

Highlights: Women in Leadership – July 21, 2017

**“Career and Leadership Insights: From Planes to Paper & Packaging” featuring Shan Cooper, Chief Transformation Officer – West Rock**



WIL seminar **#160** featured one of Atlanta’s most respected and most honored business leaders, Shan Cooper, Chief Transformation Officer with WestRock. Having made a major industry move in 2016 – from Lockheed Martin Aeronautics to WestRock, or as Shan described, from “planes to paper & packaging” – she has firsthand experience and

significant insights on the subject of leadership and career transitions.

In addition, Shan’s genuine, down-to-earth and highly interactive communication style made the seminar even more engaging and inspirational for those in attendance. Here are some of the key messages and lessons she shared:

- To better understand her transition, she talked about “perspective, purpose and power.” When making a transition or considering any job, you should think about how your personal values align with that company or organization.
- Three major areas of focus for Shan are faith, family & career.
- In deciding to end her 16 year career with Lockheed Marietta, one critical factor was not wanting to leave ATL. Having moved a number of times for new opportunities and advancement, she chose to stay here – among other reasons, family – specifically to be close to her young granddaughter!
- Shan likes to “build and create” not just maintain an organization – another reason to consider a career transition.
- She had to learn to “let go of the past” – realizing that in her new role, she was not going to be the top decision maker and she was also going to be an unknown entity.
- In any organization, culture is critical. This was the number one thing Shan wanted to understand in the company she was joining. To take an organization or company to a higher level or in a different direction, the culture has to be aligned with that mission.
- Talent is equally important. You need the best people in the right positions.
- It’s also important to understand power and what role it plays in a particular organization.
- Listening & asking questions - seeking to learn and understand - was Shan’s first 30 day approach – an approach which helped her get to know her people and her peers.

- Shan practices ending every meeting with a question: “What feedback do you have for me?”
- Even though she’s in a position to lead corporate transformation and change, she was careful to respect the history of the organization, and to be respectful of the people who have helped the company get to where it is today. It’s important to treat people with dignity even if organizational changes are necessary.
- A big part of any leadership job is cultivating relationships.
- Very intentional about being visible and talking to people especially to the people at the bottom of the pyramid. Being intentional actually requires that you flip the pyramid and realize that as a leader you work for the people in the organization who are actually doing the work and driving value for the organization.
- Value transparency as much as is possible. Builds trust.
- Integrity is a CORE characteristic. Non-negotiable.
- Email is NOT the way to communicate important information. People have a tendency to use email vs face to face communication. Can get you in trouble, legally and otherwise.

#### **Q & A:**

**Question:** How do you go about spreading a culture where asking for and getting feedback are valued?

**Response:** It’s a process and must be intentional.

**Question:** What has been your experience in the difference in women / women leaders and managers vs their male counterparts?

**Response:** Women generally appear less confident in their own abilities - even though they have the requisite skills and are strong performers etc. Men typically have more than enough confidence whether they have all the skills or not. Women should not talk themselves out of opportunities.

**Question:** What’s next?

**Response:** She’s very focused on the future, e.g., digital transformation, new technology, exploring how employees work best in a global society, ecommerce etc. Personally, down the road, she’d like to write a book (tentative title is “Faith in the C Suite.”)

**Question:** How do you handle so many business responsibilities as well as so many community leadership roles?

**Response:** Her parents instilled “giving back.” Her particular passion is education, children and women. That’s how she determines what to say YES to. She also suggests that when she’s on her own time with family, she tries to be 100% present in the moment.

