always a way to do it softly, but still make it happen.”

Q&A:

- 1) How do you “balance” your demanding business roles, community roles and personal life? - “It’s not just good time management for me, but more about creating a team that can execute the plans and do their jobs without me being there every day. I trust them to do that. As a leader in any role, my first job is to assess the team. Get the right people and make sure they have what they need to do their best.”
- 2) What are your future goals and aspirations? - “I’m very happy where I am but I think about being CEO of the company one day. Without challenge, it’s pretty boring! There are also external possibilities – one day, maybe...”
- 3) When you meet with your different employee groups, what do you do or say? - “I try to think in advance about what’s on their minds, what’s important to them, what they’re interested in. Once when we were in a rate case, and everybody was talking about it, I created a storyboard using ordinary employees. Making it relevant to them, whether it was the subject of healthcare or whatever. It made for some great dialogue!”
- 4) What obstacles do you face? – “Besides growing and sustaining the business, I’d say it can be challenging working with male colleagues. I’m talking about external to the company as well, e.g., when I go to industry meetings of presidents, I’m the only woman. Some may think they have to communicate with me differently, or just feel uncomfortable because I’m not one of ‘them.’ But we work it out.”

- 5) Have you had any start-up / entrepreneurial experience? – “AGL is the oldest company in the state and we’ve certainly created a lot of business units...as well as acquired others.”
- 6) Do you have a successor selected? - “Well I think about that and that’s important. I’d say YES, and actually I am mentoring 2-4 people. One thing I look for is the person’s ability to make decisions with the president’s hat on. Another aspect: the ability to dress up to go to a corporate or community event...and to dress down when the situation dictates. Being comfortable in both situations.”
- 7) Have you had to downsize and if so, how’d you handle it? - “Yes and the best approach is always to be honest and transparent and to communicate all along the way. Try to help everyone make the transition.”
- 8) How about culture shift from entitlement for example? - “ I think transparency of what you’re trying to achieve is the key, and we’ve used the ‘defreeze, refreeze’ approach. Some may opt out and that’s ok too. There was a higher turnover at the top than at the bottom of the pyramid. We stressed empowerment at the lower levels.”
- 9) Is it possible to take on too much change at once? – “ I’ve always been a change agent and I’m comfortable with it...I grew up with a lot of flexibility and ambiguity. I think the discipline of project management can be a real asset to making change.”

Final Take-Aways:

- Listening: As a leader, the more you do, the better it is. Fireside chats are good.
- Don’t survey your employees unless...you plan to do something with the response.
- Trust: actions speak a lot louder than words.