

Inspiring Women

Episode 18: Gavriella Schuster

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. I am your host Laurie McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership and over the years I've come to learn one thing. Women need women and not just any women, but inspiring women. Tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at inspiringwomen.show or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening. And I hope you will be inspired.

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to another episode of Inspiring Women. I am so happy that today we are speaking with Gavriella Schuster.

Laurie McGraw:

Now, Gabriela is a corporate vice president of One Commercial Partner. She's a C-suite Microsoft executive. She's been at Microsoft for 25 years. She leads a global portfolio of channel partners. That's influenced over a trillion dollars in the ecosystem. She has 20 years of leadership really working on digital and cloud transformation types of roles.

Laurie McGraw:

She has been an incredible advocate for women in technology, women in the cloud, women in STEM, and has a lot to tell us about in terms of her theories of what women can do to achieve gender equity in the workforce. Gavriella, thank you for joining us on Inspiring Women.

Gavriella Schuster:

Oh, thank you so much for having me, Laurie.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah, I'm really, really happy to be talking to you. You've got such an esteem career. You've got all these years being a senior leader at Microsoft with a deep technical background. You started at companies like Cigna and Adobe, and you're leading this very large commercial operation. Why don't you just tell us what you're doing right now?

Gavriella Schuster:

I'd love to. So what I do is I develop the strategy for, how can Microsoft continue to expand and grow our business and support our customers through the digital transformation they're going through right now, most notably actually through the pandemic at the moment? And then how do we really forge partnerships so that we can bring the best of the technology and the innovation and the partners that we work with can actually drive that delivery and support out to our

customers? Help them actually take advantage of the technology, and then build applications that are more purpose-built on top of the platforms that we have for customers.

Laurie McGraw:

And Gavriella, 25 years is a long time for anything at a particular company. And you've seemed to have had a number of executive roles over the course of that trajectory. How did that happen? Did you have a plan? Did you just keep falling into next thing? Where you're pulled into the next thing? Give us a little bit about your story.

Gavriella Schuster:

Well, it was actually ... It was very purposeful. So yeah, for sure, it wasn't random. When I first started working my goal was to be an experience collector, to build a lot of capabilities and experiences across a wide range of businesses and just feel like I was always learning and growing. So for sure, the number one thing in my mind was I did not want to be a specialist.

Gavriella Schuster:

I also believe that you always have to have a plan. If you don't have a goal and you don't know where you're going, you will clearly never get there. It doesn't mean that it can't change over time, but it's important to have that. And so what I learned about myself is that I'm very energized by change. So I look for new businesses to build or when a business is at an inflection point and it needs someone to come in and make bold moves that really turn the business around.

Gavriella Schuster:

And that's what I really love to do. I've kind of built my career on that. It has happened that as I've done that and made some of these bold moves, that once I get in there and, and I'm successful at building a new business or turning a business around, then I've been getting ... Then I get promoted.

Gavriella Schuster:

But I have actually ... Throughout my career, almost every move I've taken has either been like lateral or kind of a step back, so I could learn something new, learn a new area of the business. So I've moved all around at Microsoft. I've moved all around the company from operations into enterprise services, into licensing, business planning, M&A work, product management, so all sorts of things. And through all of those the primary thing I wanted was to learn more and to build equity in myself.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, those are really interesting perspectives. And I like the comment on experience collector. So having a plan sounds like a really smart thing to do, but I have to imagine along the way there were times where you needed to change that plan. How did you know? A lot of women struggle with how to know when they should change their plan? What were the signals that made you go in a different direction? I mean, taking a lateral or step back kind of move probably in hindsight has worked out, but probably you struggled with to make those kinds of decisions.

Gavriella Schuster:

I mean, so oftentimes it was, do I feel like I'm having the most impact that I could and do I feel like I'm utilizing my skills and coming into work every day to learn something new? And since that's what motivates me the most, when I found myself in a role where I thought, this kind of feels like something I've done already, then that was that signal that I was like, "Okay, look up, look around. What else do you want to do?"

Gavriella Schuster:

And so, picking out different disciplines, different parts of the business that I could go learn was the way that I kind of set that path. It's true. I mean, I revised it a number of times because I would find myself after a couple of years doing something that I just never thought I would have done in the job I took, right? And be like, "Oh, okay. Well, this is actually very interesting. Now it opened the door for me to learn something else. And now I see ..."

Gavriella Schuster:

It's almost like when you get to the top of a hill, you realize that the top of the hill isn't the top and there's a whole nother layer to it. And then you want to go climb that part. And so that's ... It's kind of it gets revealed to you over time. You think you know something and then as you start learning more about it you go, "Wow. I hardly knew that at all."

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it also sounds like it worked out. I mean, the portfolio that you have responsibility for now is tremendous, and that's a pretty great deal of responsibility at obviously a very impactful company, Microsoft.

Laurie McGraw:

But let's maybe turn to women and women in technology, that's an area of personal passion of yours. You know a lot about it. You do a lot of work to promote women in STEM, some of the organizations that you lead Women in STEM, Women in Tech, Women in the Cloud. And so let me just start with kind of the obvious question, why is this important to focus on?

Gavriella Schuster:

Well, there's a number of reasons. So one is that I know I'm tired of being the only woman in the room and looking around and not seeing enough other women. And it is problematic because I think that women bring a different perspective and actually getting diversity in a room enables you to get all of the perspectives and people from all walks of life give you different views on the experience. And that's what's really important.

Gavriella Schuster:

In high tech it's still so much of all boys network and I really want to help women break through. And one of the things that spurred me was that my daughter, she's 22 now, but when she was in high school she went into a STEM track. And after a year, she was like, "I don't want to do this anymore." And I was like, "Why you seem to be doing really well." And she said, "I don't want to hang out with all the boys."

Gavriella Schuster:

And I was like, "Okay, see, it has not gotten any better." Like I thought by the time she got into that position it would be so different for her and it's not. And so that really made me go, "Well, we just have to do something about this." I mean, it has been 20 years of this and clearly nothing's changed and nothing ...

Gavriella Schuster:

And that's when I started realizing really nothing had changed for me either. And it was just time to make a change, to get people to disrupt the status quo, get people to really think about it and go make a difference.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, the numbers bear you out. I mean, it was McKinsey who started doing a lot of research on this. We saw in 2015, that for companies that have excellent grades on gender diversity, they do 15% better financially in terms of their returns. But then we also saw the McKinsey study that in 2018 showed that women had made literally no progress in 10 years, so a huge disappointment. And new studies are coming out that are stating that the pandemic has made it significantly worse particularly for women in tech.

Laurie McGraw:

So at Microsoft what are you seeing? And you work with so many companies, what are you seeing there?

Gavriella Schuster:

So I am absolutely seeing women dropping out of the workforce during this pandemic faster than the men. And actually I just read on the World Economic Forum last week that at the rate women are dropping out, it'll be 135 years before we get to gender equity. And I was like, "Wow, that's just staggering, right?"

Laurie McGraw:

Staggering.

Gavriella Schuster:

We're just so going backwards. And, as you said, in the 30 years I've been in the industry we have declined 10 points in terms of female representation and that's just going ... It's not like we're not making progress. We're just going in the wrong direction. And then with my daughter's own experience, I'm like, "Well, of course, because we're not even making it better in the academic world."

Gavriella Schuster:

We see that same thing in the industry and the partnerships that I work in. And so, I've tried to rally the groups that I work with. That's why I started the Women in Cloud and the Women in Technology network. It's also why we have an association we work with called the International Association of Microsoft Channel Partners. They have an arm of their organization focused on

gender diversity. And then they also just started a black channel partners initiative to drive for racial justice across the U S.

Gavriella Schuster:

And then in Australia we have an organization that started Male Champions for Change across high tech dedicated to driving for gender equity. So we've been able to make some good progress in getting allies in the industry and having people make this something worth working on.

Gavriella Schuster:

And what I'm really excited about is what I see in areas like Germany and Norway and then even some of the states like California where they're mandating women on boards. And some areas like the New York City Public Works Department requiring all of their suppliers to talk about what their diversity representation is, right?

Gavriella Schuster:

I mean, I think those are the things that it's going to take for us to step up and make this change. And it's intentional action and transparency. And I think it has to come from the commercial sector because it's clearly not coming from the public sector.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I think that these are really terrific initiatives. I agree with you. But maybe even take it to a personal point, because here are, you are so incredibly accomplished in terms of where you are in your career and what you have already done. But do you still experience these instances? You might be the only woman in the room, but are there times where you're still not heard or you have to be amplified by somebody else? Does that still happen to you today?

Gavriella Schuster:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I have a male chief of staff and there've been meetings where the two of us walked in the room and it's not like the people in the room don't know who I am or what I do, right? We walk into the room and the men in the room direct their attention and their questions to my chief of staff. And I'm like, "Are you kidding me?" Right? I mean, he's a great guy. Don't get me wrong, but it's just unbelievable.

Gavriella Schuster:

And I talked about that in my TED talk and it was validated by the unbelievable response that I got from so many women, and many accomplished women all over the planet that experienced the same thing. That they feel talked over, not listened to. I mean, it actually even happened in the Obama White House where the women talked about having a strategy for amplifying each other's voices so they were heard.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. And, I mean, the strategies are really helpful. I know it can be sometimes maddening that, this still exists, but I think your story really, speaks to that it still exists, but hopefully we can make some change.

Laurie McGraw:

You've got some ideas about that, Gavriella. You've talked about achieving gender equity and you've got some strategies in mind for how that could be accomplished, talking about things like become. Could you tell us more about that?

Gavriella Schuster:

Yeah. So, when I decided to go do a TED talk, I thought I've got to have something where I can help people make this very real and remember it. And so I took all the actions that I believe people should be taking and thought, what's a frame that I could provide that makes it easy? And so the frame is become. Just remember become.

Gavriella Schuster:

You want to become an ally? Let me tell you how you can become an ally. There's four easy steps. You connect, you outreach, you mentor, and you empower. And behind each of those it's specific things that each individual can take to really disrupt the status quo.

Gavriella Schuster:

So in connect that is about connecting into your network in an intentional way and bringing women into your network. And you can do that by connecting to a network like the Women in Cloud or the Women in Technology network.

Gavriella Schuster:

There are actually women, female networks across every industry, right? Bringing them into your network as business partners gives them access to you and everyone else in your network. And so that's a super powerful way to really create that amplification and be a force multiplier.

Gavriella Schuster:

The second way is in your organization, regardless of what level you are, if you are doing any kind of hiring to think about, how are we conducting the recruitment of candidates? How are we interviewing the candidates? How are we writing those job descriptions? And are we making sure that we are screening in for diversity and not screening candidates out because we're looking for certain number of years or certain levels of experience that really only someone well established and well established i.e men would have?

Gavriella Schuster:

And so that's the second thing is to really do outreach and proactively go out and find great candidates for the roles that you have open and kind of build those succession plans from that network you create in step one, connect, right?

Gavriella Schuster:

Then the third step is mentor. Reach out and mentor women. Sponsor them, promote them, help them to learn from your experiences. And that's a powerful thing because you can instill in them confidence. I mean, I think that, Laurie, that's probably hopefully what we're doing right now,

instilling in other women confidence to be heard, to go out there and shape their perspectives, and be comfortable sharing their perspective and their voice.

Gavriella Schuster:

And then empower women in the workplace by creating an inclusive culture by employing some of these allyship strategies of amplifying somebody else's voice and somebody else's idea and actively going out of your way to support them.

Laurie McGraw:

And so, Gabriel, these are, I think, really terrific steps. And I do like the easy framework that you lay out for people. The things like connecting and mentoring, those for women I find they're kind of easy to do. We know how to build our networks a bit with other women. As women leaders, we actively and almost instinctively work to mentor other women.

Laurie McGraw:

What about men? You work with such a broad network of companies and often are surrounded by men. How do you advise them to do these things? Because I would imagine that their networks are ... They're not filled with women. They don't know the young women in their companies perhaps as much. What are you seeing and how do you advise men?

Gavriella Schuster:

Yeah, I mean, I advise them the same way. And the response that I've gotten, I mean, has been so supportive. Mostly the men have just thought, "Oh, I never thought about it. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know there was something I could be doing." And so, this actually, the framework, these four steps gives them something very tangible to do. It's like, "You want to be an ally? Let me tell you what it means to be ally. And this is the easy way to do it."

Gavriella Schuster:

There have been men ... Unbelievable, but there have been men who are just like, "Well, I just don't actually even know that many women in the industry." And it's like, "Wow. Okay, let me help you. Let me introduce you. And let me show you how you can get to know more women," right?

Gavriella Schuster:

And I think ... I actually read this article in the Seattle times probably about eight months ago that talked about how there is actually still ... There's still stigma associated with men and women getting together and making sure it's appropriate, right? And I think that that may be something that holds men back in the networking with women is that they may feel awkward about it. They may feel like that's more of a dating scenario rather than a work scenario.

Gavriella Schuster:

And so it's helping them to understand and learn, I guess, how to do networking with women, right? Because maybe the networking they do with men is in the locker room or on the golf course. And, of course, that's not appropriate. So what is appropriate?

Laurie McGraw:

Well, giving coaching. And also, I think you're pretty emphatic about you need to be an agent of change. You need to be an amplifier in order for us to achieve anything close to gender equity. And results do speak to companies in financial return. So that's always really helpful.

Laurie McGraw:

If we think about beyond leadership in terms of what leaders can do, what do you think that the important things are for women themselves to do?

Gavriella Schuster:

So I think women need to get comfortable being uncomfortable, right? Pushing themselves to participate, to speak up, and to share their perspective, and not to shy away when the first try doesn't succeed, right? So when you say something and people don't hear you or they dismiss what you've said, pushing yourself to do it again, to do it again in a new way, to work at it.

Gavriella Schuster:

Like you said, it's not really fair, right? It's not necessarily fair that you'd have to do that, but I think it's still necessary. And it works, right? The persistence pays off and clearly helps you then establish your credibility and move to the next stage of making an impact.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, if you think about some of the mentors that just you've had personally who have pushed you the most, what did they do for you to help you do these very same things as this great advice that you're giving to others?

Gavriella Schuster:

Yeah. I mean, first, they listened and empathized with where I was at. And then they helped me to see things that I could do where it would still be authentic to me. I would still feel comfortable with it. And yet I could be heard. And how to ...

Gavriella Schuster:

Now when I go to speak I almost instinctively and immediately start building my credibility. So it basically says, this is why you should listen to me. When you walk in a room and you do introductions and it's like, "Well, here's what I've done around this topic. Here's why I got invited into this room. Here's what I'm hoping to achieve," right?

Gavriella Schuster:

That kind of thing just builds your credibility from the moment that you speak. And then it avoids that awkwardness later where people don't know why they should listen to you.

Gavriella Schuster:

So I think that's the kind of thing I've learned from the people who have mentored me, which is learning from their mistakes, learning from the things they see that work, and then getting exposure by watching them.

Gavriella Schuster:

I do a lot of that kind of mentorship when we were in the office of when women come around into a meeting they oftentimes will go to the back of the room or not even be at the primary table. They'll take a seat along a wall or something. And I'm like, "Come to the table. Set out your space. Claim your space."

Gavriella Schuster:

When I go into a meeting that's a physical meeting, I'll put my laptop down, I'll put my phone down. I'll kind of create space at the table for myself, so that it's clear I'm here.

Laurie McGraw:

I'm here. And I want to be heard. I have something to say. And that's also really terrific in terms of just how you can actually do outreach, those small things that matter a lot, especially coming from people like yourself, who are such strong executives.

Laurie McGraw:

Gabriela, this has been a really incredible conversation. I've loved hearing about the become framework that you've outlined. As we close out this Inspiring Women conversation, what sort of last closing thoughts or advice might you have for listeners?

Gavriella Schuster:

My advice would be that we all have to take responsibility to disrupt the status quo. Clearly what's happening today isn't enough. And we need to be allies for each other. We need to look out for opportunities to promote and sponsor and mentor each other, and to create that inclusive environment where all voices, not just the voices of women, but the voices of every individual that's in that room or on that project can be heard, and really make the invisible visible.

Laurie McGraw:

That is excellent advice and a great thing for us to close out on. This has been an Inspiring Women conversation with Gavriella Schuster. Thank you very much for being here today. Gavriella, where can folks follow you?

Gavriella Schuster:

They can follow me on LinkedIn. I'm Gavriella Schuster. I'm the only one. They can follow me on Twitter, [gavriellas1@Twitter](#).

Laurie McGraw:

Terrific. Thank you very much.

Gavriella Schuster:

Thank you.

Laurie McGraw:

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