

WIL Highlights for December 11, 2020

“Leading in a Disruptive World Requires Analytics, Agility and Authenticity” featuring Kathleen Edge, EVP Operations, Southwire Company

Summary: WIL #211 was special because we had the amazing Kathleen Edge as our guest speaker. It was also special because it was a time of farewell and transition for WIL founder & host, Susan Hitchcock, who’s retiring from TLG after almost 3 decades.) Lyn and Bob Turknett, TLG founders and co-chairs presented a tribute in honor of Susan.

With the formal introduction of Kathleen Edge, it became very clear that she was the perfect person / leader to conclude the 2020 WIL series. Kathleen is an inspiring individual whose manufacturing and technology career includes 30 years leading and contributing in fields from finance to human resources, talent management and operations. Among her many personal and professional strengths are her authenticity, confidence, and vulnerability. WIL participants clearly benefited from Kathleen’s willingness to share some difficult lessons learned - as well as some of the most rewarding lessons learned from her career and life.

As a leader with very broad-based experience and a special focus on human capital, she clearly illustrated her own mission which is “to bring out the best in people.” To those of us familiar with Turknett’s Leadership Character Model, Kathleen also demonstrated that she’s a role model for Integrity (the foundation of leadership character) and a balance of Respect (what I like to call the people side of leadership) and Responsibility (the bottom-line / results side of leadership.) We are all better for having heard Kathleen speak, having learned from her well-earned wisdom, and from getting to know her not only as a leader, but as a caring and “real” human being.

Background – Personal & Professional:

- Raised in San Diego in a large family, youngest of 6 children. Very inspired by her mother. Being part of a tribe is in her DNA.
- As a young child she played office and dreamed of being a leader.
- Met photographer who was in the Navy, got married, and moved to husband’s home state of Alabama. She now considers herself an adopted Southerner. Husband is her life strategist and has always supported her career.
- Received undergraduate degree as well as a masters in accounting from U. of Alabama
- Career moves have been numerous including 8 moves in a 14 year period across multiple states and cities. Worked for Kimberly-Clark, Oldcastle and Exide Technologies prior to Southwire in various roles.
- She joined Southwire in Feb. 2013 as SVP of Human Resources and became EVP Operations in Oct. 2018. Southwire is a \$6B privately held company with 7500 employees.

Key Lessons Learned / Take-aways / Memorable “Kathleenisms”:

- “Optimism – surround yourself with people who bring that out.”
- “What’s unsaid is unheard. Let people know what’s important. And also, as a leader, what you don’t tell me I don’t know.”
- “My best advice is be flexible, adapt, ask the right questions and let your organization be the innovator.”
- “Empowerment leads to innovation and control leads to stifling.”
- “Who you are is who you are. It’s less stressful to be yourself.”
- “I actually interviewed for the position at Southwire being completely my authentic self – and - I got the job! I wasn’t always this comfortable in my own skin, but when you get there, it’s rewarding.”
- “The Gold Standard (of your career) is when you’ve done the hard work, achieved, learned and grown.”
- “Be bold and brave (as a woman). It’s very important, especially as a woman, to share your ideas, dreams and aspirations (with your boss or supervisor).”
- “We need more white males as champions which will help drive inclusivity and change. I think inclusivity will lead to diversity.”
- “It has taken a long time to get to where we can have difficult conversations about diversity, inclusion and equity. Now those conversations are increasing. The goal is to ensure everyone is comfortable being themselves.”
- “There’s no real work life balance, that’s perfection. If you strive for perfection you’re never going to be your authentic self or a leader. I look for a work life investment ratio.”
- “I try to be clear with my family and friends re my work. Having the right people around me has been impactful for me and changed the course of my leadership.”
- “I think it’s disrespectful not telling someone that they’re not performing well. Typically you’re talking about it with others but not that person.”
- “I like change management but having done a turn-around, I know it’s not in my DNA.”
- (Discussing her career journey / various roles and responsibilities) “I’ve done tampons, diapers, toilet paper, bricks, pavers and asphalt.”
- “Last year I planned to talk about technology disruption, but 2020 brought a whole new dimension which has forever changed companies and the world. It would have taken our company 10 years to get to the flexibility (with Zoom and Teams of course) that we accomplished in 3 months. This is an example of a COVID opportunity. Other examples include reduction of commuting time; updating equipment with accelerated investment; and wearable devices for social distancing that can be used for safety as well.”
- “Leaders must stay calm during disruption, like in the eye of a hurricane. Initially I wasn’t sure what would happen. But I received an anonymous letter from an employee talking about how appreciative he/she was that Southwire was providing for their family a safe place and safe way to work so he/she could pay bills and take care of his/her family. That opened my eyes, gave me a different perspective and we moved forward from there.”

- “In the future I think the workforce will be both virtual and in person and at Southwire, we’ll be hiring more for problem solving than for brawn. This will allow us to attract a different workforce and will increase diversity.”

Q & A:

- (On mentors and mentoring) “I found people I had a rapport with and built a relationship. I don’t go out to find or select mentees, I typically wait to be asked to be sure the person wants me.”
- (Use of analytics) “My accounting background helps me do the analytics and dig deep. I look for trends, not just the latest performance. Data also lets you take the emotions out of the decisions.”
- (Career advice) “I think you should try to find the right role that aligns with your mission. Find another leader who shares your mission and garner his/her wisdom.”
- (Advice for women in manufacturing) “I try to give females opportunities, equitably, and they need to earn it.”
- (Likeability factor) “I don’t worry about being liked but I want to be seen as fair and I want to be respected.”