



WIL Highlights – Oct. 23, 2020

“What Makes a Fortune 100 Best Company to Work For: Try Culture, Trust, Camaraderie and Pride” featuring Joanne Smith, EVP and Chief People Officer, Delta Air Lines

Summary: What an amazing opportunity to have a senior executive officer from one of the most respected companies in America as our guest speaker this month! Hearing Delta’s story, both past and present, through crisis and success - and from an insider’s and travel industry expert’s perspective - was eye opening and totally inspiring. It’s very clear that both Joanne and CEO, Ed Bastian, have provided the right kind of leadership that led to the Delta’s “Best Company to Work For” recognition in 2017, 2018 and 2019.

In addition, participants also had the opportunity to learn about Joanne’s journey, both personal and professional. We learned that she grew up with humble role models – her parents – and that her mother’s focus on family vacation trips ultimately was responsible for Joanne’s passion for travel.

We also learned that even in a virtual situation, Joanne’s down-to-earth personality comes through. She displayed so many inspiring leadership qualities, e.g., her vulnerability, integrity, courage, confidence, empathy and accountability – just to name a few. In the TLG world, we’d say “Joanne definitely is a leader of character.”

Recently in an annual survey by the Atlanta Business Chronicle, Ed Bastian was honored as the “2020 Most People-Focused CEO.” He was called “courageous” especially for his leadership during the pandemic. He was the perfect choice. Joanne is equally deserving of recognition for her leadership and impact this year and before. Not surprisingly, she’s received numerous awards in her 30+ year career in the travel industry, but none more impactful than being inducted into the YWCA’s Academy of Women Achievers along with other outstanding women leaders in Atlanta. Despite her demanding career and extremely challenging position, she still makes time for volunteer roles including serving on the Agnes Scott College Board of Trustees and the Advisory Board of the Breast Cancer Research Foundation.

Simply put, we could not have had a more inspiring, informative or invigorating WIL speaker than Joanne Smith! Perfect timing.

Background – Personal & Professional:

Grew up in small town in California, in a middle class family. Received Business Admin. Degree from California Polytechnic State University with a career focus on brand management.

The flight attendant position caught her eye because of the travel and flexibility; first job small regional carrier in San Luis Obispo, California.

Joanne’s travel / airline industry career includes multiple roles and a broad range of responsibilities: In Flight Services and support personnel; catering operations; worldwide marketing and brand management; community affairs, customer research; as well as product and service development.

Key Take-aways / Lessons Learned:

On her career:

“I’ve had great bosses and champions who’ve helped me in my career. I’ve also learned from bad bosses – but none at Delta!”

“Joining Delta in 2002, my first 8 years were full of crisis and many challenging opportunities – including a bankruptcy, devastating recession, the SARS epidemic, and a very tough merger. But Delta’s always been led by values no matter the challenge.”

“My career tip: say YES to opportunities, take advantage of them whether you feel 100% confident or not; work hard and be willing to admit mistakes. I’ve also gained confidence along the way.”

“One of my skills is bringing people smarter than me to the team.”

On Delta’s culture:

“A part of our culture, I think, comes from being in the South (Southern hospitality) and putting customers first. But in the mid-90’s, our trust with employees as well as customers was broken and we had to work hard to rebuild it. Then there came a tremendous turn around.”

“TRUST = Truth over time. You have to deliver on what you say. As an example, in 2009 during the economic crisis, Ed stuck to his promise to the employees despite the situation. He would not go back on his word.”

“We could not have imagined the success we were going to have after bankruptcy – our 2012 to 2015 success story. We wanted to use the opportunity to have industry leading pay and benefits, including 401ks and profit sharing.”

“A big learning for me came when our employees provided feedback that said ‘Stop talking so much about profit sharing (although it was a terrific benefit).’ They wanted the company to focus on continuous improvements that were better for our customers. They wanted to be proud that Delta was delivering an excellent product!”

On Delta during the pandemic:

“Ed Bastian says ‘crisis doesn’t build character – it reveals it.’ He’s been a phenomenal take charge leader from the beginning, focusing on health and safety and with a three pronged strategy: Protect people, protect cash (stay solvent), and protect Delta’s future.”

Among the extraordinary actions taken have been the CEO’s 100% pay cut as well as cuts throughout the management team; allowing self-identification of high risk employees to take time off but with 100% health benefits; baseline testing, working with Mayo Clinic, Emory and CDC on protocols, 78% of employees currently tested; Delta still blocking middle seats; CEO town halls with our people to keep them informed; and prior to October, Delta was the only large airline with no furloughs.

“In my conversations with Ed this year, 90% have been focused on people.”

“We have taken limited employee surveys during this year with a focus on ‘how are you doing? How are communicating? How are you mentally?’

“Not only has our CEO been courageous this year, so have our employees!”

On what comes next:

“Our CEO has publicly stated that Delta is taking a stand against systemic racism. Even in a social, economic and health crisis, we will continue our journey of diversity and inclusion. Lots of listening; thinking about white privilege

and our biases; and being an ally. Going forward we'll look at every aspect of our HR practices from recruiting, to hiring, to promoting etc."

"It is safe to fly! Our planes are safer and cleaner than our homes!"

"We also have learned a lot about how we work during the pandemic, particularly around flexibility and remote work. The future workplace for Delta and other companies will be different. We definitely want to keep women including working mothers in the work force."

"Mental health and the stress factor is very concerning and going forward, we will be taking extra measures to help employees take advantage of all the services Delta offers."

Other comments:

"When I think about work life balance, I'm more about integration and flexibility."

"How I've managed my stress this year includes some virtual time / regular Zoom calls / staying connected with family and friends. At work I'm exhausted like everyone else but camaraderie helps."