Cooper: Mentors helped build leadership skills

By Kimberly Smith
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Shan Cooper's career took flight at an early age when at 32, she was named a vice president of diversity and equal opportunity programs at Lockheed Martin Corp.

Since then, Cooper's leadership horizons have continued to expand, eventually leading her to her current position as vice president of Lockheed Martin Aeronautics and general manager of the company's Marietta facility, where she is responsible for 8,000 employees who design, produce, and maintain the C-130 Hercules, F-22 Raptor, P-3 Orion, C-5 Galaxy and F-35 Lightning II military aircraft. She is also in charge of Lockheed Martin's subassembly sites in Meridian, Miss., and Clarksburg, W.Va.

As the keynote speaker at the Women's Leadership Forum on Friday, May 4, Cooper will share the lessons she's learned from more than 20 years in the business world and how these lessons shaped her formative professional years and continue to serve as a guide as her career evolves.

Although she is a senior executive in the aircraft industry, Cooper got her start by holding a variety of positions in the human resources and diversity fields before making the jump to vice president. Cooper credits her previous experience as excellent preparation for a position that demands top-notch business leadership skills.

"HR was a fantastic foundation to prepare me to be a leader," Cooper said. "It forces you to understand the importance of employee engagement. You have to learn how to balance business needs and employee advocacy. Remember that all of the work gets done by people. Gaining a greater understanding of the people you work with helps you to be a more effective leader."

Cooper also credits the people who offered their professional guidance throughout her career as valuable assets that have helped her reach her current position.

"I have always had great coaches and mentors," Cooper said. "What I learned has helped me to prepare for this role.

She credits her parents as her first mentors, followed by Connie Fisher, who was director of executive education at Emory University in Atlanta when Cooper was an undergraduate student in the late 1980s.

"When I went off to college as an undergrad at Emory, Connie Fisher got me work-ready," Cooper said. "She taught me things like appropriate dress, executive presence and other things you need to know in the workplace."

Cooper also credits mentors like Ted Childs, whom she met when he was vice president for global workforce diversity at IBM Corp., for encouraging her to ask questions. "He told me, 'Don't be afraid. If you need help, go ask for it.'"

Lee Bhyant, a former executive vice president and general manager for Lockheed Martin's Marietta site as well as sites in Clarksburg, W.Va., and Meridian, Miss., and Cooper mentor, expressed his confidence in the leadership skills Cooper had learned when he needed someone to fill in for him on an extended basis.

Cooper remembered the conversation she had with Bhyant. "I said to him, 'We've got to determine who's going to be running the plant while you're out,' and he said, 'It's going to be you. You're going to run the plant while I'm out.' I said, 'Are you sure?'"

Cooper said that was a defining moment for her. "I had to take on running the facility for three months or so," she said. "I had never managed anything that large. It was this site and two other sites. The team here rallied and we got it done. They stepped right up and we made it happen."

Cooper's enthusiasm, leadership qualities and talent for working with others have not gone unnoticed by her colleagues.

Lorraine Martin, vice president and deputy general manager at Lockheed Martin for the F-35 jet fighter program, has known Cooper for five years and can attest to Cooper's abilities.

"She truly has a passion for her work. It's clear that she loves what she does. If anyone has been around Shan, one of the first things they'll notice is her personality. She has an infectious presence that lights up the room," Martin said. "And she respects the people she works with. She's a very inclusive leader."

Martin recounted how one year, shortly before the holidays, she and Cooper spent about four hours walking the production floor to thank everyone for the work they did at Lockheed Martin.

"It was a joy to walk with her and see the impact she had on people as she talked with them," Martin said.

Cooper's capacity for breaking down walls and making a positive impact on colleagues also comes in handy if a problem arises. "If something's not going right, Shan is able to make sure it turns into a productive and positive situation" by reaching out to fellow employees for ideas from their perspective, Martin said.

Johnny Whitaker, director of communications at Lockheed Martin, regards Cooper's engaging personality, interest in her co-workers and keen sense of integrity as her strong points. "Integrity is her watchword," Whitaker said. "We are going to do things right, even if it's a tough decision. She lives it, she demonstrates it and she preaches it. Shan's our biggest cheerleader for doing things the right way from the top down.

"Shan tries to make this the kind of place where people want to come to work and enjoy their work, and she has succeeded at that," Whitaker said.

How to entertain clients in today's economy

By Amy Howell Hirt
SPECIAL TO ATLANTA BUSINESS CHRONICLE

So much for striking multimillion-dollar deals over rounds of martinis or weekends in Vegas. While it still works on television dramas, business owners and executives in the United States today face new rules for what's acceptable, and beneficial, when entertaining clients.

"People are scaling down and being very careful with the gifts they give and receive," said C.B. Bowman, executive director and founder of the Association of Corporate Executive Coaches and CEO of Executive Leadership LLC.

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Despite the potential pitfalls, personal contacts are often the key to making the right decisions. After all, "most companies do business with people they like," Ross said.

There are ways for professionals to tap into that potential without venturing into questionable territory.

Bowman suggests companies limit their activities to those that are economically feasible for their competitors.

While alcohol is often expected at corporate events, Ross advises companies to think about their liability, should a client drink too much, and consider safeguards such as making a block of hotel rooms or cab services available.

Bowman is also seeing a resurrection of old-fashioned gratitude that can be as simple as sending a testimonial for a client's website or blog.

She also recommends gift certificates to a restaurant or bookstore.

Hirt is a freelance writer based in Cincinnati, and a contributor to The Business Courier, a sister publication of Atlanta Business Chronicle.