

## **WIL Highlights for Aviva Leebow Wolmer**

**November 16, 2018**

While she may have been a somewhat reluctant 2<sup>nd</sup> generation CEO in her family's business, Pacesetter Steel Service, Aviva Leebow Wolmer has proven to be a great choice for her company, now and for the future. All of us in attendance at WIL seminar #186 were extremely fortunate to hear her inspiring personal and professional journey – a journey with many more chapters yet to be experienced.

The Atlanta born and raised CEO opened her remarks with this statement: "This is my story and you can take what you like and leave the rest." This statement set the stage for everything that followed: Aviva's open, candid, and 100% authentic story-telling style. It also supports why she was honored last year as one of the Atlanta Business Chronicle's "Most Admired CEOs."

Forty one years ago, Aviva's parents started the business and she literally grew up roaming the halls and helping with small tasks. But neither she nor her two older sisters dreamed of one day taking over from their dad. In fact, when it came time for college, Aviva was adamant about establishing her own identity. "I felt that I needed to be far away from the family business, so criminal justice seemed like a good path, and with that, I chose to get a law degree," she said.

Later as she waited to get her bar exam results, her father suggested she take on a temporary role within the company, as "Learning Leader." The objective: to restart Pacesetter University. Accepting this interim role, Aviva set an ambitious goal of personally interviewing all 160 associates – including travelling to where they were outside GA. "My objective," she said, "was to understand their needs, learn directly how things were going from their perspective."

And learn she did. With amazing openness, the associates gave her critical insights into the inner workings of the business. The result was the identification of 8 key areas of the business that she felt needed to be addressed. After she presented her recommendations to her father and his executive team, the entire trajectory of her career changed.

It was at that point in 2010 that Aviva's career began for real in her family's business. Through various roles and different responsibilities, she has progressed

to where she is today as CEO. The following are additional leadership insights and experiences she shared:

- “Leadership is indeed a journey and I’m working on my own development continuously.”
- “I’m actually honored and excited when major companies like Home Depot or Amazon offer jobs to some of my talented people because it means we’ve done a great job of helping them develop and become strong leaders.” (She added: “But please don’t steal my people!”)
- “Rather than having a set of core values that we simply post on our website or on the wall, we have specific behaviors that we live by. What people Do, how they ACT in their various roles, not just what they SAY they believe in is what we embrace. Every week we focus on one of these key behaviors.”
- “We don’t just have employees, we have associates and they’re family.”
- She learned about strategic planning from a consultant, Rick Johnson, who also was her mentor and executive coach. He told her, “You can be a CEO if you want it and you can lead in your own way.” He was the person who brought her and her father together to discuss a possible transition and introduced her to other key business advisors.
- Four years ago she took over as CEO, but it hasn’t been easy for either her or her father. “We are aligned on the Vision, but not necessarily on HOW to achieve it.” They each have different leadership styles and knowing that about one another have found ways to work successfully together. Her mother is also part of the business, serving as Chair.
- “I grew up on the people side of the business which I believe is the best thing I could have done. Beginning with the associate interviews I initially conducted, I began building relationships and people trusted that I’d take action.
- “We truly believe our talented team is what distinguishes us and that led to our tag line: *Our People, Our Advantage* – and it’s much more than just a tag line to me.”
- “Of course we want to grow the business, but it will be too large if I don’t know our associates.”
- “My parents built a strong culture – we’ve just refreshed it and continue to do so. I’m extremely grateful to both my parents.”

- “Last year, my leadership team had to really step up to do strategic planning without me. I took some time off when my husband and I adopted a baby. Adding motherhood to my other roles has definitely given me a perspective on work-life balance. I think it’s more about work-life integration and that’s my approach.”
- One of Aviva’s favorite sayings is “I just had to figure it out.” She’s a great role model of getting thrown into something and just having to work through it. There’s really no roadmap for how to be a CEO. She did reach out to other female CEOs for advice and discovered most of them had their children before they became a CEO!
- One thing she’s learned is the need to create a gap and a sense of urgency and people will step up. The team can accomplish big things when there’s buy in.
- “It takes time to earn credibility in the role I’m in and in the industry – both as a female and as a young CEO in my 30’s.” Clearly Aviva has earned “creds” having received various honors and recognition including being asked to keynote at a national industry conference. (NOTE: She’s highly respected as a leader in technology and for talent development.)
- When asked if her law degree has helped her, she talked about negotiation and decision making - two critical skills as a leader.
- Last but not least, Aviva also spoke about the importance of “self-care” as a leader. You can’t be there for others if you don’t look after yourself – as a CEO or as a mother.