

# Women in Leadership (WIL)

## July 19, 2024 - HIGHLIGHTS

“Go for it, be open to possibilities, and everywhere you go, offer everyone respect.”

- Edna Morris,  
Chairman of the Board, Tractor Supply Company, Sr.  
Advisor, Solomon Partners, Founding Chair,  
Women's Food Service Forum



ilg 2024 SIGNATURE SERIES  
women @ leadership

### “Authentic & Respectful Leadership at Its Best” – Edna Morris, Special Guest Speaker

There's not a more appropriate title for Edna Morris' conversation with WIL host, Anne Quiello, than this. Edna shared this and many more leadership and life insights from her amazing career. Her career has included roles from SVP to Chief HR Officer, to CEO, to Chair of the Board across multiple organizations, corporate and nonprofit as

well as entrepreneurial, and across the U.S. and beyond. Currently she serves as Chairman of the Board of Tractor Supply Company and Sr. Advisor, Soloman Partners. Previous roles include President of The James Beard Foundation and President of Red Lobster.

#### ***A little background***

While attending college in Lake Placid, NY, Edna had a minimum-wage job as a waitress. She didn't know then where her life would lead her, but she knew that she loved the pace of the restaurant business, the business itself, the people, and the customers. “If you have hustle, are smart, and willing to work hard, there's plenty of opportunity – and that includes more than the food aspect.”

Edna was named after her grandmother who told her to “use your gifts.” She's followed that advice in all she's done. Among the many contributions Edna has made throughout her career, starting the Women's Food Service Forum is one of the most impactful. For over 35 years, it's been a safe place for women in the industry to talk and share experiences, grow competence and confidence as leaders, and empower the next generation. Edna says, “The secret sauce for the forum's viability has been listening to others.” Edna also credits Dawn Sweeney at the National Restaurant Association with transforming the industry.

#### ***Wisdom from her career progression and extremely broad leadership experiences (you might call them “Edna – isms!”)***

- “Authentic respect, bring chaos to order, make the complex simple, listen to others who usually have the answers within themselves. These concepts are applicable in work and for humanity.”
- “Do things others don't want to do.” One example for Emma was designing an incentive program for stores to participate in the Special Olympics held at Notre Dame.
- “Building relationships in every role and organization, so important.”
- “Fairness and respect matter.”
- “Ask for different opportunities. Especially as a woman.”
- “Throughout your career you build transferable skills.”

- “Try new things, call it a test or trial if that helps to get it accepted. (She initiated an Employee Assistance Program – EAP – before other companies began to implement. She also initiated a new policy to support employees who want to adopt a child.)
- “To progress in your career, gain a broader perspective, be curious, listen and learn from others, see how the pieces of organization fit together, and ask questions.”
- “As a leader you can be both confident and vulnerable. Re the Imposter Syndrome, I think some doubt isn’t such a bad thing. It can actually propel you forward if you remind yourself what you’ve already accomplished.”
- “How people are treated determines culture which is why you must treat all people at every level with respect.” (One example Edna shared involved a plant sanitation supervisor who her boss told her to fire because he wasn’t handling certain things. Edna talked to the individual, found out he couldn’t read and that was a problem with some new practices. She told her boss that the supervisor didn’t need to be fired, but instead she helped him enroll in an adult literacy program. He continued with the company and retired 12 years later.)
- “People just want to be seen and heard. You should really KNOW your people as individuals, their different background and interests.” (Another example Edna shared involved her getting to know the women who made the biscuits every day for Hardees. They loved what they did and really liked their early morning schedule. Since biscuits were very important to the business and their customers, Edna did not change their schedules.)
- “When you hire, hire for smart, courage and heart – hire the ones who’ll do the right thing.”
- “I always tried to put my hat in the ring for a particular role when I knew I could do the job, and I always wanted to make a difference.”
- “I could do and say things at 50 that I couldn’t at 30 because of the experiences I’d had and the confidence I’d gained. You really don’t have to know everything but listen to others and try new ideas.”
- “You have to earn trust every day.”
- “Try to understand a situation before making a decision. But once you’ve listened and learned, be decisive.”
- “Change comes from understanding and understanding comes from conversation.”
- “Find what fills your soul, something you have passion for, and brings you joy.”

***Additional advice for women on the move***

- “Give yourself a little grace. So many concerns around work and family / professional life versus personal life. You can have it all - as they say - maybe not always at the same time. If you decide to prioritize family and step away for a while, try to stay connected and keep up with what’s happening in your industry or business.”
- “Have courage to speak up, stand up for yourself and others. A fellow board member, a man, once said to me, ‘I don’t believe in lowering standards for women.’ I told him, ‘I agree and luckily, we don’t have to!’”
- “Regarding board service, there’s a difference in this and executive roles. A director’s role is to help protect shareholders, not run the company. Uses the same skills as executives, as well as specific expertise. There are a lot more opportunities now for women but certainly

more is needed. Still need to work on eliminating stereotypes. Another suggestion: if you serve as chair of a committee, you have even more opportunity to influence decisions.”

***What’s next for Edna?***

- “I will continue to do more mentoring for women as well as men.”
- “My plan is to wear out, not rust!” (No doubt about that for this powerhouse!)

***ONE LAST THING: “Go for it! Be open to possibilities. Respect everyone. Remember, we all just want to be picked for the team.”***