

Empower to In Power #2: The Power of Authenticity
and Strong Values with Cerec Eberly



Full Episode Transcript

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Empower to In Power, a podcast mini-series highlighting the trailblazing journeys of women who boldly carved a path to leadership.

"I have generally grown up in the south and never wanted to be that small-town girl."

People who empowered them along the way.

"What differentiates an extraordinary leader from other people is their degree of emotional resilience."

And how they continue to empower forward for the women to come.
"The tools that I have learned in my life, they kind of reside in a big toolbox that I carry around with me."

Thank you for joining us.

Vicki Shackley: Welcome SignatureFD's In Power to Empower podcast, where we explore the journeys as some of the most successful women in their industry. Today, we're so fortunate to have Ceree Eberly with us. Ceree spent nearly 30 years at Coca-Cola, where she last served for eight years as the Chief People Officer, where she was responsible for leading the Coca-Cola company's culture, talent development, and succession. She finally retired in 2018 and now serves on the board of Qualfon Corporation and is the Board Chair of Gartner, a leading resource for HR leaders across the globe. Also joining us today is Dan Dubay who's worked with Ceree for over a decade. So welcome to you both. And thank you so much for sharing your time this afternoon, Ceree.

Ceree Eberly: Yeah, thank you. It's great to be here.

Vicki Shackley: And thank you, Dan.

Empower to In Power #2: The Power of Authenticity and Strong Values with Ceree Eberly

Dan Dubay: Likewise.

Vicki Shackley: Ceree, tell us a little bit about your journey into the executive leadership roles that you've played what was important getting you there and who was important.

Ceree Eberly: Yeah, well, a little known fact and hi everyone, hopefully this won't be boring. I'll share some factoids that might amuse you, but I grew up in Tennessee, one of a number of kids. There were seven of us total between step kids and real kids. So the natural ones. And I actually went to go to medical school. So went off to college and thought I was going to medical school and went all the way up to applying. And at the same time, I had been very active on campus. I was involved in a lot of organizations and I was head of my sorority at the time. So I was not accepted into the medical school I wanted to go to as a first round draft pick. So they asked me to take a step back and take a year out. And so I took an assignment being a chapter consultant, which means you traveled out of a suitcase and you went from college to college, working with alumni and college women and I did a lot of recruitment.

Ceree Eberly: And I found in that year that I loved it. And I discovered after a year that I really didn't want to be cutting on people and be a doctor. My family was surreal because I thought I would make a terrible brain surgeon. So I kind of ditched the idea of going to medical school and got into HR through recruitment. And that's ultimately how I got to Coca Cola. I was hired as a corporate recruiter way back the day. So that's kind of how I entered the human resources function was kind of by default, not by design. And then I always was really wanting to be a global citizen, even as a little girl. And you would find that

Empower to In Power #2: The Power of Authenticity and Strong Values with Ceree Eberly

probably odd grown up in the middle of nowhere, Tennessee, but I studied French in high school and got a minor in college.

Ceree Eberly: And I was just thrilled with the opportunity of travel. So I traveled in high school overseas in Europe and continued through college and then after college. And so kind of living my dream and seeing the world and speaking different languages was always an appeal to me. And I always had a goal to live overseas and I had that dream come true working for Coca Cola. So I was able to progress. There were a number of positions. I moved to Latin America at one point in time in my career. And then I went to Europe at one point in time before I assumed my last role, which was the head of the people function for the company. So a lot of the moves were just very natural progression moves in a career in the function. And I was afforded the great opportunity to work with lots of great leaders and mentors and all these years later here I am.

Dan Dubay: Ceree, one of the thing that amazes me about your journey is you did it as a single mother, since your son Tyler was a baby. Can you kind of share just some of the challenges of being a single mom and navigating the corporate world at the same time, raising a just great young man that I know.

Ceree Eberly: Yeah, yeah. His name is Tyler who lives in the west coast. And Dan's had the opportunity to work with Tyler actually to hone his financial skills. It was not easy. I was one of the first women way back in the day who took an international assignment as a single mom. So at the time I had gone through a divorce. I had a three and a half year old, a one-way plane ticket to Costa Rica because I was

Empower to In Power #2: The Power of Authenticity and Strong Values with Ceree Eberly

going to be working in central America in the Caribbean region. And I had a hotel room. I had a new job. I had an office. I had never learned a word of Spanish, though I knew French, so I had to learn the language, which took some time, but it wasn't difficult. It just was an effort of time. And so I had to go into a new country, new role that I'd never done within the company before. New boss and didn't know anyone there, I didn't speak the language.

Ceree Eberly: Didn't have a nanny. Had to leave him the first week that we were in the country together. I was going to Honduras and I had to leave him with the school the first day that he joined and with a hotel and someone from the hotel, but ended up being his nanny. She helped me out that evening and I was gone maybe three days. So you can only imagine what it would feel like to have to leave a little kid in a middle of a foreign country where you're traveling 70% and you're gone all the time. It was kind of a rude awakening to being a single parent. It's hard enough when you do it in your own country, but it's extra challenging when you do it in a foreign country where you don't know the people, you don't know the language, you don't know the customs, you're gone.

Ceree Eberly: So it took a huge leap of faith. And even when I moved to England, it was still harder in the sense that I can still remember the day. And Dan, you might remember this. Tyler was playing rugby at the time. And he was probably about 13, maybe 13, 14. And again, I was gone somewhere in Europe and the doctor calls me and he says, Dr. Luxton here, sorry, I know you're out of the country per usual. And that was his normal kind of barb at me for not being there. And he said Tyler's okay, but he was on the rugby field and was on the bottom of the

Empower to In Power #2: The Power of Authenticity and Strong Values with Ceree Eberly

scrum. And he's got a punctured lung or two, but he's okay. He's going to make it all right. And he had broken ribs and he had a lung issue, but I was able to get in the next morning and get it all taken care of.

Ceree Eberly: But again, you're out of the country. You're not there. So it made life challenging to balance being a mom of, well, I was a mom and a dad, but also to be a good employee to be on top of my work, to be in all these countries. And just to kind of balance everything. I was a little nuts some of the time, it was not fun. It's easy when you're in one country in your home every night, but when you're traveling and you're speaking different languages, or you got to go through different cultures and customs and going in and out of all these countries you get stuck sometimes because of weather, you get stuck sometimes for a number of reasons and it just made it logistically harsh sometimes to be a parent. And be available.

Dan Dubay: Wow.

Vicki Shackley: That's tough. Tell us a little bit about your experience internationally and how were women treated and how was the whole diversity inclusion thing addressed differently in other countries versus here in the United States?

Ceree Eberly: People have asked me this question and I found it more fascinating to be an American living outside of the US. It was one thing to be a woman and in Latin America, I really acclimated quite well. And you just had to really focus on when people wanted to meet with you. They first wanted to talk about family and their personal lives first, and then they would get to business. And if you get to a place like Europe, it's completely the opposite. They want to get to business and get that done. And then if there's

Empower to In Power #2: The Power of Authenticity and Strong Values with Ceree Eberly

time, they'll talk about personal life and interests. So you had to really look at the culture within how you operated. And so I learned to adjust my style, according to the culture of where I was. I found that being authentic and being a human being kind of just helped you survive and thrive. And it wasn't as much around, I'm a woman, so you're going to treat me differently.

Ceree Eberly: It was more fascinating people associated me with being American and in Latin America, I found it to be very appealing for people. I was welcomed a lot in Latin America, because I was an American and people really embraced women and they actually embraced me being a single mom. So lots of people took me under their wing, inviting me into their homes, were very warm and gracious to me. And the friends that I developed in Latin America are still with me today and they know who they are and they're my besties. And when I moved to Europe, it was interesting because politically, there's some love/hate going on in different parts of Europe and in the UK with Americans. And I was between two different presidents. It was was Bush and Obama and people would treat you differently because you were American.

Ceree Eberly: And so I didn't really relate to having to be a female, in a certain geography. It was more about my nationality and how people perceived me. And so I think I would address the question by saying, if you are true to who you are as a person, authentic, and you treat people with dignity and respect, it doesn't matter what your gender is or your nationality. That just goes a whole long way of being accepted in a culture when you were so incredibly respectful of the similarities and differences about what you bring to the table. But you seek to understand the

Empower to In Power #2: The Power of Authenticity and Strong Values with Ceree Eberly

culture and the people who live there and not to make it wrong because you're different or they're different, but to be accepting. And I think that's really where I learned about what inclusion means.

Dan Dubay: So when you talk about being authentic, I know one of the things that is so important to you is your values. And can you kind of share a little bit about how those values played a part in that authenticity and in your journey in the corporate world?

Ceree Eberly: Yeah. I was raised in a small town, and even when I go back home and go to church, you'd would laugh at this. But if I didn't say hello to someone in the local Walmart, they would still calling my mama. And that has happened. And one was because my mom asked me to pick up something early in the morning and I'd gone for a run and I didn't have makeup on. So I looked pretty bad. And so I was trying to avoid seeing one of the neighbors and they had called my momma by the time I'd gotten home to say that I had not stopped to have a conversation. So where I came from, your word was your honor. And everything about you was about your values and your integrity. And my dad always said to me, at the end of the day, all you really have is your integrity and your character, and don't let anyone ever take that away from you.

Ceree Eberly: So it's always been a north star and kind of the guidepost, if you will, in my moves and the way that I treated people in the workplace, but also kind of what was acceptable and not acceptable. And I was just coaching a senior leader at another company and he asked me the question, well, how do you know when it's time to go and when you can't live with something that's not within your values or

Empower to In Power #2: The Power of Authenticity and Strong Values with Ceree Eberly

your integrity. And I said, it's really easy. You kind of have your compass and you know what's right and you know that that's right. And if it's wrong, you know when it's wrong. And if that line gets crossed and you can't agree to that, then it's real simple. You know when you have to go and when it happens, you just know it. And so I've always had the great fortune of having parents that taught me great values, but also said it's about living them. And no one can ever take that away from me when you must protect that at all costs. Does that make sense?

Dan Dubay: Yeah, absolutely.

Vicki Shackley: Ceree, it's been an interesting year. How are the companies and the boards you're sitting on, how are companies responding and what are they doing about diversity and inclusion and what positive changes are you seeing?

Ceree Eberly: Yeah, the more fascinating thing than my experience at Coke though, is great experience, I've been chairing a board of heads of HR from all over the world, some of the world's largest companies for the last three years, going on four now. And what's fascinating is that this whole conversation of diversity, inclusion has come to the forefront, giving a lot of the racial tension and the things that have happened in the US over the past year. And I think one of the things that the companies that who are on this board are learning is that number one, you have to start the dialogue. You have to actually be willing to engage with employees and really be listening. And if you ask for feedback that also implies that you have to do something about it. So what we've been talking about is

Empower to In Power #2: The Power of Authenticity and Strong Values with Ceree Eberly

the subject is probably not been discussed in great detail in many companies.

Ceree Eberly: And there's been training programs and things aimed at addressing the issues of diversity, inclusion. But I wouldn't say that it's honest talk, I think it's been a lot of scripted, rehearsed, formal conversation about inclusion, but not the kind of forums where people feel that they're safe, feel that they can have a contrarian point of view, feel like they can pour their hearts out and not be reprimanded for it. And so I think establishing a safe place for people to talk, whether it be through Zoom or the actual workplace, because not many people are actually back in offices just yet. I think that's been probably the biggest a-ha is that you have to start somewhere. And many leaders and managers have been ill-equipped to handle honest, raw feelings and conversations because either they didn't have the opportunity to do that themselves or they're not trained.

Ceree Eberly: The other thing that we're learning about diversity and inclusion is okay, if you say you want to be diverse and inclusive, they're two different things, but your audio and your video have to match. You can't come out as a CEO and say, oh, well, we really support diversity, inclusion, and then all your senior leaders are of one race and gender. So the audio and the video has to match. And so it's one thing to put all these goals out there and to say, yes, our board is going to have women on it or we're going to have people of color. It's the actions that matter. So what we have been talking about is it's not enough just to listen. I think that's a great first step, but your audio and your video of what you say you're going to do and what you actually do have to match.

Empower to In Power #2: The Power of Authenticity and Strong Values with Ceree Eberly

Ceree Eberly: And if they don't match, then you need to stop saying that. Or if people are giving me feedback and they don't act on it, then don't ask for the feedback. So I think there's going to be proof in the pudding in the years to come to say, okay, if this is a priority for us, and we want to level the playing field and make the workplace a fair and equitable place for everyone to be their best self, then how do we do that? It's taking the bold actions. It is mirroring your audio and video and making sure that you act on the things that you say you're going to do. And I think we're going to be watching that for the months to come to see if that's going to come to fruition. Now it's not easy that I do think that those are two areas that we've seen the dialogue starting, and then starting to say, well, this is not right. And we are going to correct this. However, the proof is the audio and the video must match in your words and your actions.

Dan Dubay: So when you look at syncing that audio and visual, is it starting with the open candid conversations? What are the tweaks or tools that you see that will have the biggest impact to be able to get those to sync together?

Ceree Eberly: Yeah, I think that there's quite a bit of training and help that's being offered in settings and workplaces to help managers have those conversations. They also have to provide a safe haven to allow people to feel comfortable speaking up. So part of that is setting the context and setting the environment such that people do feel safe to speak up and have a different point of view that might be different than their colleague. And that's okay. And I think the proof of adding senior leaders to roles, appointments of CEOs, appointments of women and diverse candidates to boards, all those are signs and signals that things are

Empower to In Power #2: The Power of Authenticity and Strong Values with Ceree Eberly

changing. And you've seen some wonderful examples lately of women CEOs and some of the biggest media companies. You're starting to see women come in onto boards at a faster pace and rate. So I think there are some good things that are happening.

Ceree Eberly: The question is, is it fast enough and do actually people see that change? Because I do think it's one thing to say that you have a diverse workforce or a diverse board. It's another thing to be inclusive because that speaks to culture and that speaks to behavior. And so you can have a very diverse workforce, but if they don't feel engaged, invited to speak up, to share their point of view, to come and bring best self into the workplace, if it's different than the norm or someone has a different point of view, if we're not inclusive and accepting of everybody in that the fact that the differences in all of us bring out the best in all of us, if you're not leveraging that, then you don't necessarily have an inclusive workforce. So I think those are two different topics. And I think getting to inclusiveness is going to take more time. The diversity question, I think we're making progress and you'll continue to see that. But it's a bigger question for me about how do actually in the culture people thrive and it takes all of us to make the best of us.

Dan Dubay: Mm-hmm (affirmative) That's good. Well, I kind of made this joke that you couldn't stop smiling after you were out of the corporate world on a full-time basis. As you know, we look at wealth beyond the numbers, it's your time, money, relationships, influence. And we work that to align that with what is important to you in our clients. And so when we look at the intersection of your wealth, the accumulation of more and your worth being the

Empower to In Power #2: The Power of Authenticity and Strong Values with Ceree Eberly

achievement of better, we call it your net worthwhile. Can you share some of those things after you moved out of this full time? We can tell you're still having a huge impact on the different organizations and leaders, corporate leaders, but share a little bit about some of the things that you're passionate about and how you're living out your net worthwhile today.

Ceree Eberly: Yeah. And well, I have to tell you, if you knew me from before and you're listening to this, some of the crazy things I did right after I left, I went and swam in a shark cage with great white sharks off the coast of Mexico, which was hilarious. Hilariously frightful. But I did it. I got into a wet suit and was in a cage where white sharks were coming in like nose to nose with you. I went off on after that to India for a month. And it was fantastic. I went to Africa a year before last on one of those safaris where you're in the tents. You hear about these, but you never really hear the underside of the story where were the lions are walking through at night, walking around the camp. And if you really wanted to go to the bathroom you would become fish food or lion food.

Ceree Eberly: So, it was like the real, real safari. And I just had a blast. So I took some time to actually just clear my head, go do some things on my bucket list that I really wanted to do. And then I got down to brass tacks. So I really have a belief that all of us have the opportunity to pay it forward. And on one of the boards that I'm on, it's out of Mexico, they do business process outsourcing and they're out of Monterey. So they do call centers, print services globally. And they've got a who's who of clients around the world, but they also have a philanthropic arm in a place called... it's their first philanthropic initiative. And in this is about

Empower to In Power #2: The Power of Authenticity and Strong Values with Ceree Eberly

four hours outside of Monterey, up in the mountains, in the desert of it's either northeast or northwest Mexico.

Ceree Eberly: And up until now, I would spend, with the pandemic, I would spend a couple of months during the year going and working with them to help them set up their volunteer programs. So they had four pillars where they help this community of about 10 to 12,000 people. It's childcare, healthcare, education and jobs. And it was all in Spanish. And it was in the middle of nowhere. And many of the people that we were helping had no running water, no electricity. I washed all my clothes in the sink. This hotel had no washing facilities. And so it was basically going out in the country and working with people who had no access to have babies vaccinated.

Ceree Eberly: So I was taking babies to the doctor to get them vaccinated. I was working with new moms to help them and educate them on lactation and then what services they could get through the government in terms of medical assistance. Actually registering people to get a social security and national identity card was a big deal there. Did a lot of that. Helped teach English classes to children, to adults even helps a group of women put together a business plan. They were making soap and candles and help them put together their first business plan and their marketing campaign. And they were really sharp and top-notch, and what was hilarious was I would work with them and I'd be there for weeks at a time. And I was relegated to doing the packaging because I wasn't good enough to make the soap. So I actually learned, they were toe-to-toe with me in terms of, they were confident, they were bright.

Empower to In Power #2: The Power of Authenticity and Strong Values with Ceree Eberly

Ceree Eberly: They didn't have college degrees, but it didn't matter. And they were representing their community and they needed to let me in to their initiative. I was able to give them my knowledge, but what they gave me was so much more. So I was known in the community as the American because I would take pictures at sun up and light in the day when the light is just beautiful there. And so I took so many wonderful pictures of the people with their permission. I became part of the community and I planned to go back, hopefully later this year, once the pandemic has dialed down, but that's one example of giving back. And I do believe we contribute with our time. We contribute with our dollar. So I have been a financial sponsor and I think whatever you can give, it doesn't matter how much money you have, but just to give a self through your money, your time.

Ceree Eberly: But what I learned to do was give from my heart, it's just a completely different experience. I hope that makes sense, but they touched my life in a way. Yeah. And I've been doing that for years in terms of homeless shelters. And I worked during the pandemic at a food pantry, stocking shelves and giving food and delivering food to shut ins. And so my whole life I've always been taught to give back, and it's not just giving money, it's giving of your heart. And I think that is really the call that I think we all have is to help those who haven't had it as easy as some of us. And that just sometimes need a helping hand. And sometimes it's a smile, perhaps it might be money, perhaps it might be food, whatever it is. I think we have an opportunity to be part of a loving world and community. And I want to be a part of being that solution.

Empower to In Power #2: The Power of Authenticity and Strong Values with Ceree Eberly

Vicki Shackley: Well, thank you. You're so such an inspiration and you've had such an amazing journey and we just thank you so much for sharing your time today and your thoughts. And I think this'll be a really powerful story for people to hear.

Ceree Eberly: It's been a great pleasure. I'm work in progress. And so I'm just delighted to be with you guys. And it's been a lot of fun. The journey has been incredible.

Vicki Shackley: Well, be careful with the sharks, because we need you.

Ceree Eberly: Yeah. I'm going to go back. I'm going to go back and do it again now. Not this year, but I loved it. I had a blast.

Vicki Shackley: Okay. Well be careful.

Ceree Eberly: All right. Thanks so much.

Vicki Shackley: To our listeners and we'll hope to join us for the next episode of In Power to Empower. Thank you guys.

Ceree Eberly: Thank you.

Dan Dubay: Bye.

Thank you again for joining us on Empower to In Power, a podcast mini series by SignatureFD. Be sure to join us every month to hear more stories of strong women and their journeys to leadership.