

Inspiring Women

Episode 9: Kelsey Prestesater

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 and I am excited today to be speaking with Kelsey Prestesater. Kelsey is a senior consultant at Ernst & Young where she provides strategic guidance to organizations looking to modernize their finance operations. Now, Kelsey has an MBA from the University of Notre Dame and she graduated there with honors. She has some interesting things that she did while studying at Notre Dame. She also has a degree from the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University. She majored in finance, operations management and international business. She spent several years doing consulting and product things at Grainger before she went on to get her MBA. And we're going to have a really terrific conversation today with Kelsey Prestesater. Kelsey we're so happy to have you here.

Kelsey Prestesater:

Thanks for having me. I'm excited to talk with you.

Laurie McGraw:

Great. Well, why don't we just get started. And so diving in, we're really appreciative to have you on Inspiring Women. Tell us what you're doing right now.

Kelsey Prestesater:

So, right now I'm working at Ernst & Young in their business consulting finance group and my primary focus is helping organizations transition out of manually operated files to document their process and try and make it run in the background so that it frees up time for people to work on the results of the information rather than getting the information to the data results.

Laurie McGraw:

So how long have you been there at Ernst & Young now?

Kelsey Prestesater:

I've been here for almost two years.

Laurie McGraw:

Okay. So you've started doing this job before the pandemic hit and now you're doing it during the pandemic, have things changed in terms of how you interact with your clients during the pandemic times?

Kelsey Prestesater:

It's definitely a different world interacting with clients pre and post pandemic. So I used to get on a flight Monday morning and travel to go see the clients face-to-face and work with them Monday through Thursday and then come home and get more work done on Friday, but now we interact over computers and calls pretty consistently. So I have been working with the same client for about six months but I can't tell you what they look like necessarily because I'm currently on the phone with them. So it's definitely changed how we are looking at building those client relationships and what that means and trying to figure out new ways to work in the human side of business, so what people are doing this weekend or the small chat that helps people trust has definitely taken more effort than it used to.

Laurie McGraw:

Okay. Well, let's come back to that, that's really interesting. But I want to go back a little bit and just follow your career progression. So your first degree from Indiana was in finance operations and international business, now, why did you choose that degree? What was interesting about that?

Kelsey Prestesater:

I knew I wanted to do business and I had been really good at math growing up and in my head business and math meant finance. And then as I started down that I figured out how much of the basis of things finances used for and really wanted to understand it even if I wasn't sure I wanted to do it full time, and then I tripped into operations management and one of the courses they have you have to take a whole broad spectrum of classes and one of them is operations and I really enjoyed it and so I went with that. And then I knew I wanted to study abroad and it's pretty easy to study abroad and get an international business degree because you're able to use the credits back and forth. So I stumbled into it and just kept finding things I was interested in or wanted to continue to pursue based off of just the general business aspect of things.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that's great. Where did you go? Where did you study abroad?

Kelsey Prestesater:

I spent six months in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Laurie McGraw:

Wow. Okay. Well, that's really interesting. I'm gathering that that must've been a verily terrific learning experience for you. Now, when you graduated, it looks like you got a job pretty much right away and you spent five years at Grainger. And just by looking at your background,

Kelsey, five years and bunch of promotions in there. So tell us a bit about what you did at Grainger.

Kelsey Prestesater:

So I started at Grainger in the inventory planning group. They really was trying to manage the exceptions for how customer preferences were changing based off of what was existing and stable and what was the data telling me I needed to do. So that was really interesting from one, how do I work in a corporate job, then two, how do I start to learn what leadership wants when they look at data and how they're looking at decision-making? And then about a year and a half into that job I decided I wanted to try something new and took on what for me was a really big challenge was the aspect of being super conversational. So I took on the challenge of trying to get into product management which is much more relationship-based and less data-driven to push myself into being more extroverted and not hiding behind the data.

Kelsey Prestesater:

So I moved into a product management support role and gave myself the space to learn how to be outgoing, learn to interact with suppliers, but have that safety net for when I got nervous or got scared. That was a really great learning opportunity especially since it had such a diverse field of work that you were looking at customer trends, you were looking at profitability, but I still had that support of the actual product manager.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it also sounds very purposeful. I mean, first of all, any job that deals with data, data interpretation, that is a place to be and certainly lots of opportunities with those kinds of professional career opportunities. But you said that you were trying to find something that forced you to be a bit more outgoing and not hide behind the data, I like that comment. So how did you force yourself? I mean, hiding behind data if you're introverted, seems like a good place to be, and so how did you get the courage to make that change?

Kelsey Prestesater:

I was incredibly fortunate where I had befriended someone and she is incredibly outgoing and very extroverted. And every moment I said, "I'm not sure if I could do that," she told me I was wrong and that I could. And she was in the product management organization and knew my work. So she really helped me with the initial confidence and then the more people I spoke with it was like, "Yeah, it's a challenge for you but you can do it, it's fine." So that really helped me gain that confidence and that belief in myself because I wasn't sure it was there.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that's really terrific that you first of all had the self-awareness that there was something that you wanted to work on and then you spoke with other people who reinforced that for you. And that's so important at the early stages of the career, to just know that these things that you spend a lot of time in your head thinking about, that there are other people who can reinforce them to allow you to take the next step.

Laurie McGraw:

But so Kelsey, so you spent five years at Grainger, again, couple of promotions in there so you were obviously doing well, but then you decided to go back to a graduate school and pursue your MBA. So you got into this accelerator program at a tremendous university, Notre Dame, and you graduated with honors. But why did you leave something when you were doing so well and decided to go back and get another degree?

Kelsey Prestesater:

I was looking ahead at what I wanted to do next and I wasn't sure what it was and I wasn't sure where it was within Grainger. And I had learned a ton, I'd been really happy with what I was doing, but I couldn't see myself at my next step at Grainger but I didn't know what I wanted my next step to be. So I knew I'd always wanted my MBA and I was getting support of this is the right time from a career perspective to try and figure out what that next thing is and so I just decided to go for it and study up for the GMAT and start applying and just take a step I wasn't sure I was... I knew I'd always wanted to but I wasn't sure I was ready for or where it was leading.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it's interesting that all these steps sounds like they come with a lot of introspection, hesitancy, concern and deep thought. I'm guessing that MBAs today there's a lot of debate about whether they are worth it, whether they are helpful, whether they provide the value or the career acceleration that people are looking for. What did you think about when you decided to take the plunge?

Kelsey Prestesater:

I didn't know what I wanted to do next and it felt like a space I could figure that out. It sounded also nice to go back to school and learn because I'd enjoyed my undergrad and it felt like it was the right time because I knew I wanted an MBA to check that box and spend the time on myself and really deciding what that meant.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, it looks like you did some pretty interesting projects while you were studying the MBA. So it wasn't just a bunch of coursework, you actually had some applied things that you did. Can you give us some examples of what you were doing there?

Kelsey Prestesater:

Yes. So the main thing I did it's called Business on the Frontlines. What they do is you apply and you interview and then there's a course that is just so you can get college credit because you're spending so much time on it, but you partner with nonprofits in other countries. So I was on a team that was partnered with an organization in Colombia who was looking to transition farmers from illicit crops to legal safer forms of income.

Kelsey Prestesater:

So we spent a full semester researching, what plants grow well in Colombia? How does the illicit economy operate? What does their supply chain look like? What's the average pricing on all of these things as well? Then we took two weeks over our spring break and we went and met with

the farmers to understand what their concerns were, what their lifestyles were like and why they were making the choice to transition out of an illegal economy and into more legal forms of income.

Kelsey Prestesater:

Then we came back after realizing most of our assumptions were wrong, it was terrific how terribly wrong we were and reanalyzed our whole process to make a final recommendation of over a five-year plan of the foundations they could lie today to get them to strong incomes over the course of five years and we identified a specific partner that they should work with within Colombia that had the financial and then the knowledge resources that these farmers were going to need.

Laurie McGraw:

What an amazing experience. I have to believe that that not only shaped your thinking about what you're doing professionally but also a whole lot of other things in terms of the experience that must've given you Kelsey. So you moved on, you graduated with honors, you are at a top consulting firm now, you talked a little bit about being at Ernst & Young for two years, starting off working with your clients and now working with your clients virtually through a pandemic. So tell me how you think about your work right now. Is this just one more step in a set of career steps that you have an eye towards or how do you think about your work right now?

Kelsey Prestesater:

My work right now is definitely challenging me and it's really interesting, which is always something I look forward to. And so I want to continue with it for right now, but I don't know that I can say this is my forever job, I don't know that I know anything that's my forever job. So I like what I'm doing, I think it's interesting. It's consistently changing, there's always something new to bring to our clients and so for right now that keeps me happy for the next while.

Laurie McGraw:

So Kelsey, I've talked to other young women, young women professionals like yourself, about working in the environment of a pandemic and as somebody who is very good at what you do, you sound like you really know what you're talking about. Do you find that it's easier to establish yourself with your clients or in your career or do you feel like you have to work harder at it being in this new world of virtual environments?

Kelsey Prestesater:

I think the client isn't as hard to establish herself with, I think one of the more challenging relationships I've started with is we moved to the pandemic and I had never met any of my EY team members before and they'd worked together previously. So for me, it's been just as much of a challenge if not more of a challenge to understand and learn how to work with my internal team. I don't know them and we change projects so consistently, but we put so much faith in each other to get the work done that that has actually been more challenging than developing the relationship with the client from my perspective.

Laurie McGraw:

Any tips on that? Have you found some things to work well for you in terms of establishing those important colleague relationships?

Kelsey Prestesater:

For me, I like to know a little bit about who people are and so trying to get on calls a couple of minutes early to see if I can catch someone and learn about what they've done with their weekend or what they're planning to do or even just where they live. Trying to spend those extra couple minutes getting on early, staying on calls a little bit later or getting over the personal nerves of just IMing someone and sending them a message and saying, "Hey, how's it going?" Knowing I have no work conversation with them but just checking in with them to remind them that I'm on their team.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, Kelsey, what I like what you're saying and what I like about what you're saying is it's consistent in terms of your career progression. You are thoughtful about things that you want to work on or things that are important to you as a young professional, and you're taking real actions to make those things happen. So that just sounds terrific. As you're telling your story, you're actually giving advice to many people. So thank you for that. But advice that you've been given that's helped you over the course of your career, what was the best advice you ever received? Who gave it to you and how did you apply it?

Kelsey Prestesater:

I think some of the best advice I've been given is just believe that you can. I personally am very good at self-doubt and over analyzing things and feel like I need to check every box before I move to a new role. And so my mom has pretty consistently told me believe that you can because you can. My fiance tells me the same thing and so it's coming from a lot of different places, but just for me, self-doubt is a big challenge. And I can't tell where it comes from, but listening to those people who say, "You can do it, believe you can do it." Or, "What's the worst that happens if you fail?" That's really been the consistent message that I need and that has been really good advice for me.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, self-doubt is one of those things that many people struggle with. So you're certainly not alone in that. Have you experienced over the course of your career any mistakes that you've made that you spend a lot of time dwelling on? And if so, what did you learn from that?

Kelsey Prestesater:

I have mistakes that I dwell on because I tend to be a perfectionist that are really minor and silly and no one else in the world probably remembers. But I think one of the mistakes I made is I got an opportunity and I took it knowing that I was not as qualified as they wanted me to be and then later down the road that was used a little bit against me in some instances and I believed that I was less than qualified and listened to them. And so I wish I'd fought for myself a little bit more in that situation of saying, "I was not as qualified as you wanted six months ago, but I've grown a lot in those six months and I need you to see me in that same way."

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that is something that happens to so many people. And particularly for women, that checking every box is something that many people feel that they need to do. And quite frankly, there is a difference for women and men in terms of how they feel about it. So the fact that you dwell on that but then recognize that you got the experience that really was needed is also I think a lesson in and of itself. On the opposite side of that Kelsey, what are some of the proudest things that you've done in your career so far?

Kelsey Prestesater:

So when I was in product management, I got to represent the department in the response to Hurricane Harvey and Maria which hit back to back and really just wreaked havoc. And people needed food and people needed water and Grainger had a great relationship with the Red Cross and so we got some great insights, but then I was able to source a couple million meals for people before any other organization was. So I beat FEMA, which was exciting for me. But it was a lot of work and I worked with some really great people, but it just felt so fulfilling to be able to get people basic needs, from food and water to air mattresses to sleep in convention centers and that response moment was really fulfilling for me.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that is a great story and you should be very proud of that. That is just an excellent, excellent on both opportunity that you rose to the challenge and obviously had a lot of impact in a time of need. Kelsey, this has been a terrific conversation and as I do Inspiring Women, I like to speak to both young professionals like yourself as well as women who are at the pinnacle of their careers. So as I speak to other women, what are the types of things or advice that you might want to hear that I can ask other guests who are at the top of their careers that you might want to hear?

Kelsey Prestesater:

I think one of the things that I've struggled a lot with is when you're in a new situation, whether it's a new organization or a new division within an organization, whatever that move is, how do you cultivate the relationships or identify who can I look to as a mentor or who can I look to above for help as I'm trying to navigate my career in a new place?

Laurie McGraw:

Well, that is a great question and you're going to hear from lots of women because mentorship and who you choose to be your mentor or ask and how you ask, which is oftentimes different than the types of people that might be supporting you as you try to find that next career progression move is something that we talk about a lot. But Kelsey, I can tell you already that you have already, it seems to me, had a lot of success in these early stages of your career. I really appreciate you taking the time today to tell us your story. Thank you so much for being on Inspiring Women. If women want to follow you, where can they find you?

Kelsey Prestesater:

I am on LinkedIn and Instagram.

Laurie McGraw:

Fantastic. This has been an episode of Inspiring Women with Kelsey Prestesater. And thank you so very much.

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.