

## Something Extra EP 019: Sharon Fiehler

**Lisa Nichols:** Today I'm excited to have Sharon Fiehler on the show. Sharon is a former Chief Administrative Officer for Peabody Energy, the former Federal Reserve Board Chair of the Eighth District and now the founder of ABC to CEO.

Sharon thank you so much for being with us today, all the way from... Arizona?

**Sharon Fiehler:** Arizona. And I must say we had a little warmer weather out in Arizona than you have here right now, but it's nice to be back to St. Louis.

Nichols: Yes, well you've spent many years here, didn't you?

**Fiehler:** Many years. Actually, I had my entire career in St. Louis. It wasn't all, it was not until I retired, which I now call my post-career life that I left the Midwest and wanted to explore what it's like to live in a different place of this country. So, we moved to Scottsdale, and in the summer months we go to Lake Tahoe, so a nice life but I get back to St. Louis quite often.

**Nichols:** Right, well, we miss you. I miss seeing you around at different events...

**Fiehler:** Thank you.

**Nichols:** So, let's just jump right in. I want to talk a little bit about how you grew up, can you tell us about your upbringing

**Fiehler:** Sure. Yeah. Not that it's that interesting. But I grew up in Southern Illinois in a little community called Germantown Illinois, very small population - 1000.

**Nichols:** Oh, my.

**Fiehler:** Yeah. Very small. A number of the communities would come together to form a little high school and I had 89 in my graduating class.

It was a good place to grow up. High work ethics, it was primarily blue-collar community but very high work ethics. You drive the streets of the community and everything is clean and perfect, and people cut their lawns and everything looks nice.

**Nichols:** And you knew everybody?

**Fiehler:** Of course. Not only in Germantown, but also the surrounding towns. It was good, but I knew at a pretty young age, I actually remember I was 12 years old, and I said, "You know, I want to do something, to experience the world a little bit more." So, going off to college, quite honestly, was pretty unusual for that. I'm talking the early to mid 70s, even in my graduating class of 89, I think five of us went to college.

**Nichols:** Is that right?

**Fiehler:** Yeah, so it was a small group. We had a lot of great activities in the community, but the one thing I will say that I missed quite a bit, didn't know it at the time is, this is before Section 9 or Title 9 I guess it's called. So, there were no activities, no planned activities for girls - sports activities. So, even though the high school had baseball, football, basketball and even some golf in a little cow pasture for the boys, there were no girl activities.

**Nichols:** That's hard to even imagine.

**Fiehler:** Isn't it? Yeah.

**Nichols:** It is.

**Fiehler:** And even our high school, we didn't even have a gymnasium in the whole high school it was a pretty rural country.

That is the only thing about my growing up that I really wish could have been different. Everything else, it was a pretty good life.

**Nichols:** It was a good life. It was a good place to grow up..

**Fiehler:** Yeah. Easy. Safe.

**Nichols:** So, I have to ask you and I don't even know if you've thought through this, but when you were 12, you had this vision of experiencing more. But where did that come from, when you didn't really have that? Did you have cousins or something from other parts of the country?

**Fiehler:** No, no, no. Nothing. I don't know the exact number, but I've probably got about 65 first cousins meaning from my mom or my dad's side. These were very big German Catholic families.

I was the first one to go to college out of the group now I was one of the older ones too. But no, nothing like that. It was just... You know you see a newspaper; you see the news and it's like, there's more out there.

**Nichols:** There's a bigger world out there.

**Fiehler:** There's a bigger world. Yeah, and my parents were not well educated themselves, but they felt that, you know, if I wanted to do it, we're going to go for it.

**Nichols:** That's good. So they supported you?

**Fiehler:** Oh, they supported me all the time. Yeah, but it wasn't like they were encouraging. It was more supporting. And there's a difference.

**Nichols:** There is...

**Fiehler:** Yeah, so it was nice.

**Nichols:** So the trajectory, did you set the trajectory for the rest of your cousins? You were one of the older cousins, so you went... Did you see other cousins follow your footsteps?

**Fiehler:** Sure. Because by then, I graduated from college in the mid-70s, so it was like 77 when I graduated and more of the girl cousins were going to college and some of the male cousins. I can't say I was a trend setter or anything. I think it was just the times. So yeah, there were a lot - many who've gone since I've been there.

**Nichols:** So talk to me a little bit when you entered college, did you know kind of what you wanted to do? Tell us a little bit about that path.

**Fiehler:** No, no. I didn't know at all, I actually went into social work, and so, my undergraduate degree was actually called Human Relations, I believe, but it was a lot of social work kinds of things. My practicum at the end of the program was to work in a setting, so I worked in a hospital setting as a social worker, and then was hired to stay there, because they had somebody out on leave for a while.

So for one year after school, and I was a social worker, along with being an admin assistant on the side because I needed more money than the social work could give me. So I did that for a year.

**Nichols:** So you worked two jobs?

**Fiehler:** Two jobs. But it wasn't maybe 50 hours a week, it wasn't like so overwhelming but I finished college in three years because I knew I really wanted to get out and make money, so making money was always something that was important.

**Nichols:** It was a motivator for you.

**Fiehler:** Yeah because there wasn't a whole lot, but it was fine. I never felt like I was lacking, but then after I worked for social worker for a year, and the person came back, I needed to really find a job and I applied and was hired by Ford Motor Company, the assembly plant into their, what was then called "personnel group," and I was hired into the Ford College Graduate Program, it was called. So, because I'd only been out of school for a year, I still qualified, went there and got my first introduction to human resources, and I did that for two years.

Got laid-off. That's when the...

**Nichols:** Is that right?

**Fiehler:** Yeah, maybe many of the car manufacturers around 1980, were having a lot of competition for the first time from foreign cars and so this plant went from two shifts to one and if you weren't, at least probably 20 years seniority, you were gone.

**Nichols:** So where were you, where were you physically located?

**Fiehler:** St. Louis. Everything was in St. Louis. My entire working career was either in St. Louis or across the river in Illinois.

**Nichols:** So you got laid off. I'd call that a life interruption.

**Fiehler:** It was, but what I decided to do was, I realized by then I wanted more business experience, so I went back to school - night school for an MBA and went to the University of Missouri. Of course, within a year I needed to get a job, and I ended up being hired by Peabody which became Peabody Energy and I was hired there and spent 33 years there after that.

**Nichols:** How did you start... How did you start it?

**Fiehler:** I was a college recruiter. So I started in college recruiting, which would have been in March but by the time we actually got to college recruiting, Peabody was having layoffs and so all of the plans I had for recruiting were kind of put away, on hold, and I didn't even know if I was going to have a job again, but the company was also doing some new things within their employee base, and it was called "salary administration," which is now we really referred to as compensation.

So they gave me the very first job that didn't even exist, so I took the very first role as a manager in that group and I so..

**Nichols:** How old were you Sharon?

**Fiehler:** I would have been 24.

**Nichols:** That's awful young to be a manager, to be put as a manager in that group.

**Fiehler:** It was just a title. It was a one-person group. There was nobody else there.

**Nichols:** Okay. You weren't managing anybody.

**Fiehler:** And I remember I was so naive, I remember I got this job, and I had this office actually, and I had this desk with all these drawers and I made this file and I called it salary administration, and I put it in this drawer 'cause I didn't know what I was doing. It's like of course two years later not only is every drawer in the office filled with subtitles from that, but file cabinets along hallways. And it was just so naive to think that I made one file called salary administration, and I thought that was going to serve a purpose.

**Nichols:** That is so funny. Well, naivete is sometimes a very good gift.

**Fiehler:** Yeah, it was a real training ground.

**Nichols:** I bet.

**Fiehler:** Very quick training and I had great mentors, I worked for a man by the name of Jason and he was an amazing mentor for me—introduced me to lots of ways of doing things, but one of the things he taught me, is if you want be in control, you have to take charge. And one of the things we did was we had these groups that were different coal companies, 'cause we were coal mining, and we would have these organizations. And he would always tell me, "Make sure you chair everything you can, 'cause that's how you take control."

**Nichols:** That is interesting. I've talked to so many people and to put it another way, I had so many people say, "raise your hand." And raise your hand for the stuff that no one else wants.

**Fiehler:** Well, that's a very good point. Yeah, so I did a lot of different HR things over the years, took on benefits, took on employee relations, took on recruiting at some point my opportunities expanded.

**Nichols:** But you learned the business.

**Fiehler:** I learned...

**Nichols:** You learned as you went through.

**Fiehler:** Absolutely.

**Nichols:** And when you retired, you were in the C-suite.

**Fiehler:** I was.

**Nichols:** You were the CEO, had several functions reporting up there.

**Fiehler:** I had about five or different distinct functions: about 250 people, but it was a great, great job, I loved what I did, and only retired because it was time to do something different, not because I was tired of it.

**Nichols:** Right, and I want to get to that, cause you are doing some different things now, some new passions, right?

**Fiehler:** I am.

**Nichols:** I do want to talk about that. I met you years ago, we started on a board together, and I just so admired you, and just your grace and your poise, and the confidence that you brought. But you don't always start there, do you Sharon?

**Fiehler:** Well, those are very kind words. No, there's a lot of learning that goes on with everything. Very, very few of us, I think, are born with all of the attributes it takes to become a leader.

**Nichols:** Absolutely.

**Fiehler:** It takes some hard work. It does take some intuition sometimes but... And then it takes role models for you to watch and observe.

**Nichols:** So important. And you alluded to that you said that you had a lot of mentors and people that built into you.

**Fiehler:** I did, I had my very first boss at Peabody. He was a very good mentor. Another individual who became our CEO at a later point, his name was Irl Engelhardt, he was clearly somebody I learned a lot from and later in my career, my last boss was Greg Boyce and learned a lot from him. So, I had a lot of role models over the years and mentors to some extent, I don't think it was mentoring the way we think of it today. It's not a formal process. At least with Earl and Greg, they were also... I would term "supporters," so they understood what I was doing and quite honestly Chief Administrative Officer, it is kind of the back-office things, but they understood you can't have a business without it.

**Nichols:** It's critical.

**Fiehler:** So, they were great supporters of my teams which also makes a difference.

**Nichols:** Well, let me ask you this, because some of our listening audience could be young women out there or young men and they're sitting there thinking... Wow, I wish I had a mentor, I need a mentor. What would you say to them? How could they go about finding a mentor?

**Fiehler:** Well, I say mentors in different categories. You've got mentors for the business where you're currently working, if you're in a company large enough, you will find individuals who you can learn from about that company. The person may also be a mentor for the particular field you're in, which could be the same person, or might be somebody different. So you kind of got a technical mentor and then you've got a mentor that kind of shows you the way if you're in a larger company and you need to identify who those people are, they quite honestly need to be for the mentor, that's kind of showing you the way, they need to be a little bit of a mover and a shaker, themselves. Because your whole point is to make sure you get recognition at the "table" when individuals are talked about, for promotional opportunities, developmental opportunities, and you need somebody there who's going to know who you are and speak up for you, you have to start with doing a good job.

**Nichols:** Absolutely. It's little by little. Right? Taking the assignments that are given to you, doing those with excellence.

**Fiehler:** Always. If you've got an organization that is well-versed in how to develop people, trust them. Because I remember... Actually, it was Greg Boyce, my last CEO I worked for, he always tells the story, he was an engineer, and one time he was told he was going to be given a new opportunity in government relations, and he was like... What does this have to do with my future? I have no clue, little did he realize many years later being in the industry we were in, which was coal mining, it had a lot of government relation interaction.

**Nichols:** He needed that experience.

**Fiehler:** He needed that experience and he said it was invaluable. But at the time, he almost thought about saying No, I don't think I want to do that. I'd rather stay in engineering, but he didn't. Because he trusted the leadership that they weren't going to take him astray. You don't always understand what a role may do for you until years later, but once you get in it, you do have to kind of make sure you do the best job you can, within that role.

**Nichols:** That is great advice. Well we're going to take a quick break and then we'll be back with Sharon Fiehler.

**Commercial Break:** Let's face it, the future is mobile. There's a good chance that you are listening to this show right now, on your phone. Have you explored how you can move your business mobile too? Our mobile apps team at Technology Partners, makes it their mission to move our clients into the hands of their employees and customers and change their business processes to meet the demands of their users. Let's work together and build a dynamic mobile app for your team. Go to [tpi.co/mobileapps](http://tpi.co/mobileapps) and get the conversation started about how we can help you get your new application off the ground.

**Nichols:** So, Sharon, welcome back.

**Fiehler:** Thank you.

**Nichols:** I want to talk to you a little bit because since I've known you, you have been a person that has just given back, you served on so many boards. I always thought I was busy until I was around you.

**Fiehler:** Well you and I were pretty well-matched there with a lot of boards.

**Nichols:** Right. So, talk to me a little bit about that. Two things: one is, how important do you believe that it is for leaders to give back? Secondly, there may be some people in our listening audience—women and men—that say, "Well I want to serve on a board." How would I go about doing that? So, talk to us a little bit about that.

**Fiehler:** Well, first of all, giving back is crucial. Our country is one where we are a very generous country and giving back comes to many of us just naturally because of where we live. Now I did find St. Louis to be a particularly generous city, not only with giving, but also with people being interested in helping other organizations. We've got a huge United Way effort in the city, have for many, many decades. But for me personally, I found myself often thinking back, I came from pretty humble beginnings. Never really needed those services. I was quite fortunate but recognized that maybe sometimes a lot of people get on the edge of needing it and having services there is critical to getting people back on their feet.

Because I was so fortunate not to have needed it. I also wanted to make sure that those who did need it, it was there for them, it was natural for me and many others to want to make sure that the community has everything it needs to not only help people who need help, but also from the cultural standpoint. To make sure St. Louis is a city that we can feel, we can have outings be it at our zoo, at the Botanical Gardens, our wonderful museums we have and be able to enjoy the life that St. Louis provides for us.

So, all of those things were a reason. I joined boards early, not only to participate but also you find a lot of interesting people when you go on to boards. So, working in a larger corporate environment, maybe not large, but larger with several hundred people, you get a little bit



insulated sometimes with people that you work with, and being on a board gives you an opportunity to meet a lot of interesting people.

**Nichols:** A lot of diversity.

**Fiehler:** Tremendous diversity.

**Nichols:** In different industries?

**Fiehler:** Different industries, different backgrounds, different ages, you see people who've been through their full careers already, and the wisdom they bring to these meetings, you bring people in who are excited and young and is their first time and they bring the energy into it. So, it was an opportunity not only to help to promote St. Louis but also to meet people. And it became networking, and something that became interesting. I mean, you and I are examples. We served on several different boards together.

So, you kind of start to know people outside of your industry, outside of your business, and it becomes networking, and you're amazed at how many times, those interactions become important in your life in ways you never think.

**Nichols:** Absolutely.

**Fiehler:** Here you and I are here today, many years later.

**Nichols:** Still friends and doing things together.

**Fiehler:** Yes. And enjoying kind of hearing what we're all doing, and how we can still help each other. So being on boards, I highly recommend it for anybody. And these are non-for-profit boards, this is giving of your time but quite honestly, almost every board you go on, there's going to be some expectation to help support it financially. You can't be in denial of that. It is, it is a two-piece kind of a unit.

**Nichols:** I say it's your time, your talents, and your money.

**Fiehler:** That's right, but that's okay. These boards can function without that. But some people are in a more of a position to give more time and don't have the means yet, but most of us as we go through our careers, we have hopefully, our financial position changes, and we can participate either in one organization more than maybe we did at the beginning or in multiple organizations that we weren't able to.

I have no regrets about any board I ever was on. Every one of them gave back to me in some way.

**Nichols:** Absolutely, and I'm just thinking there may be leaders out there and what you just said, I mean, encourage your people to get involved because it's a way to learn, for one thing, because you're learning from diverse people. So, talk to us. Now you're retired, but you're not really retired, you're "post-career."

**Fiehler:** Not really retired. Post-career. That word is not one that many of us want to associate with because..

**Nichols:** Right. Because you are doing other things now and you have a new passion.

**Fiehler:** I do.

**Nichols:** So talk to us a little bit about that. What's your new passion?

**Fiehler:** I'm developing, along with my consulting partner Beth Chesterton, an educational website for girls, let's just say 10 to 18 years old. Although I think there's a lot of information on the website that even women early in their career would find useful. So, ABC to CEO is the name of it. I came to this idea after I quit working at Peabody, I kind of sat back and said, "Okay am I finished working? Is there something else I really want to do yet?" And I started thinking about, "you know, one of the things that I never ever considered was really leading a company." I led teams. I had a very nice role within Peabody. I loved my job, but as I look back, I kind of wished when I was much, much earlier in my career that I had thought about. You know, maybe someday I want to actually lead a company, a company either that I could have created myself like you have, or a company that exists already, and work yourself to a point that you're seen as the next CEO.

So, I realized when I looked at my career, I had in retrospect let's just say, I really didn't shape it in a way that made me a candidate to become a CEO.

When you look at all of the things that are important to becoming it, I made some wrong turns. Didn't mean I couldn't get to the C-suite but I never was going to get to CEO. And so this organization is about insights that I want to give young women. It's applicable to anybody, but I am directing it towards young women, because as we look at, at least Fortune 500 right now, only 5% of those companies are led by women.

So, I'd love to see that statistic change a little. I don't know where it can take us but any improvement is a good improvement. So the website is all about teaching young girls about traits of CEOs and teaching a little bit older, teenage girls about... Here's where you don't want to go wrong, be it a staff position versus line position, understanding PNL, understanding the importance of taking on new assignments, relocation, everything that goes along with that. So,

it's supposed to be an education about, here's where you can run into a dead-end, and if you want to keep the path open, be aware. So, we call it preparing for the possibility.

**Nichols:** I love that. Well, and it's just... Yes, and it's a possibility, it's possible you're having a vision that you could do this, right?

**Fiehler:** That's right, and we're not saying this is a track that we necessarily want you to take... We're just saying if you get to that point, we'd like you to be aware of these things, so you don't run into the dead ends.

**Nichols:** That's very good and I'm just going to have to say, I mean I never aspired to be a CEO, and I really could not do it without an amazing team.

**Fiehler:** Right. I mean it does come down to that. Absolutely.

**Nichols:** Oh my goodness. I've got an amazing partner in life, in business, in Greg. And so many years ago, we launched into the entrepreneurial wagon and it's been a fun ride, but you never can do it alone. That's for sure. You have to have a great team.

**Fiehler:** That's right. And we've got a lot of materials that we try to educate young women about how important the team, the collaboration, and all of that is in order to make it successfully.

**Nichols:** Right, for sure. So let's talk about this real quickly, before we sign off. This is Something Extra. So, Sharon I'd love for you to give us your insights. What do you believe is this something extra that every leader needs?

**Fiehler:** Well, it didn't really take me long to think this one through. So having been on the side of hiring many executives, even being involved in hiring CEOs, talent management, organizational development, I really, throughout my career, have had a lot of opportunities to be exposed to leaders—different kinds of leaders—some of course, better leaders than others. And one of the things that I can say pretty consistently: you can learn traits, so you can be taught - okay, here's how to be a good communicator to some people it's more natural than others, but here's how to be a good communicator. Here's how you become good at financial issues; all of these different traits that you would find in a successful CEO, but to me, what makes the difference is something that's not learned but it's earned, and that's trust.

**Nichols:** I love that.

**Fiehler:** I have found time and time again when I talk to individuals as I did many times in my career, about I want to be a good leader and what do I need to... I say to them, leaders actually have people following them. So always look behind you and try to understand: are people following you because they have to to get their paycheck or are they following you because they

trust you're going to take them to a good place?" And the long-term leaders that I've seen time and time again that have stand the test of time. Not only do they have the traits as a foundation, but they have learned how to have people trust them because they're true to their work. So that's my something extra. It's trust, and you can't learn it, you just earn it.

**Nichols:** You earn it, that is wonderful, I love that. So Sharon, if people want to connect to ABC to CEO, how would they do that?

**Fiehler:** Well, we're not quite online yet, but we're getting close. You will find us at [www.ABCtoCEO.com](http://www.ABCtoCEO.com) shortly. We're not quite there, but we will be there in the next few months so join us when we get there.

**Nichols:** Yes, for sure. Well, thank you so much Sharon and this has been just a delight, I just love seeing you when you're back in St. Louis.

**Fiehler:** Thank you, it's good to see you. I've enjoyed this, thank you, I'm flattered that you asked me.

**Nichols:** Absolutely. Thank you.