

[BUSINESS]
By Patti Martin Bartsche



The Shadow of a Leader

A Conversation
with Lee Senderov,
Foundation Partners
Group Chief Marketing
& Digital Officer

It's no secret that Lee Senderov, chief marketing & digital officer for Foundation Partners Group, has been energized by the study of leadership. She is quick to acknowledge the individuals who have molded her into the leader she is today.

That list includes her father, who advised Senderov to “Work for someone whose job you aspire to have one day” as well as speaker and bestselling author Simon Sinek, who said, “Leadership is

not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge.”

While all leaders wear multiple hats, Senderov says that professional women often wear more than their male counterparts. She points to a Harvard Business Review article written at the start of the pandemic which noted, “Despite the fact that women outnumber men in the paid workforce, women still do more of the domestic work and child-care – almost twice as much as their male partners.”

As more women enter the funeral profession, the key is to find ways to nurture and support their leadership journey ... and that just might mean shifting mindsets from “this is the way it’s always been done” to “this is what we need now.”

We recently talked with Senderov about mentorship, leadership, and strategies for achieving success in the workplace.

WHAT WAS IT ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND THAT HAD YOU FINDING YOUR WAY TO FOUNDATION PARTNERS GROUP IN 2020?

Actually, Foundation Partners found me. I was president of the digital division of Richland Group, a Berkshire Hathaway company specializing in metals and jewelry manufacturing, when I received a call from a recruiter about joining Foundation Partners Group. I did not know anything about the funeral profession or death-care space but, as I started to learn more, I was intrigued. Mostly, I was drawn to the mission-driven work our funeral directors, morticians, crematory operators, and others perform for families every day. Because of my previous work in product categories that were “late digital adopters,” like auto repair and fine jewelry, I believed I could bring the value of my perspective and experience to funeral service.

YOU WERE COMING INTO



LEE SENDEROV

FOUNDATION PARTNERS IN A NEWLY CREATED POSITION IN THE EARLY STAGES OF THE PANDEMIC ... WHAT CONCERNS, IF ANY, DID YOU HAVE?

Even though this was not my first time starting a new position in a new industry, what was very different was that, because of the pandemic, I wasn’t able to physically meet anyone. In the past, when starting a new role, I would immerse myself in the business by visiting locations and meeting with teams to learn from them and about their futures over a meal, a walk, etc. Due to the pandemic, this was not possible. Despite this limitation, I was able to connect meaningfully with team members across the organization through phone and video calls. I found that I had to be even more proactive than under normal circumstances about reaching out to folks. For example, I would (and still do) schedule “coffee Zooms” for no reason other than to catch up with individuals in an effort to continue building relationships.

FUNERAL SERVICE HAS LONG BEEN VIEWED AS A MALE-DOMINATED PROFESSION. IN WHAT WAYS IS THAT CHANGING?

We are seeing more and more female funeral directors entering the profession, which is a wonderful shift.

Foundation Partners Group has a history of supporting and nurturing women leaders in our funeral homes and in regional and national management positions. Since the company was founded in 2010, the number of women leaders and team members has grown from 33% to 53% of our workforce of nearly 2,000 employees. From the C-suite to field offices, women bring their unique talents to comfort and support the more than 150,000 families Foundation Partners serves each year across 270 locations in 21 states.

WHAT ARE SOME STRATEGIES THAT CAN HELP WOMEN ACHIEVE THE SUCCESS THEY WANT IN THEIR WORKPLACES, ESPECIALLY IN MALE-DOMINATED ROLES LIKE FUNERAL SERVICE?

I recommend four strategies that will help women achieve the success they deserve in their careers:

First, **drop the imposter syndrome** – the psychological phenomenon leads people to doubt their skills, talents or accomplishments. Recognizing that many women suffer from this can help. Second, **don’t hesitate to ask** – for help, for advancement, for knowledge; you need to advocate for you! Third, **think strategically** about your career. Every job I have ever taken has been with the goal of learning something new, advancing my skillset, and building my personal “tool belt.” A career is a journey that needs to be actively managed. Finally, **network more**. Keep in touch with folks throughout your life and get creative about how to reach out to new people.

WHAT ADVICE DID YOUR MENTORS GIVE YOU THROUGHOUT YOUR CAREER?

I have received many pieces of advice. Here are some that always resonated with me:

From my dad: *Work for someone whose job you aspire to have one day.* Work for someone you admire, someone who can teach you and can help you achieve the goals they have achieved.

From my mentor: *Baseball players don't walk up to bat expecting to strike out, but they do 20% of the time. Sometimes you'll strike out; get back up to bat.*"
Never give up.

From Warren Buffet: *You can't produce a baby in one month by getting nine women pregnant. No matter how great the talent or efforts, some things just take time.* Always remember that patience is critical.

WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT QUALITIES FOR LEADING DURING UNCERTAIN OR CHALLENGING TIMES? WHAT IMPORTANT LEADERSHIP STYLES DO WOMEN BRING?

When leading through difficult times, it is important for a leader to recognize that often team members are experiencing challenges beyond the norm at home, not just at work. For example, during the pandemic, many

working professionals had to find a new balance between their time at home and their time at work because children were not in school. This reality added another layer of stress to a workforce that was already stretched thin. Because women tend to wear more hats outside the workplace, they bring a critical level of empathy to their teams, which is especially powerful during challenging times.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE ASPIRING LEADERS?

Be willing to change your mind. Often, new leaders think they need to have all the answers and must always be right. Unfortunately, this is impossible. Even if your mind is set on something, always be open to listening to a team member who is offering a counterargument. I am often graciously told that one of my superpowers is that with the right data and reasoning I can change my stance on a given situation. This attitude has helped me gain respect, especially with new teams.

IN YOUR EXPERIENCE, WHAT SKILLS DOES A LEADER NEED TO DRIVE SUSTAINABLE CHANGE AND GROWTH?

I love this quote from Simon Sinek's "Together is Better": *Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is about taking care of those in your charge.* In my opinion, thinking of leadership as a way to take care of people rather than a way to instruct people is really core to driving sustainable change and growth. Additionally, I believe there are five core values that make a strong leader:

1. **Empathy** – Care and concern for your coworkers.
2. **Self-awareness** – Knowing when you don't know something and being willing to ask. Recognize your mistakes and apologize for them.
3. **Championship** – Accolades are free and always appreciated, especially during hard times.
4. **Transparency** – Be very clear about expectations. The simpler, the better; there should be no need to guess.
5. **Ongoing** – I think of leadership like yoga; it's a lifelong practice that requires continuous improvement. •










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