

LEADERS in Action

Jason Womack interviews EVA TANSKYBLUM



Eva Tansky Blum is the former Chairman of the Board of the University of Pittsburgh, the first woman chair in Pitt's 228-year history. Previously, she was executive vice president and director of community affairs at PNC Bank; and former president of the PNC Foundation. She worked to position PNC as a leader in the community and directed the company's philanthropic programs, including PNC Grow Up Great, a \$350 million, multi-year, bilingual initiative to support quality early childhood education.

Q&A

Jason Womack: *Do you have a simple way to think about how leaders get better?*

Eva Tansky Blum: A leader has to listen. They have to listen all the time. (It bears repeating.) The people throughout the organization, the ones doing the work on the ground, they are the ones who know what's going on. By talking with, and hearing from the people being led, we put ourselves in a position to be very effective leaders.

Also, we have to know our stuff. The next great idea will come from talking it out, by imagining how things can be better, and by taking action on the projects that can make a difference. Everyone is involved. Not just everyone at work, but the communities we work in as well.

JW: *As Frances has taught for so many years: Look outside the walls of your organization. What was your defining moment as a leader?*

ETB: At the beginning of my career, I was asked to start a brand new department. I had all these people reporting to me—it was time to get things done, and I had to learn while leading. At one point when someone came to me and said, “We’ll never be able to meet the deadline,” I knew I had to respond from the point of being a leader, not just doing leadership.

So, I said “We have to meet it.” Of course, if you set the right (not unreasonable) expectations, people will figure out how to get there. And they did. We worked together to get the project done, on time, and I learned a valuable lesson about leadership.

Continued

Q&A with Eva Tansky Blum

Eva Blum really walks her talk as a leader; she shares her passion and ideas, asks questions, and listens actively to both the topics and tone of the conversation.

As you read our conversation, ask yourself, “What can I listen for in my next important meeting?”

JW: *What will leaders increasingly need to include that up until now they may not have had to study in great detail?*

ETB: Understand how best to use social media. We are going to have to be more and more comfortable with technological connectivity. The way the younger generation thinks, communicates and creates communities is changing; and, it will change again in the near future.

We are operating in a very global, open and transparent world. What is being done “there” in fact impacts us “here.” And, with the technology and speed of connectivity we have access to, we are going to have to study this in more detail.

JW: *What do you think are the most important questions effective leaders need to ask of themselves?*

ETB: “Did I do my homework?”
“Am I serious about what I’m doing?”
“Do I feel good about the work I do?”
“Am I having fun?”

I really care about our communities, our people, our collaborators. I try to be true to the work; I wouldn’t ask anyone to do something I wouldn’t do. And I believe in having a balance between a life and a career.

One of my early mentors said to me, “this is your job, your family is your life.” That lesson has stayed with me, and I continue to seek a balance between my career, my family and my life.

Another question I ask a lot: “What’s next?”

And, the truth is, I get teased here. We’ll have a GREAT announcement, and on the plane ride home, as we’re celebrating an amazing achievement, I’ll turn to the team and ask, “Ok, so what’s next?”

JW: *How do you listen - and what do you listen for - so you hear more than what is just being said by those you lead?*

ETB: I like to really listen to people. I believe a collective input makes a better decision. If you listen to people they feel invested in the project.

In a discussion, there is always someone who knows more than they are saying. It’s important for a leader to look around and notice who may not be contributing as much as we think they can. Finding ways to do that has been integral to our success.

One of my tactics is to look around the table and choose someone who I believe has something to add. I ask them, “Is that where you think this is going?”

This question serves to engage them even more in the direction and outcome of the meeting.

JW: *What is one of your favorite books on leadership?*

ETB: I read “Team of Rivals” recently. From the start, Lincoln understood the implications for the future. He fought for what would make us successful in the long term.

•