



Hear Her Story: Lesa Nichols, Owner, Lesa Nichols Consulting

At Women in Manufacturing, we are committed to supporting women in the manufacturing sector. We firmly believe that mentorship and community-building will help attract and retain women in manufacturing. As part of our mission, we feature the stories of women we admire who are currently working in manufacturing here on our blog. The following is the latest installment of our "Hear Her Story" series.

Lesla Nichols grew up the only daughter in a family of boys. Her stepfather worked in manufacturing management and she remembers how he used his skills to tackle household projects. "We never called for a repairman," she says fondly. "He would just say, 'let's get this out to the garage and fix it.'" As a young girl, she admired her stepfather's ability to take something apart, analyze the pieces, and put back together an even better product. She didn't know it then, but she would acquire those same skills in her own manufacturing career.

Manufacturing is a social science

Lesla calls her landing in manufacturing something of "serendipity." While pursuing her undergraduate degree at The University of Louisville, a professor approached Lesla with a special opportunity - a position in the Washington, DC office of a Kentucky senator. Her time in the nation's capital stimulated her natural curiosity and Lesla knew she wanted a career that would foster her love of learning.

After completing her studies in communication in 1986, Lesla joined a Kentucky public relations firm and began working with the firm's client, Toyota. Toyota was new to Kentucky in those days and initially had only a small office there. While working with the PR firm, Lesla was assigned the lead role for Toyota's external relations and she quickly amassed responsibilities from writing a community newsletter to penning speeches for Fujio Cho, who was then president of Toyota Motor Manufacturing U.S.A., Inc. It was in this role that Lesla first understood manufacturing to be more than a technical career. Mr. Cho and her other mentors at Toyota emphasized the humanistic element to manufacturing and encouraged Lesla's interest in group dynamics and best practices for communication strategies.



Lesla Nichols

Eventually Lesla left the PR firm and joined Toyota full-time, where she rose to a position in top-level management. Over the course of 16 years, she became a master of the Toyota Production System (TPS), a method of pulling together all elements needed for manufacturing: people, equipment, materials and information into a production system that visualizes problems as they happen. Following this model, she led the introduction of TPS, with high level problem solving teams at numerous successful facility start-ups and tune-ups across the United States.

A Surreal Experience

After a five-year stint with the Greater Boston Manufacturing Partnership, Lesa formed her own group which she calls, Lesa Nichols Consulting.

She ruefully reports that she was often one of only a few women at the management table during her time at Toyota and that, as she has formed her own business, she's often surrounded by male counterparts.

It was that reality that first attracted Lesa to Women in Manufacturing™. "I was actually first turned on to WiM by one of my clients several years ago," she confides. "And I was not sure whether I wanted to get involved since the organization was just beginning."



Lesa works with LEGO Serious Play

But when Lesa attended her first WiM SUMMIT in Detroit in 2013, she was glad that she did. "I was really blown away by the caliber of people," she says. "I was so used to being alone as a woman – It was overwhelming and a surreal experience."

It was also at last year's WIM SUMMIT that Lesa had what she calls "an epiphany." During a presentation by Robert Rasmussen on the "Lego Serious Play" methodology, Lesa felt years of manufacturing sector leadership coming together with her communication background.

"This," she thought, "is how to break down barriers and connect people quickly." She was so inspired that she traveled to London for a

four-day training to become a facilitator for the program which she will now incorporate into her work with clients.

Lesa describes her work today as collaborative, examining a company and advising on top-level management and organizational design. "It's like tearing something apart to look at it," she says, "And then working with company leaders to put it back together even better than it was before." And that's something Lesa knows well.