

Women Of The C-Suite: Sharon Whiteley of Harmony783 On The Five Things You Need To Succeed As A Senior Executive



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AS a part of our series about strong women leaders, we had the pleasure of interviewing Sharon Whiteley.

Sharon Whiteley is a serial entrepreneur, innovative consumer product manufacturer, marketer, and author with a talent for recognizing emerging consumer trends. She is currently Founder and CEO of Harmony783, her eighth venture — a new grounding footwear company. Earlier in her career, Sharon spent 14 years in the specialty retail shopping center industry where she created the pushcart concept of transitory merchandising, a forerunner to today’s pop-up stores. Her work has garnered her numerous awards including the Entrepreneur of the Year and Award and a Lifetime Achievement award from her alma mater, Skidmore College.

Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit more. Can you tell us a bit about your “backstory”? What led you to this career path?

I grew up in an entrepreneurial family and believe it was in my blood — in essence my destiny — to always follow this path. I never set out to build any of the ventures I created. I get tapped on the proverbial shoulder, stirred in the gut, my heart goes to my brain — and the calling is stronger than the sirens calling the sailors.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began leading your company?

What seems to always be a consistent scenario in every enterprise I’ve created is that synchronicity immediately arises. I meet amazing people who enrich my life personally and contribute to our company’s vision and opportunities.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

It would be hard to name just one mistake...and funny is not a word that comes to mind. I do have a good sense of humor, and can laugh at myself, however, the state I am left in

after blundering is one where I focus on what I could have done differently to foster a different, more desirable outcome.

None of us can achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

When I was fresh out of college, newly married and without a clue about what I wanted to do in life (I majored in American studies so I could take my junior year abroad) I fell into the specialty retail shopping center arena working on a project very similar to one where my Dad was a tenant. The developer, and my boss, was an intuitively brilliant man, Dave McClain. He was a truck driver who owned the center's land. He was charismatic and had an incredibly positive attitude and nature. His way of treating and encouraging me at every turn, left me feeling I could accomplish anything I set out to do in life. The way he delivered important feedback that many others would have delivered critically was done in a fashion I could hear it and not feel I was being minimized.

In my work, I often talk about how to release and relieve stress. As a busy leader, what do you do to prepare your mind and body before a stressful or high stakes meeting, talk, or decision? Can you share a story or some examples?

My MO is to burrow through stressful situations. I do not always take the time to be reflective and hit the pause button. When matters get beyond my own "self-talk" therapy, I make it a point to get grounded — physically. Of course, I wear our grounding shoes and also sleep grounded. I haven't shared this much but I had a heart attack three years ago and I am convinced if I wasn't living grounded — and sleeping so, I wouldn't be responding to these questions. Being grounded has a great to do with blood viscosity. Also, my friends and trusted mentors who I can be vulnerable with, have been helpful by allowing me to download and let off steam all while sometimes using a few choice expletives along the way. Getting enough sleep helps immensely if times are challenging.

As you know, the United States is currently facing a very important self-reckoning about race, diversity, equality, and inclusion. This may be obvious to you, but it will be helpful to spell this out. Can you articulate to our readers a few reasons why it is so important for a business or organization to have a diverse executive team?

Being in the world of consumer product, one must be not only conscious of but more importantly focused on diversity; it's the way of the world. It is also core to me to appreciate differences. I grew up appreciating all cultures and perspectives, so it was innate to be inclusive. I find in today's world that diversity of age is also paramount. Experience, be it with human interactions and certainly building businesses and living through different and changing times, is incredibly important and contributes to what I value as *cellular wisdom*. Age diversity, a bit less discussed, is also important. Younger minds are vital to understanding the current times, not to mention their mastery in technical arenas. I started in business before the Internet existed in the mainstream. Young blood would have been an invaluable asset to some earlier companies in hindsight. I am sure I wasn't as swift as I might have been seeing the opportunities that lay right in front of my nose.

As a business leader, can you please share a few steps we must take to truly create an inclusive, representative, and equitable society? Kindly share a story or example for each.

Be conscious when hiring people to join your company to seek out people with diverse backgrounds; be open, learn from them all and be respectful of those with different views. Trust your gut and give people who have passion, are kind, curious and hardworking a chance. There is one common value, however, that is essential and that is *respect* for other human beings. If any person is disrespectful of another in any venture I have created, they are pointed directly to the door.

Ok, thank you for that. Let's now jump to the primary focus of our interview. Most of our readers — in fact, most people — think they have a pretty good idea of what a CEO or executive does. But in just a few words can you explain what an executive does that is different from the responsibilities of the other leaders?

I am an entrepreneur and have the title and responsibilities, fiduciarily and otherwise, of CEO. However, I also am an operator. My responsibilities are to not only be steward of the company's vision and mission and enroll others to join in its manifestation. It also entails working right alongside those who I directly manage — collaborating, encouraging, and most definitely, learning from them, as well.

What are the “myths” that you would like to dispel about being a CEO or executive. Can you explain what you mean?

This one is easy...the illusion is that you are your own boss is one that immediately comes to mind. It is comforting on some level to know you are ultimately in charge of a great deal independently, however, there is always someone — whether an investor, banker — or in my world of consumer products — customers (who we regard as our *reason for being*) and who we always are mindful of and strive to serve impeccably well.

In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges faced by women executives that aren't typically faced by their male counterparts?

I grew up in as an entrepreneur and this has been my sole path. As a result, I never personally experienced any gender discrimination. One of my co-authors, in our book called *The Old Girls Network: Insider Advice for Women Building Businesses in a Man's World* (which is not a snarky “chick” book, rather it was merchandised to women as we are acculturated differently than men) hailed from the old boy's Wall Street investment banking world. The stories she shared were astonishing. Why anyone would put up with limiting opportunities, biases, bully, or sexist talk — or less than equal treatment was dumbfounding to me. I appreciate many women have faced challenges and obstacles and don't always have the option, or desire to make a change. It again wasn't my experience, so I don't personally have stories or advice to share other than — whether it be gender discrimination or another toxic factor, get out and seek environments where you are recognized, appreciated, respected, and valued.

What is the most striking difference between your actual job and how you thought the job would be?

I never had any expectation about my job or role being at the helm of early stage and innovative consumer products enterprises. This world is fraught with so many daily changes that I never assumed life would be staid. It's always a very organic environment. Given the world today and the unforeseen pandemic impacting all of us in so many facets of life, including work, one's job needs to continuously evolve. Having empathy is critical. No one is unscathed.

Certainly, not everyone is cut out to be an executive. In your opinion, which specific traits increase the likelihood that a person will be a successful executive and what type of person should avoid aspiring to be an executive? Can you explain what you mean?

People look at life through different lenses. Some have talents, skill sets — and stomachs — for different environments and ways of life. It is an old adage, however, the buck does stop at the top so if one is not inclined to own that responsibility — be able to admit mistakes, be humble, vulnerable, and positive in nature, they likely would not flourish in this role. Being curious, thoughtful of others and a “learner” are also a prerequisite in my book.

What advice would you give to other women leaders to help their team to thrive?

Be positive even in the face of challenges; be vulnerable and humble — and celebrate your team whenever the opportunity exists to do so. People watch what you do, and what you say; currently they also pick up on the “energy” behind all your actions.

How have you used your success to make the world a better place?

I have always created businesses whose mission is to manufacture and market products that enhance people’s lives, with a focus on health and wellness. Consistent with this purpose is a generosity of spirit and a tangible one as well. We give back to our community and donate whenever possible, with goods we make, with our time if we can provide helpful contributions and as champions of others who are committed to making the world a better place.

What are your “5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Started” and why? (Please share a story or example for each.)

1. ***All money is not the same color green.*** Be mindful if you are raising capital in a business with investors who believe money affords them the right to reign over every and all decisions, regardless of their lack of domain expertise, acumen, or skill set. One absolutely needs capital to grow a business but there is a price to pay if your values are not aligned with any of your partners.

2. ***Do not tolerate negativity in your enterprise.*** If anyone — a high performing member of your team or a lower level staffer — is a negative person, do not keep this person on board. Negativity is toxic and will impact your culture, your company's performance and most importantly, strip your world of joy. It may even make you physically sick.
3. **Be passionate (or minimally genuinely interested in) what you engage in and where you invest your time.** Some days passion and caring will be the only fuel you will have. If you are indifferent or have no connection to a company and its goals and purpose, simply *Do Not Pass Go*.
4. **Do not start a company if you are undercapitalized.** You will likely hit a wall if you are pushing the envelope and, in a consumer sensitive business it's pretty much a given if you are being innovative you will do so, At those times you will need to figure out how to go over it, under it, through it, or around it. Most often this requires the financial means to stay the course.
5. **Don't let anyone stifle your dreams.** Naysayers have no place in your world. Believe you can do anything you set out to do. Kick them to the curb without a second thought.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good for the greatest number of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.

I have had the blessed fortune of being drawn to the world of alternative and integrative health and wellness arenas. Being grounded, which is what our new footwear company, HARMONY783, is all about is a life saving practice that will contribute to one being healthier, feeling more energetic, and a host of other benefits, such as reducing inflammation, increasing circulation, normalizing blood pressure and boosting one's immune system. It is science, it is nature and it is free. Bringing this practice to the mainstream has been a commitment of well over a decade.

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

For twelve years I had a wonderful gift and stationery company, Peacock Papers, where our entire product line was positive, typographically designed messages on a range of products. Two quotes come to mind — an inspirational one that birthed the “Aha” moment for the company — *A Peacock that sits on its tail feathers is just another Turkey* (my maiden name Pfau means Peacock in a few languages so I was always drawn to messages and related images — and this one rang true at the time); and a message that always made people smile — it was #1 for over 12 years — *Did Anyone Tell You today???* *You're terrific.*

We are very blessed that some very prominent names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them

Just One? Ahhh, there are many I can think of. Having to pick one individual, however, I would say my Dad. He died when I was just out of college and I hardly knew him. He was a gentle man and an awesome merchant and entrepreneur. I would have loved to learn more about his world, his past, his family. I know he came from hard times, however, not very specifically. I am grateful to have inherited his entrepreneurial genes, along with my identical twin, who is also an entrepreneur.

Thank you for these fantastic insights. We greatly appreciate the time you spent on this.

Business

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