

Something Extra EP 053 – Dee Ann Turner

Lisa Nichols: I'm thrilled to welcome Dee Ann Turner to the show today. Dee Ann is a former executive at Chick-fil-A and now works globally as an author-speaker and coach. Dee Ann, I am so delighted that you are here, thank you so much for making the time and welcome to the loop.

Dee Ann Turner: Thank you so much Lisa it is great to be with you and it's a pleasure to be in St. Louis again.

Nichols: Yeah, looking forward to our conversation and we just talked about... We may have to do part one and part two I think that there's a lot that we need to talk about, but tell me a little bit about how you grew up.

Turner: I'm a native Atlantan which is rare and spent all of my life there except for a little time in Cincinnati, and a short-standing Executive Education in Boston almost since I was there for nine weeks. I sometimes claim that I lived there. The funniest thing about my childhood, when I think about talking with you and owning your own business, and my own entrepreneurial roots started early in my childhood, when I was about eight years old. My father's best friend owned a grocery store and so I came to realize that my house was on the path to the neighborhood swimming pool and everyone had to go by my house on their way to the swimming pool, so I bought candy and drinks wholesale from him.

Set up, had a little table or had the merchandise all displayed, and so I would sell it a retail price for the kids from the neighborhood would pass by my house go under the deck. Buy candy from me, I'd make a profit, and I go back to him and buy some more for the next week. So that was my first job and how my own entrepreneurial root started. But along the way too, I found that what I really wanted to do was be a writer and so that was a big part of my childhood too. Other than that, it was pretty normal. Grew up in a family had an older brother and my dad was an attorney, he passed away a few years back, my mother was a stay-at-home mom and did a beautiful job at that. And so, pretty average.

Nichols: Yeah, your dad was obviously in the business world, so you probably got some of that education at dinner.

Turner: First of all, my dad being honest with you, my dad was a lawyer, so he wasn't at a lot of family dinners, he worked long hours, and it was one of the reasons I didn't want to be one is because I watched him do this all those years, and so family dinners, sometimes weren't till 8 or 9 o'clock at night. And the other part that's interesting about that, when you think about it, Dad was in the business world and he was in commercial real estate and corporate law, but he still was what we call professional. And so I didn't have any true business mentors growing up and which made it interesting that I ended up in business and I never really considered a career in that direction because it wasn't even my mother went to law school, she ended up by practicing in my influences were more doctors, lawyers, teachers and professional not so many business people.

Nichols: But you did have that entrepreneurial bent and that bent to sell, you saw the opportunity.

Turner: It's funny, when I was selecting franchisees for Chick-Fil-A restaurants, one of the questions I always ask them, was what was the first thing you ever sold? And the reason I asked them that question, is if they told me a story like my own story or like Truett Cathy the founder of Chick-Fil-A his story of selling Coca-Colas when he was five years old door-to-door newspaper house. But, if they told me, "Oh I sold t-shirts for my fraternity, in college, I knew right then, I might not have an entrepreneur because entrepreneurs I've even seen this among my own three children, one of them definitely an entrepreneur, he was figuring out how to make money by providing a service or a product from a very young age, and that's usually a trait of an entrepreneur.

Nichols: Well, fast forward a little bit. And you did get a degree in journalism.

Turner: I didn't finish my degree. My husband and I got married and moved back to Atlanta, he was finished with school and I was headed to finish my degree in journalism, when I had a little bit of a detour.

Nichols: You had a little bit of a tour and to borrow a line from your book, Dee Ann, it all started with a flat tire.

Turner: Well, it did well when we moved back to Atlanta, I went to work for an advertising firm because that's what journalism majors, do to make money especially back in those days. And

so I worked there a brief time. My husband was a pastor at a church in Atlanta, and down the street was the Chick-Fil-A headquarters, and it became necessary for me to move closer to where the church was that we could be living in the community where we were serving. And he said, "I really think you ought to apply at Chick-fil-A. I grew up in Atlanta, ate Chick-fil-A from the time I was a little girl, actually ate it on my wedding day, and my husband and I had it on our first date, but I never really thought about going and working at the corporate office, so I started researching a little bit and I really didn't think much about it.

I just put in an application well, two weeks later they sent me that letter that says Thank you for your interest, but we don't have anything that matches your experience and skills. And I told my husband, I said, "Well that's that. So, let's just not worry about it. I'm not going for it. Yeah, and he said "Oh no, why don't you apply again? So, I applied again in two weeks later I got another version of that same letter, then I was intrigued, I was like, "Who is this place that keeps turning me down?" And so I started pursuing it and I started learning more about Chick-fil-A, I was pretty sure I wanted to be part of it well, about six months into this a lady comes into the church one day where my husband and was Pastor and she's got a flat tire and she wants to use the phone. 'cause you remember this is way before cellphones. And she wants to use the phone and he... That's okay, I'll change the tire for you. And so he changed the tire afterwards, she gave him a coupon for free Chick-Fil-A sandwich.

He said, "Oh do you work for Chick-Fil-A?" and she said, "Well I do, but my husband is being transferred to Jackson, Mississippi, and so I've resigned and he said... What department do you work in? And she said, advertising which was exactly the place I've been trying to get a role. So he, ushered her out of the church went over and called me. I hung up the phone then I'm immediately called Chick-Fil-A and then I told that lady, that I've been talking to for six months her name was Gale and I said, Gale, I hear you have a job in advertising and I'd like to interview for it. I'm convinced they just wanted this woman to stop calling them and pestering them for an interview. This is also before email. So, everything was a phone call. Anyway, they invite me in for an interview and I went through the process for about four months.

Nichols: I know you said it's a long interview process

Turner: But I did eventually as you know, I was able to get the job and accept the offer and I always say that my husband changed my life when he changed the tire.

Nichols: Yeah, I love that story. That's a great story. Well, you talk about being mentored by Truett Cathy. Can you talk a little bit about that experience?

Turner: Truett was an amazing man, for somebody who grew up in the first housing project in Atlanta, his mother ran a boarding house and he was one of the younger of his large family, and so you know, he was the last to eat the chicken when it came around on Sunday, used to say, he didn't get the wings he got the chicken feet. But anyway, just such a humble man from humble beginnings, and then to build what he built a Chick-fil-A and when I say I was mentored by him many, many, many people were mentored by Truett because he gave himself, he loved people and gave himself away. He always said We're not in the restaurant business, we're in the people business. And what he taught me was people decisions are the very most important decisions, a leader makes. Those decisions are who you select how they get promoted, how they're compensated even how they exit the organization, all of those are the most important decisions that a leader makes. And among those, the selection decision is most important.

So that's what he and I spent the most time talking about was getting that people decision, right, because if you selected the right person it solved a lot of problems. In fact, this is the most amazing thing you're in the staffing business, you'll find this amazing... You'll never guess what, I had a zero budget for when I went to work for Chick-fil-A, separation, I had no budget for separation had a great budget for selection I had a healthy budget for stewarding and sustaining talent, but I had no budget for separation. So I went to talk to the President Jimmy Collins he was actually the Executive Vice President at the time, and I said, Jimmy, why is it that there's no line item for this? He said, Well, I have a story for you. He said When I came to work for Truett, I set up this plan of what we would do if we needed to terminate somebody. And he said, As I brought the plan to true it and started to hand it across the desk he put his hand up and he said that won't be necessary we won't be making any changes. And so, Truett's philosophy was that if you selected right, the right talent to begin with, that you won't have to deal with that issue of separation. So he didn't make a budget for it, which caused us to be much more careful about our selection.

Nichols: Absolutely, you've just said it the perfect segue, because you say building culture is really about timeless principles and timeless principles are best conveyed and taught through stories. Do you have a story that just comes to top of mind, that just really still stands out for you about your time there?

Turner: Yeah, I could tell you hundreds of stores. So I'm gonna tell you, but my favorite selection of a franchisee ever. It was 1994, that's how long ago it was, and at that time my responsibility was for operator or franchisee selection for the company, that's where I was in my career. Again, I told you that Truett's said people decisions are the most important decisions we make. Well, the most important of those was who we gave the keys to the restaurant to, if you picked the right leader it solved a lot of problems. We had this location in fact it was the lowest volume restaurant in our chain, we were struggling to find an operator for it and by the way, my performance was based on having leaders in restaurants not having them without an operator, so this was quite a problem that I had to solve, and we looked through our system and we didn't have any candidates 'cause not many people wanted the lowest volume but we had this guy who had been trying to become an operator for a long time 10 years in fact, I said, "Well let's just bring him, his name is Rudy.

Let's bring Rudy in, let's just see what happens, so he starts the process, and he makes it to the end of the process and he's sitting in my office I interview him, and then after two hours of interviewing, I offer him the opportunity. Well Rudy begins to cry and tears are in his eyes and he turns to his wife and translates in Spanish, she had come with him and she didn't speak any English, and he translates and then she begins to cry. Well, I'm sitting there. Oh great, this guy's waited 10 years for his opportunity he's just been offered the lowest volume restaurant, in our chain, and he's disappointed. But that wasn't the case at all, it was tears of joy that he had an opportunity and did Rudy make the most of his opportunity. Let me tell you what he did.

The first year he was in the restaurant, he increased sales exponentially in the restaurant, profits exponentially he won the highest sales award, that are provided to Chick-Fil-A operators, but he wasn't done yet the next year he repeated the performance and won the award again, he did so well that the third year we moved Rudy to a new restaurant. But he had made that restaurant so successful is that we were able to attract a retired Air Force officer, to take over that restaurant and today, Rudy operates two free-standing Chick-fil-A restaurants in McAllen, Texas where he first started out and the guy he took his place Bruce, he operates two free-standing restaurants in Arizona. So, the lesson of all that is is because somebody was willing to take an opportunity that nobody else wanted, thousands of people have had jobs out of those two men in these 20+ years. Scholarships awarded and all kinds of opportunities and have had people from their restaurants to become franchisees as well.

Nichols: Sure, what a fantastic story, I love that Dee Ann and I'm looking forward to hearing more.

AD: We're gonna take a quick break and we'll be back.

Nichols: So Dee Ann you say the combination of extraordinary talent and a remarkable culture will win the hearts of your clients. So I would say, Chick-Fil-A probably has one of the most intentional remarkable cultures in American business today. How has that been built? And then I wanna talk about the talent piece.

Turner: Let me talk to you a little bit about my formula that I talk about my new book. So first of all, let's talk about what is a remarkable culture. I think he has three elements. The first is a meaningful purpose. It's the why an organization existed at all that can be a business, it can be an educational institution, it can even be a family. Why are we here, what is this all about? Secondly, the second element is a challenging mission. What are we trying to accomplish? Now, the purpose rarely ever changes, but the mission, once it's accomplished. You have to set a new challenging mission. So second element. The third is demonstrated core values. What are the beliefs that this organization holds most dear and is willing to demonstrate day in and day out? The demonstration part of that's the most important thing because some people create a list of core values they stick them on a wall, but they don't demonstrate them. And it's really important, from leadership down to demonstrate that. So that's the essence of remarkable culture. The second element that I talk about in this formula is extraordinary talent. And what do I mean by that? Well, I'm talking about talent whose character matches the culture of the organization and whose competency matches the role and not just the role that they're applying for, but probably roles in the future because that's where you need your better strength for leadership.

Lastly, chemistry that matches the team. So when you put those together, and then you teach them principles that can be applied rather than forcing them to comply to a stack of rules given principles that they can use their judgement and apply then they create amazing customer experiences. And here's the last part of the formula when that's done over time, consistently, then what you end up with is legendary customer service. Like you have it Chick-Fil-A or like you have it Ritz Carlton that's that formula that I believe in.

Nichols: And I know that you've talked about situations where the principles are not taught then so that the employees don't own that and they don't always do what's in the best interest of this customer, but with Chick-Fil-A, if you're orders wrong you get a free chicken sandwich.

Turner: Well, I can't commit to that. But it certainly happens often. And I think that's the whole difference is this idea of rules versus principles now, you experiences all the time at customers at all kinds of brands. I could tell you stories just this week where I can walk into a hotel or a restaurant or a retail establishment and within seconds of engaging with one of the team members, I know whether it's a remarkable culture or a toxic culture. Maybe something in between. And I know it depending on if the team member responds to me as somebody who's been taught principles to apply versus they've got a bunch of rules they have to follow and they're sticking to the rules, and so you can really tell that that's to me the hallmark of what kind of culture you're in immediately.

Nichols: Well, can you talk about the keys to talent from bet on talent. What are those keys to talent?

Turner: Sure, well, we talk about remarkable culture. The next thing you wanna do is focus on the selection the stewardship and sustaining. I used the word sustaining talent rather than retaining, retaining just feels like keeping something around but sustaining is not just keeping it around but actually growing and developing that talent as well. And then nurturing the internal relationships and focusing on mentoring and leadership development, creating loyalty among team members to the organization, and to each other each other because loyalty often breeds loyalty, and so I believe that loyal employees create loyal customers.

When I think about brands who are really successful what I see in those brands are servant leaders, and they practice servant leadership that they put others before themselves. Of course, that's one of the major examples that I had at Chick-Fil-A from Truett Cathy, but I see so many other brands that have bought into that and recognize that it's not a top-down organization that the people who are closest to the customer are truly the most valuable. And need to be supported, and then one of the things that I love about being associated with Chick-Fil-A is their hospitality policy, is to treat everyone with honor, dignity, and respect, and every brand could adopt that for their employees, and then also for their customers. And that's one of the things I experienced. I've been retired from Chick-Fil-A for a year now, and I travel around the country speaking and when I'm in Chick-fil-A restaurants now, just as a customer and just observing, I actually look for this and I've never ever not felt it. Or have I ever seen an example, where it wasn't happening in the restaurant so that's one thing I love about Chick-Fil-A.

Nichols: Yeah, well, let's talk about something extra that you have seen in one of your team members.

Turner: This question just reminds me of a team member that I had that just displayed resilience. I call him my own life, finding a way forward when I hit a wall. It's like, Okay, I have to find a way forward. And I saw this in this team member and I'll tell you the story of what happened. I placed her in this role and she was doing a phenomenal job, but she got caught up a little bit in a political situation as often happens, and she received some really unfounded criticism, and I knew it was unfounded. Sometimes, yes, there's the feedback you need but this case truly was unfounded. So what I decided to do at that point was to remove her on it, that situation to a different role. Now, a lot of people would have been so discouraged.

I mean they've been moved out of the role they've been criticized, unfairly. And they've been criticized unfairly by a senior leader in the organization. So I really thought she was gonna leave the company, nothing like it, she just didn't about face. She took the role I asked her to... She ran with it, her people, which I knew they would, they absolutely loved her, her influence in the organization, increased 10 fold. Today, she's a director and she's leading an area of the business and doing a fantastic job and I'm so proud of her. So many people would have been defeated by that, but I said she had resilience, gave it something extra and moved forward with it.

Nichols: I love that, that is a great story. I know that you talk a lot about positional authority versus personal influence and there's a big difference, isn't there? It sounds like she still had personal influence because her team still loved her and followed her.

Turner: Absolutely, yeah, positional authority won't get you very far. It's personal influence that'll make the difference in where they're not people follow you.

Nichols: Well tell us a story about where you saw something missing possibly on you or a team member.

Turner: It was hard for me to think about this question really in life of Chick-Fil-A just in general as a consumer. The thing that I see so often when I see a brand failing is not to provide second mile service for the customer, the guest, the patient the student, whatever, whoever's receiving their services. Of course, a principle that I learned at Chick-fil-A and make second mile second nature, and I'm so disappointed when I go into a business. In fact, you know my mother, I wrote a blog post about this recently, my mother went into a store. She was really excited about coming to our community and she had been a member of that store in the different community

and she'd moved and she's so excited they were coming, and then she told me the story about how she was treated on her first visit there and it was horrible and it was all about people just not willing to do that extra little thing to make somebody's visit really extraordinary.

Nichols: I'm thinking, dignity, honor, and respect.

Turner: And that's what happened to her that day she had none of that.

Nichols: Well, what do you believe in... Is this something extra that every leader needs?

Turner: Every leader always needs extra insight, so don't ever stop asking for it, and being willing to hear it and act upon it. I don't care how many years we've been leading people even today. I have so much more insight, looking back, and I know 10 years from now, if I'm around all I don't have more insights to be willing to receive that insight from others.

Nichols: So, did you guys do formal reviews at Chick-fil-A?

Turner: Certainly, we had a performance management system, we had one of the things that I felt like they did best was the leadership talent review, where once a year, top to bottom of the organization leadership was reviewed and plans were made for succession and development opportunities came from that. But I'm not even talking about the formal all of the formal feedback I'm really talking about the willingness to have those over a cup of coffee conversations. To me, that's where the value comes. I think it's where people are most vulnerable, to receive it, and most vulnerable to give it.

Nichols: I completely agree, I'll always say, We all have blind spots. All of us have development opportunities, and so getting that feedback from others is really critical to your own growth.

So, Dee-Ann I know you retired from Chick-Fil-A year ago after what 33 years? And I know for you, you say really what you did then at Chick-Fil-A and what you're doing now is that you really want to help people find their path. Talk a little bit about what you're doing now and how you're continuing that mantra that you have for your life of helping other people find their path.

Turner: A number one party is I'm a writer, that's driven by the contracts I'm under with Baker publishing, but that's okay, because that was what I always wanted to be the reason I moved

away from that is when I was in college, I realized that my husband and I got married, it was really hard to make a living as a journalist, and I didn't have enough life experience that anybody would wanna read about and so that's how I chose to go into advertising in so that I can make a living. And then I ended up in HR. I didn't tell you the story about how that happened. But I was in my final interview, after months of interviewing for this job in advertising and the vice president of human resources did something I would never do. He said to me, he said, They're gonna offer you this job in advertising but you do have a job in HR, you might be interested in too. I think you'd be a really good match for it. Are you interested?

He said, "Go home and think about it over the weekend, so I did, I said, "You know, I think it might be really interesting to work in HR for a couple of years. I like those people. Well, of course, you like the people in HR, they're paid to be nice, right? I like those people. I think I'd like to work with them and I'll know where the jobs are in marketing and I'll move on in a couple of years to marketing. Well that never happened, obviously, because I really found my own calling, but I didn't do it without a struggle. I told you that my husband was a pastor. I thought I was gonna be in full-time Christian ministry, and that was why I went to school, where I did, Cincinnati Christian University in Cincinnati is because I was going I wanted to go into full-time Christian journalism, and so I was gonna be the pastor's wife and stay home with the children. This unexpected career happened for me, and things started moving along and it was going really well, and I was struggling with the idea that maybe I'd abandon my original calling that God had given me, and soon I realized that my calling was to help other people discover their calling and that became really the focus of my role all those years. I had lots of responsibilities at Chick-Fil-A, everything from building and overseeing the on-site child care, and wellness and talent acquisition and talent development. We could get culture and engagement diversity, including all of those things. But when it really came down to the one thing I did, my job was to help other people find their calling.

So I was given an amazing opportunity about 14 months ago, Chick-fil-A offered 100 employees the opportunity for an early retirement. I didn't have to go, no one had to go about half of them chose to, but I really saw that as my opportunity to do those things I'd already dreamed off. I already had a contract for two books with Baker books, I had already been speaking about 50 times a year, and I thought you know I love doing that. I'd like to continue. And it also gave me the opportunity full-time to focus on my true life passion helping other people find their path. And so that's what I'm doing these days, I have to admit, his top-of-the-line priorities is writing. And then secondly, it's speaking because all those people wanna know about bet on talent. I have to get out there and speak and I love doing that I especially love meeting the people in all the

different places and then, I do some consulting, I don't do a lot of consulting to be honest, I'm working with global partners I primarily work with CEOs and Chief Human Resource Officers on helping them strengthen their culture or maybe even lay the foundation for an organizational culture and then helping them look at their talent systems. Lastly, I love coaching. And again, both of those things I don't do as much of right now, so I want to give a my other commitments, but it keeps me fresh, it gives me good material to share with others and I've really enjoyed those opportunities as they've come about.

Nichols: So bet on talent is your newest book, right? So would know it's on Amazon, but you got a website as well. What is your website?

Turner: My website is DeeAnnTurner.com and you can find my book there, along with lots of other free content have a blog post there, there's some videos there and so I invite you to engage with me there. You can also find me on my Facebook page, Dee Ann Turner author page. I hang out mostly in LinkedIn, there's a lot of good content that I learn from on LinkedIn for sure, of course I'm a Dee Ann Turner there on Instagram @DeeAnnTurner and then on Twitter @DeeAnnTurner.

Nichols: Well, I hope that our audience will engage with you on any of those platforms Dee Ann and thank you so much for being here. And everybody go out and buy a copy of Bet on Talent. Thanks for being here.