

Inspiring Women

Episode 23: Rebecca Marks

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. Welcome to another episode of Inspiring Women. And today, we're speaking with Beca Marks. Now, Beca is a senior finance manager of sales operations at Grainger. Grainger is a Fortune 500 company. They're an industrial supply company that has international operations, multiple billions of dollars in terms of being a public company. They work on things like motors, and lighting, and materials. Three million customers worldwide, sales, and they have hundreds of branches. And, Beca has been there for about 10 years. She's been there since she graduated from Indiana University, where she graduated from the school of business. And Beca, I'm really excited to be speaking with you today.

Rebecca Marks:

I'm so happy to be here. Thanks for having me.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, great. Well listen, to start, your background is in finance and accounting, and your title is a senior finance manager. Now, that all sounds kind of generic. So, why don't you tell us what you actually do?

Rebecca Marks:

Great. I will talk a little bit about what my team does and what I do, because as a leader and I'm sure other leaders can experience the same thing, they're a little different. So, what I drive my team to help do is use data to find insights that drive action in the business, that it really all stems down to that. What we try to do is help the business understand what's happening, what trends are good, what trends are bad, what things we can do differently, and actually help them come up with solutions to drive action that creates change. It's super exciting, gets me very energized. My responsibilities are very similar to a lot of other leaders, it's about prioritizing, taking away roadblocks, helping people think through and problem solve to find those solutions and find those conclusions that can help the business move forward. From a finance lens, specifically supporting sales operations.

Rebecca Marks:

I support things like pricing and gross profit. So, how do price changes impact our overall P&L? What impacts can they have on volume? What impacts can they have on customer behavior and

how customers see Grainger as a partner? Things like contract realization, so are we getting what we should be getting out of our contracts? Where do we have opportunities for growth? Where are customers not using us as much as they can? And, how can we help the sales team understand what extra value there is with some of those contract customers? So, that's two examples of things I support.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, to me that sounds like a lot of data, a lot of spreadsheets, a lot of like manipulation of data to understand it, which is always, I think that stuff is very interesting. But sometimes, it's hard to sort through a lot of information, and then turn it into something that you can take action on, so that's what I'm hearing is getting you excited about what you do at Grainger. But Beca, you've been there for 10 years now, so that's a long time to be at a company and you've been there since you graduated. So, what's been keeping you there? Why is it so interesting? How are you not getting lost in a company with over 20,000 employees?

Rebecca Marks:

Yeah, that's a great question. I think the thing that keeps me is the fact that there's always something new to learn in such a big organization. There's always a new opportunity. And, I think Grainger is really special because if you voice that maybe I'm thinking this is getting a little stale, maybe this isn't pushing me as hard as it could, if you're a high performer or a top performer, those opportunities are going to come your way to take on a special project.

Rebecca Marks:

Or for example, the last big thing that happened to me was I said, "I really want for my development to try to lead leaders," and through a couple of organization changes, we were able to make that happen. And so, I think being vocal about what it is you want to learn, what it is you want to do, and having the network of people who can help you find those solutions is really critical. I've been able to do that at my current organization. And so, I haven't really felt the need to leave, because I'm continuing to be challenged consistently and I'm just not feeling as though I'm bored in anything that I'm doing. There's always something new to explore.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, you've also had eight promotions in 10 years, that sounds like a lot of promotions to me. So certainly putting the, what you want forward, sounds like that might be working for you as well. I want to move a little bit to the company orientation. So just in learning more about Grainger to prepare to talk to you, Beca, I was focused, I was just looking at their diversity equity and inclusivity statements. Now, those are kind of hot topics these days, but it seems that this large Fortune 500 company is pretty purposeful in that approach. So, just tell us what it looks like from the inside, the words on the webpage are very, very clear in terms of the commitment to DE&I, how that's important from the board level, from the executive management level. What does it look like from the inside?

Rebecca Marks:

Yeah, we are doing a lot around DE&I and it's something I'm super passionate about. The more voices and diverse voices in the room, the better the outcome. So, it's something I'm definitely

super passionate about. The tone from the top has been excellent, especially over this past year. We're facing into a lot to say the least, in terms of the Black Lives Matter movement over the last couple years, as it relates to Me Too movement. And, it really started with the tone from the top. So our CEO, and our board and the leadership team came together and said, "We need to start having important and impactful conversations in the workplace," which having worked for a few years was just, I thought these were topics you don't talk about at work. It's very politically driven sometimes and it can be very uncomfortable. So, how do you start those conversations?

Rebecca Marks:

They started a program called [Be Brave 00:06:53], and trained all leaders on how to have to brave conversations with their teams. We practiced it as leadership teams first to make sure that we could structure them in a way that was inclusive and open, and get a few tries under our belt before trying to lead our teams through something that they had probably never talked about at work. That's definitely one way those conversations with my team have been some of the most impactful in terms of getting to know people as people, getting to share unique views and thinking about the world in a different way than maybe how I came to the table initially. It's been very eyeopening, and very humbling and very, I think, impactful in making us feel closer as a team.

Rebecca Marks:

The other thing we're doing is around hiring recruiting processes, making sure that we're taking out as much bias as we can, doing trainings on inherent biases known and unknown, to make sure that when we're evaluating talent, it really is as fair as possible, so that we get diverse voices in our organization, that we have a diverse recruiting pool, so the people interviewing you will look different.

Rebecca Marks:

And, making sure that then we have those diverse opinions in the room when it's time to debrief. Those are a couple examples of things. I think the leadership team is doing really well to drive that DE&I mindset throughout the organization.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it's great that you're getting training and you're also... You've been a manager for a couple of years. And, usually when you are an early manager, and becoming a leader and you are a leader, focusing on things like the development of employees and development of sort of like next level strategic thinking, those are the kinds of things that usually I've seen people get training on. But with DEI, it's a lot more about culture and also about being more inclusive in ways that I will just say in my experience that hasn't been necessarily the focus of companies, but it's certainly critically important now. So, are you feeling equipped? How does that match up with your ability to influence a culture? And again, I'm thinking about this more from the large nest, the size of your company, being able to have a voice as a earlier stage manager.

Rebecca Marks:

Yeah. That's a great question. How I think I influenced the whole, control what you can control in your environment and show up every day the way that you want to, because your team sees

that. One of the ways is promoting talent from within my team and making sure that they're ready for the next steps, because I know that we've had these types of conversations and they're ready to take that to the rest of the organization. So I think as a leader, you have a huge responsibility to train your team for when they get promoted and become people leaders themselves that, that message gets spread across.

Rebecca Marks:

I also think starting small is not a bad thing, controlling what you can control in your environment is a way to impact the larger organization. Because even if you work on a small team, we work very collaboratively, very cross-functionally. And so regardless if I only have control over my small team, I'm interacting with a lot of different people every day. And it takes all of us acting in the right ways, making the right decisions to make a big change, so that's how I think I contribute to the overall organization's objectives.

Laurie McGraw:

Great. Well, this podcast is inspiring women, so in your company, it's focused on things like motors, and supply chain, and industrial parts and things of that nature. Now, I think about those things as more male dominated, how is it in the company? Am I thinking about it the right way? Do I have it incorrect, or is it really just sort of gender neutral and I've just got outdated views of those things?

Rebecca Marks:

I think you could view it as being potentially masculine for me, especially as a finance professional, whether I'm talking about motors, or whether I'm at a consumer packaged goods company talking about chips, or whether I'm talking about some other product line, it doesn't influence my job that much, because I'm not in it. I also think with STEM becoming a larger focus for women up and coming in their careers, and within education, I think some of these gender barriers are coming down. And so, I would like to not think about it, something as so much as masculine and feminine, but I think there's a lot to learn in this industry, there's a lot to get out of it. And so, I would like us to not put those sort of gender barriers on any type of product, because I think you could do it in a lot of different industries.

Laurie McGraw:

So the labels are outdated and that's actually really encouraging to hear, Beca. It really is, I appreciate that. So, let's talk about your career. So again, 10 years at Grainger, you've had eight along the way. That's a lot of promotions. How has that worked in terms of the next job? Did you have your eye on it? Did you go through structured programs? How did you advance your own career within, again, this larger organization?

Rebecca Marks:

Yeah, I started at a rotational program, so my first three jobs were six month rotations, and I didn't have a ton of control over where I went. I tried to control it as best I could by knowing the different rotations that were available to me, speaking to different leaders who were responsible for that rotation, because I really believe in a push-pull. If I'm telling the head of the program, "Hey, I'm really interested in this role." And that leader is going to the head of the program and

saying, "Hey, I think Beca might be a good fit for this role," that is a match made in heaven. You're much more likely to succeed. But after that, I think I took an approach of always having three things in my mind of what I wanted to get out of the next role and being able to articulate those three things clearly.

Rebecca Marks:

And then, I think once you have a strong network of people who understand what it is you're good at, where's your strengths, where's your opportunities and what are those three things you're looking for, when the opportunities present themselves, they can say, "Hey, maybe Beca would be a good fit for this because I know that it meets her criteria."

Rebecca Marks:

And so, I haven't targeted specific teams or specific roles, but really focused on what am I going to learn, how is it going to help me advance my career, or help me work on a development area and move forward from there. And, I've been pretty strategic with that. That's how I coach my team to talk about jobs they want. Because truthfully, even in an organization as big as Grainger, the job that was super interesting two years ago might not be the job that's super interesting today with strategic objectives of the organization, maybe there was a big problem there, the problem's been fixed. So now, it's time to just status quo, which is not what I'm super interested in. So, I think it's not really looking at whose been in that role before and what have they done, but where is the role going, where's the organization going and how do I connect myself to those things?

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that's also a pretty purposeful approach. Okay, you're taking action on talking to different people outside of your current, whatever your team structure might be or the next couple of layers of management. And then also, thinking ahead. Did you start out that way or are those things that you learned along the way? Are you more purposeful about your career next steps now or have you always been this thoughtful about it?

Rebecca Marks:

I'd definitely say it's evolved and I hope that I can speak about it better today than I could eight years ago, probably. But, I think whether or not I was able to articulate it as clearly then as I am now, I had a bunch of great leaders who help me think about networking, who helped me think about communicating what I want out of my career, and what I want out of roles and opportunities. And through that mentorship, I think I was able to find my sort of secret sauce and how I want to think about my career moving forward.

Laurie McGraw:

Okay, well, let's talk about one of those career moves. So you've moved into management, you're leading a team, and after having done a number of things along the way as an individual star contributor. So when you made that move to management, was that a big leap for you? Was that an easy step? What were the differences from becoming the leader to being the star performer?

Rebecca Marks:

It was definitely a big change, thinking about being an individual contributor versus a leader. I think the thing I really wanted to do purposefully before I made the jump to leadership was really building my development plan around what were the skills I needed to become a strong people leader out the gate, and I started working on those things long before I took the job. I think it's really important to be showing up as a leader and demonstrating those skills before you move into it, because being a strong analyst is about how do you build the model? How do you think through pulling the data? How do you think through structuring your argument to some extent, but your leader probably helps you with that? So, how do you become a really self-sufficient individual contributor? How do you think about mentorship of others early on?

Rebecca Marks:

So if you're a senior professional, how do you think about mentoring the professionals below you, giving them advice, seeing what works, seeing what doesn't work from a coaching perspective, taking on prioritization responsibilities, taking on project management responsibilities and making sure that you're open to those kinds of opportunities that may be in addition to your day job, so that when it's time to make the move, it's not brand new. But let me tell you, it was it wasn't easy. It's a hard shift to go from being the one doing the thing to being the one leading someone to do the thing, because you are likely in a new department, you don't know the subject as well as you did when you were the one in the weeds, and you have to build credibility really fast that even though that this senior analyst might know more than you today, you're there to help and provide support in a new and different way, and bringing a different perspective to the team.

Rebecca Marks:

And, I think that's a really big leap. And if you on day one of becoming a manager, that's the first time you're thinking about what skills do I need to be a great manager, you probably moved too quick. So, I really tried to take, again, a purposeful approach to my development, making sure I felt ready. Obviously, there were things that were unexpected, leading my first one-on-one, I feel sorry for the person sitting across the table from me. It did not go that well, but you live and like you learn, and you get advice from people who mean something to you, and that you think are good at it and you grow. And, I think the team overall understands that it's a tough transition and they grant you a lot of grace.

Laurie McGraw:

Sure. And so, building is one of the things that you talked about. So when you were first becoming a manager, tell me about some of the things that you... So, your first one-on-one terrible, I hope that person is still there and thriving with you. I'm sure they are. But, what are some of the things that have worked out really well being a leader, but maybe what are some of the things that did not work out so well, the thing you changed in terms of your approach as a leader?

Rebecca Marks:

Yeah. I think the thing that has changed the most is I had a very one size fits all solution to management at the beginning, because as a first time manager, I was managing people how I wanted to be managed when I was an individual contributor. And recognizing that everyone has

different motivations, everyone has different interest levels, and how fast and how far they want to go in their career. And everyone has different strengths, and how do you play to those strengths, how do you delegate work to the right people, instead of just saying, "This person is the rock star, I know they can get it done." How do you make sure that you're spreading the work evenly, and thoughtfully, and purposefully across the team, and you're treating people and you're managing them more of the way that they would like to be managed, versus the way that you would like to manage them.

Rebecca Marks:

That was not something I thought a ton about. I just thought, "Hey, I've had great experiences with these types of leaders, I wish leaders maybe did this differently, I'm going to mold to that." And, you need to be a lot more flexible and understanding, that what drives one person is going to be a little different than what drives another.

Laurie McGraw:

I think that's a really good learning. And I will tell you that, that from my perspective of working with lots of managers over many years, I've seen that, sort of thinking that there's one way, but then learning and incorporating the many views of the different types of people and the strengths that they bring to a team. So that's just fantastic, Beca. How are you doing in terms of delegating work? That's another sort of common issue for early managers. Was that something that you had to learn or did you do it well right out of the gate?

Rebecca Marks:

I think that actually was a strength for me. I will say there was a benefit. We were changing our systems and I didn't learn the new way, how to pull data from the new system that we were migrating to, sort of purposefully as a way to say, "Okay, if I can't pull it myself, then I have to involve my team, I have to go to my team, I need to use them and let them be the ones to shine, and do the analysis, and think through it and provide those insights to leadership." "And, I'm here to coach and develop, and assist them when they have questions." And so, it was sort of lucky timing for me, and so delegation early on was not something that I had to worry too much about because I actually couldn't do it myself.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, then that is fortunate, because that is definitely an early management trap. I'm glad that wasn't one that you had to fall into. Beca, let's talk about this past year, we are not yet out of this pandemic. It's been a year of change on almost every level for almost everyone. And for many people, I would just say your age group, for many folks, it's been a lost year in terms of career progression or advancement. How has it impacted you? How has it impacted your team? Have you been able to focus on career progression? Has that been something that just has been impossible to think about during this period of time? What's been going on there?

Rebecca Marks:

Yeah. Couple of different questions within that. I think I'll start with number one, which is, it was a struggle initially to think about how to work successfully from home, how to collaborate successfully from home, how to not just be excited that you get to be in leggings every day, and

really think about the implications that it means for your team and how they interact. And so early on, it was really critical that we set up forums and places to have as close of an in-person experience as we could. Definitely a ton of learnings along the way. I now institute team video days, so they're set days every week where we come together, and if we're on calls just as a team that we agree to turn on our videos in order to feel a little bit more connected.

Rebecca Marks:

Additionally, I think being on video all the time, it's proving to be pretty exhausting for a lot of people, especially introverts. So as you think about that inclusion and diverse team that you want to build, thinking about requiring video all the time actually might be stifling. Some involvement from the quieter people or more introverted people on your team was a great learning for me. So not to do it all the time, but to have structured time to do that as a team. I think finding ways to celebrate wins was really important, because naturally that would happen after a meeting, you walk out of the room, you talk about the meeting on the way back to your desk, you talk about what went well, you talk about what didn't go well. And so, you need to find thoughtful ways to structure that because it's not happening organically. And then in terms of thinking about how it's impacted career progression, I definitely say it slowed things down from a networking perspective, at least initially.

Rebecca Marks:

There was so much work going on with how is the business going to manage through all this change? How are we going to continue to serve our customers? What is happening with our suppliers? What is inventory levels look like? Do we need to think about furloughs or other very critical decisions we need to make to be successful as an organization and do the right thing for our people? And so, there was just enough work to go around that you could not be thinking so much about networking. But, I think now that it's more of a steady state, those one-on-one mentor conversations are coming back. We're finding more of that structured time to meet and have conversations about development. Throughout all of it, it's mandated that you have at least one quarterly development session with everyone on your team, so I was able to maintain those because I think they're really important at a minimum to be talking to your people once a quarter about their long-term development plan.

Laurie McGraw:

Those are great, great pieces of advice. I like some of those tips, I might bring them back for my own work Beca, so I appreciate that. As we close out here, it's been such a great conversation. And as you think about yourself and having done all that you've accomplished already in your career, do you think what you want to do in the next five, 10 years? What are you thinking about next?

Rebecca Marks:

Yeah, that's a great question. I'm definitely thinking about what comes next. I've been in the finance world for nine years. I think there's a lot of benefit to seeing more of the organization, even if my long-term goals are to stay within finance. Being an operating partner and understanding that side of the world, I think would only make me a stronger finance partner in the future. And so, it's really thinking about longer-term, again, what skills and experiences are

going to set you up for a long and successful career, where you have the opportunity to work on a lot of different things? I think finding ways to open more doors than to close them is important, especially early in your career. And so, I think being purposeful about what comes next and what you want out of your career, is it managing a really big team because that's what gets you super excited?

Rebecca Marks:

Is it being super focused on strategy? In which case you're probably never going to have a super large organization, because those jobs just typically aren't structured that way. And how do you set yourself up to be ready for those things in the future? And if you want to do both, how do you make sure you keep all the doors open? So, definitely having in-depth conversations with my mentors about what comes next, what doors I want to keep open and at this point, what doors I'm going to have to close. And, this is really probably the first move where some doors might close, because I don't make a decision and that's new and different for me. So, definitely don't have a strict plan of what the next five years can look like, because the job that I want might not even exist yet, but the types of things and the types of roles that I see myself in, I'm definitely thinking a lot about that and how to set myself up for success to get there.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, thinking about the long-term by setting yourself up for success, that is really terrific advice. As we close out here at Beca, any last thoughts that you want to leave listeners with, whether it's on questions you want me to ask other people that I talk to, or just last advice you to want to leave the audience with?

Rebecca Marks:

I think one piece of advice that I was thinking a lot about as I prepped for this call was, how to think about talent, and thinking about how you hire and bring in and coach the right talent. And what I'd say about that is, is I found that I always look for three things the most in an interview, we have principals that we make sure that we interview on, so that people follow our goals and values. But I think for me, the three keys to success have really been curiosity, analytical thought or problem solving and drive. Because if you're curious, you're going to ask the right questions, and get down to the meat of what's working and what's not working. If you're a problem solver, you can figure out how to address the things that are working and not working and come up with solutions.

Rebecca Marks:

And if you have drive, you're going to do that proactively and show up really well to people around you. I think drive is one of the hardest things to coach. So, it's probably one of the things I test for the most in an interview situation about how are you proactive, how do you learn when no one asks you to, how do you look into things when no one asks you to, because I've really found that at least in my world and my team, those have really been the things that I think have made me successful and make the people on my team successful. And how they do it can show up in different ways, but I really feel like those are the three pillars of being a successful employee.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, Beca, those are really terrific pillars and I love that advice. So, thank you for sharing that. This has been an inspiring women conversation with this young inspiring woman, Beca Marks. And Beca, thank you so much.

Rebecca Marks:

Thank you. Really appreciate the time.

Laurie McGraw:

This has been an episode of Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw, please subscribe, rate and review. We are produced by Kate Kruse at Executive Podcast Solutions. More episodes can be found on inspiringwomen.show. I am Laurie McGraw and thank you for listening.