Cole shares leadership insight

Q&A

By Tonya Layman
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Katrina "Kat" Cole has worked in many leadership roles and grown under the guidance of several mentors throughout her food service career.

Today, she serves as a leader and will present her insights as a keynote speaker at the 14th Annual Women's Leadership Forum on May 4 at Cobb Galleria Centre.

Having worked her way up the food service industry corporate ladder, last year she was named president of Cinnabon Inc. Prior to her role with Atlanta-based FOCUS Brands' Cinnabon Inc., Cole was vice president of training and development for Atlanta-based Hooters of America Inc., where she began her restaurant career at the age of 17 in a hostess position.

She worked her way up to shift manager and corporate trainer. She went from Hooters girl to Hooters vice president, reporting directly to the CEO as a member of the executive team for the past six years of her tenure there.

Cole has led training and development initiatives on several continents for international and domestic operations.

Here, she shares some thoughts on leadership:

Q: What has been your biggest challenge as a leader?
A: Time management. With rapidly changing dynamics in a multi-channel business, taking on larger teams and projects, and wanting to give them all the support and time they deserve eventually ends up pushing the boundaries of what can be done in a reasonable time frame. It takes constant reorganization and re-prioritizing in addition to developing other leaders around me.

Q: Through your various leadership roles, how has your view on leadership evolved?
A: Not much. I still think the staples of treating people with respect, being empathetic to the position and views of others, and operating with integrity at all times are at the core of successful leadership. There are certain techniques and practices I have learned over time, but my view on what is at the heart of great leaders has stayed consistent and only been reinforced as time goes on. Leaders have to remember that the perception of us is built on a lifetime of personal interactions that have led to a reputation or legacy. Every small encounter today affects our ability to effectively lead in the future.

Q: Do you think there is still a glass ceiling for female leaders, and how do you see women breaking it?
A: I struggle with that concept. There are certainly specific industries, functionalities, jobs and companies that seem to be more male-dominated, and as such, women in them are less likely to have connections, advocates and access that are comparable to their male counterparts. This can create hurdles and additional challenges for the women in those situations. However, I don't think there is a hard-and-fast barrier, because if you are talented enough and hungry enough, you can get past most hurdles.

There are incredible industry organizations, mentorship groups and other collectives that provide support and coaching to help anyone who wants to move up do so with greater success. If your organization still doesn't reward your talents and efforts, go to a business where they will, or start your own company.

Q: What is the most common mistake you see female leaders making?
A: I suppose there are habits that many women may have that are different from men that can affect leadership and success, but not exclusively. Women may not speak up as much as men, and they may not be as direct in asking for what they need or want. Some women need to take more time to build casual, cross-functional relationships, often beyond the workplace. Male leaders are often good at this (golf, outings, etc.). Because of responsibilities at home or not wanting to be seen as "giving off," many women pass up these opportunities, and they miss out on critical relationships that can lead to new business, gaining advocates and champions, or just gaining helpful perspective.

Q: What is the best advice that you received as a leader that you pass along to others?
A: Get results. Be thoughtfully bold. Build meaningful relationships. Do what you say you are going to do. Give back, bring others along with you and pay it forward.

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