



WOMEN — IN — LEADERSHIP

THE POWER OF
SPEAKING UP
AND THE REWARD
OF MENTORING

BY JANE LARSON, WORLDATEWORK



Whether it comes naturally or must be cultivated, one thing stands out in the lives of women who become leaders: They speak up. As in, they speak up for what they believe and what they want.

Kimberly Kean, co-owner of Gene Johnson Plumbing & Heating in Seattle, and Katharine Voyles Mobley, chief marketing officer for First Advantage in Atlanta, fall into the “comes naturally” category.

Kean said the worst leadership advice she received was to tone down her personality because it was “too much” and “too intimidating.” The best advice, however, directly contrasted that, pushing Kean “to be who I am and bring my personal power of who I am to my job and to my work,” she said. “I’m pretty upfront. I’m not quiet. I take up space in the conversation. I just do.”

Mobley found that being the youngest person in the room added to the challenge of convincing industry veterans to pay attention to the then-new World Wide Web.

“Luckily, growing up in the car business with my dad, I learned how to stand up for myself and really fight for what I needed to do,” she said. “I’m not afraid of what I call outrageous conversations. There are times when you have to, for lack of a better term, have the balls to open your mouth and say, ‘This is what I stand behind and this is what I want to fight for.’”

Sharon Lontoc, chief human resources officer for Title Alliance Ltd. in the Philadelphia area, falls into the “cultivate” category, as do many of the women Kathleen Duffy meets in her volunteer efforts with 2020 Women on Boards.

Lontoc explains that she was quiet and introverted as a girl and finding her leadership voice went against that grain.

“The best advice I was given was to be vocal and to not let something stop me from sharing my opinion.”

“The best advice I was given was to be vocal and to not let something stop me from sharing my opinion,” she said. “It came with a tale of caution as well, which is, you have to be careful and mindful of your audience because how you deliver those messages is going to be different based on the audience you have.”

Duffy, president and CEO of Duffy Group Inc., an international recruiting firm based in Phoenix, is also co-chair of 2020 Women on Boards’ National Conversation on Board Diversity. 2020 Women on Boards is a non-profit education and awareness campaign that collaborates with corporations to achieve a minimum of 20% women directors on their boards by the year 2020. She said networking is essential to the success of women, who often have the diverse skills today’s boards are seeking.

“Ask yourself, ‘Have you ever thought about serving on a board?’ And if you have, to put it out there,” Duffy said. “80% of all board positions are found through networking, and so tell your network and be intentional by saying, ‘I’m interested in serving on a board in the next 18 to 24 months.’”

Here’s how these four women are making a difference on the leadership front:

'You Can Absolutely Do This'

Making it to the top of a family-owned business was both easier and harder for Kimberly Kean than it would have been for someone else.

"I got an opportunity that maybe someone else wouldn't have gotten," Kean acknowledged. "I happened to be the oldest in my family, so I got that opportunity" to be a second-generation co-owner of her family's business, Gene Johnson Plumbing & Heating in Seattle. "But I had to work harder to earn people's respect, otherwise it's, 'You got handed this. Your dad gave it to you.' You have to work to overcome that stigma and actually have success that is based on your own hard work."

Kean's parents started the company in 1976 and she grew up answering phones and scheduling service calls. She earned a business degree from the University of Washington and followed it with plumbing apprenticeship school, where she was the only woman in the class. Her "eight-year education," as she calls it, not only gave her a residential plumbing license, knowledge of plumbing codes and experience working in the field, it helped her in managing marketing, finance and the 34 employees of the plumbing company and a Zoom Drain franchise.

Kean and her brother-in-law bought the company from her parents just before the Great Recession hit and she counts that economic downturn as the biggest hurdle she had to overcome. People still had plumbing problems, but they tended to repair or fix things themselves rather than replace. She took on multiple roles in the business.

"We were willing to make moves," she said. "It's hard, but when we just didn't have the revenue to support the overhead as well as the number of people in the field, making decisions quickly is how we adapted. Also, figuring out how to utilize our marketing the best we could, trying new things to try to earn every bit of business we could. And cooperative relationships with our employees. We just got really close, we worked really hard and that core team all still work here."

Those moves have helped the second generation more than double the company's revenue. Next on Kean's list is to hit \$12 million in annual revenue by 2023 and to attract the right people to her companies and provide the training for them to be successful.

Kean calls plumbing a great opportunity for women because of the training programs available, the female customers who are more comfortable with having a woman in their homes and the high earnings that come with being in a field critically short of trained workers.

"It's becoming more open as people understand this isn't something only men could or should do," she said. "If you are mechanically inclined, this is for you. You can absolutely do this."

'Yes, I Can, and I'm Going to Prove It'

Sharon Lontoc landed in her dream job as CHRO of a Philadelphia area title company. Even better, when she looks around, she sees a C-suite where women are the majority: chief strategy officer, chief financial officer and the general counsel and compliance officer. CEO Jim Campbell credits the women's passion and energy for fueling the title and escrow company's continuing growth.

At Title Alliance, Lontoc helps oversee nearly 300 employees in 11 states and 40 joint ventures. The organization's growth has brought growing pains, she said, but Campbell is passionate about the employees and understands how critical human resources is in reaching the company's 2022 goals. For Lontoc, that includes ensuring strong training programs, developing a "dream manager" program and making Title Alliance a Top 100 workplace in each of its markets.

Lontoc didn't even know what HR was when she was a teenager working at a small building industry company where male co-workers made insulting comments and told her that as a girl, she could never do their jobs. Older and wiser people in her college classes told her those things were not OK, and when a professor suggested she take an HR course, she discovered the career she wanted. She later thanked him, she recalled, "and he said, 'What are you going to do about it? You now have a responsibility. You have knowledge of what is OK, you have knowledge of what's not OK, and you have knowledge of how to fix it.' It really got me thinking that I have to be a change agent."

She started her career as a cooperative-education student in Norfolk Southern Railroad's labor relations department, where an encouraging boss told her she could do anything if she set her mind

“I just want girls to know they can progress to be anything they want to be and to have the confidence to do it.”

to it. She moved through increasingly responsible HR positions in manufacturing and services firms, culminating in a job as senior HR business partner at Merrill Lynch. However, when the Great Recession hit and Bank of America acquired Merrill Lynch, Lontoc lost her job. It was one of the unexpected turns in her career, but “all of them, in the grand scheme, have been good,” she concedes now. The next position she found, as HR director at a law firm, broadened her knowledge of different areas of HR. Armed with that, she joined Title Alliance in 2019.

Of course, there were obstacles along the way. Lontoc said her greatest challenge was dealing with people who were close-minded about change and thought of HR’s functions as limited. Overcoming that challenge meant having to change those mindsets by saying, “Yes, we hire your employees, and yes, we have to let employees go, and yes, we make sure people are paid,” Lontoc said. “But let me expand on that. When we hire somebody, it’s critical that we hire someone that not only has the technical skills you’re looking for but also is a strong cultural fit for the organization, because if we don’t get that right, we’re going to see a never-ending cycle of constant recruiting because turnover is going to be high. And when we let people go, are we being respectful about how we do it?”

Lontoc belongs to the local HR Executive Alliance and has developed a close community of female colleagues who talk about what they’re going through, help each other and mentor other individuals in their careers. She also leads her daughters’ Girl Scouts troop, happy to see the organization show girls they can do things like camping and robotics.

“I want people to think about how they can progress,” she said. “I just want girls to know they can progress to be anything they want to be and to have the confidence to do it. And to have enough confidence so that when somebody says, ‘No, you can’t,’ that they can say, ‘Yes, I can, and I’m going to prove it.’”

Measuring Your Success

The birth of the internet changed her career, opined Katharine Voyles Mobley, chief marketing officer for First Advantage, a provider of background screening technology based in Atlanta.

Her first job out of college was with an advertising agency, where she worked long hours and for less pay than her teacher friends. But, when she got the chance to manage the account for realestate.com, she began fighting for ways to generate clicks and drive traffic to websites. A stint building the brand for a tech startup taught her more about the tech space and helped her migrate into analytics and specialize as a tech marketer.

“Even though I fought for the internet back in the day, fighting for the role social media was going to play in branding, even in B2B tech companies, so few people initially thought that any of these social media channels would have any relevance in the B2B space,” Mobley said. “But at the end of the day, B2B is still just human to human.”

At First Advantage, Mobley works with HR to use hashtags and social media to engage their 4,300 employees around the world, show them each other’s lives and introduce job candidates to the organization’s culture. She calls this an exciting time for the company as it expands globally and raises internal and external awareness of the importance of First Advantage’s services.

At the same time, she’s helping two employees navigate their roles as new mothers while staying sane and relevant. She serves as a board member for the YWCA of Greater Atlanta and as an advisory board member for Win2ition, a non-profit that supports single caregivers.

Mobley also is writing the “Mentoring Matters” column for the new WorldatWork magazine, *#evolve*. (See page 15.) She likes to advise young women on how to get the most out of their first job so they can get their next one. She said she is keen on

encouraging them to always measure what they are doing so they can demonstrate the impact their work made on a brand.

"I think women tend to think more on the soft side of skills, and I always advise that they bring in more KPIs (key performance indicators) as the measurement for career trajectories," she said. "What have you driven from a revenue perspective or usership perspective or product engagement perspective? That's a key piece that we as female leaders need to help do a better job in educating women as they enter the marketplace."

Taking Names and Making Matches

Kathleen Duffy hadn't planned on starting her own company. But when the boutique search firm she worked for moved from Phoenix to the Bay Area and made her an independent contractor, it didn't have enough work to keep her occupied.

That was a big moment of reckoning. It was Duffy's chance to develop a different business model where, instead of paying traditional retained or contingent recruiting fees, clients could unbundle the executive search process, pay only for the services they needed and do so with a fee-for-service model rather than one based on the candidate's compensation.

"People were intrigued by it," Duffy said. "And I was pretty good, so the business grew by word of mouth."

Duffy leveraged the network she had developed since her days recruiting new sorority members and top scholars at Arizona State University. As Duffy Group Inc. grew, she was one of the early pioneers building a remote workforce. Employees were looking for a company that valued work-life balance and supported mothers with children in school as well as employees needing to care for aging parents or ill spouses.

The company weathered tragic events like 9/11, "where the world stops and how do you continue to forge forward with your business," she said, and the last recession, which hit small businesses and the recruiting space especially hard. Rather than finding other businesses to enter, "I wanted to make sure we stayed true to our core business," Duffy said. "We were more focused in speaking with prospective companies about what we were doing and how it was different from traditional executive search."

Duffy also has focused on helping women reach the very top level of corporations as members of boards of directors. As the Phoenix co-chair of 2020 Women on Boards' National Conversation on Board Diversity, she helped bring CEOs, corporate directors and women leaders together for a day of networking and roundtable discussions designed to "take the mystique away" of the process of securing a corporate board seat.

Non-profit boards, she noted, are usually good steppingstones to corporate boards because they give women the opportunity to learn on a smaller scale about governance and how boards work.

"Women corporate directors are very, very much interested in mentoring women," she said. "And if there are opportunities to bring these people together and for the corporations to be aware of these fabulous people who are interested in serving on boards, we'll be able to indirectly make some matches." ###

Jane Larson is a contributing writer for #evolve and *Workspan* magazines. She can be reached at workspan@worldatwork.org.

