

Something Extra EP 109 - Shannon Hauf

Lisa Nichols: Chromosomes, little strands of nucleic acids and proteins are the fundamental genetic instructions that tell us who we are at birth. Most people are born with 46 chromosomes but each year in the United States, about 6,000 people are born with an extra chromosome, making them a person with Down syndrome. If you've ever encountered someone with Down syndrome, you know that they are some of the kindest most joyful people you will ever meet. They truly have something extra.

My name is Lisa Nichols, and I have spent the last 24 years as both the CEO of Technology Partners and as the mother to Ally. Ally has something extra in every sense of the word. I have been blessed to be by her side as she impacts everyone she meets. Through these two important roles as CEO and mother to Ally, I have witnessed countless life lessons that have fundamentally changed the way I look at the world.

While you may not have an extra chromosome, every leader has something extra that defines who you are. Join me as I explore this something extra in leaders from all walks of life and discover how that difference in each of them has made a difference in their companies, their families, their communities, and in themselves. I'm excited to have Shannon Hauf on the show today. Shannon is Senior Vice President and Head of Seed Production Innovation at Bayer Crop Science.

Shannon, I am so excited about this conversation that you and I are going to have today. You know what? We're kind of recent friends because we met through the Most Influential Businesses Women, but then we found out, after we met, that we are like a stone's throw away from each other [chuckles] in relation to where we live.

Shannon Hauf: Yes, as I say we're just a country block away.

Lisa: A country block away. I love that. We have so much that I want to talk about today. I just know that our listeners are going to enjoy just hearing your story.

I had this idea as a young girl on the farm that I was going to move to New York City and be a doctor. I suppose that was-- I don't know how I got that image. That's really what I was striving for when I left the farm.

We had an agreement at my farm. My dad said, "Well, you can go to Iowa State because that's a great school for farm girls to go to." I went to Iowa State, which is an exceptional school for the sciences, whether it's biology engineering, or agronomy, and got a degree. I ended up, two years into my degree of pursuing medicine-- I decided that that wasn't what I was interested in.

I had an internship at Asgrow. That was before Monsanto actually had purchased Asgrow. Asgrow was still a standalone company. At that time, I decided that's what I wanted to do. There were then two types of jobs at Asgrow. There were the types of jobs I was doing as an intern, and the types of jobs all the PhDs had, which looked like really attractive jobs. They were thinking about strategy and how are we going to put together the best corn plants and get the highest yields. Those were the jobs I wanted.

That led me to go to graduate school. It was that internship that changed my career path so much that I was no longer interested in medicine and moving to New York City and rather than living on the farm, and I guess solving world problems in a very different way. In some ways, it's the same, because medicine is serving people as well. It was really about how do we fulfill the needs of food around the world. I was really much interested in advancing crop innovations and that's what led me to graduate school.

Lisa: I know that you have a Master's in Plant Breeding, and then you went on to get your PhD in Weed Science. I remember, Shannon, reading somewhere something that you had said, "All farmers, it really doesn't matter if you're in the United States or if you're in Africa, there's a few things that farmers look at. They're looking at yield, they're looking at disease and they're looking at weed control."

You definitely with the plant breeding, I'm sure, there's yield in there and resiliency and then, of course, the weed science, but I want to back up. You said you did the internship at Asgrow. This is why internships are so important because that was a pivotal point for you. You were thinking I'm going to go into medicine but then after doing that internship, you were like, "No, this is really interesting. I'm seeing what the PhDs are doing." That's why it's really important for kids to do these internships.

Shannon: The types of jobs our companies are doing today are so vastly different than when I was in college. I think people underestimate what agriculture, how advanced it is, right. We think of Amazon and Google and all of the exciting technology companies. I will tell you that same excitement and innovation and technology is happening in our company as well. There's many exciting things and internships are important to help. It changed my path. I would tell you I know a lot of people's paths have changed as well.

To be honest, I think about it, at that time, Asgrow, they took a giant leap. Their internships were kind of settled for the year. I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do. I had three friends that had internships at Asgrow. They went and asked, "Hey, are there any more internships?" They said, "Well, who is this person?" "We think she's really good." "Bring her in. We'll interview her."

I went in with the idea that I had nothing to lose because they had said their internships were closed. They really didn't have any more. Obviously, it worked out that I was able to kind of secure an internship, and I worked there for two years. After my internship even, I then stayed on and worked through the school year.

Lisa: That's a great lesson right there, Shannon. Just because they say no, it doesn't hurt to ask.

Shannon: I always tell people, "The line of people to tell you no is much longer than the line that'll tell you yes."

I think, my career has a lot of great lessons learned so far. A handful of them certainly are, "Be open-minded, take risks." I did three jobs in a row I didn't want to do and they were all three amazing.

Lisa: But you did not want to do them.

Shannon: No, I reluctantly did them, because of the managers. Managers are important. I knew if the job ultimately wasn't going to be enjoyable for me, because having fun is really important to me, they would help me find something else. The job turned out to be-- All three of them turned out to be great learnings, great contributions to our company. In each case, my manager did support me and helped me be successful. I took a lot of risks. Like I said, they weren't the sexy job at the company. It was the job that was a little bit harder, and maybe had a little bit more challenges, and you had to work uphill a little bit more-

Lisa: Had to work a lot harder to accomplish the job.

Shannon: -but absolutely worth it. I've been lucky.

Lisa: Great lessons there, though, Shannon. If you'd been reluctant to take those jobs, then you would not have had that experience. I always liken it to a snowball, and a snowball, as you go along, you just get more and more, it gets bigger and bigger. That is what happens. I believe in your career, as you take on those things that maybe aren't that sexy or that comfortable, you're gonna learn some things if you have what I call a high growth quotient. You'd mentioned being in R&D. I know that the stats and the research is showing us that by 2050, our population growth is just going to explode, we're going to be at 10 billion people. The demand for both fiber for clothing and for food is continuing to grow up.

But then you and I've talked about this, our land is actually shrinking. Innovation is paramount to ag because you've got to be more efficient, you've got to increase your yield on a smaller plot of land, I mean, all of those things. Tell us a little bit about that. I don't know if you want to get into genetic editing or that sort of thing.

Shannon: No, I think a lot of times when I have the opportunity to get interviews, I think that there's this assumption that a large company like Bayer, and formerly Monsanto, was single-mindedly focused on one way of growing a crop, which was biotech. Also, you think about modern agriculture in North America or South America. The reality is, I can tell you, every single scientist that comes into work every single day is driven by the mission, and the mission is to put food on people's plates everywhere around the world.

It's not biotech, it's not organic. It's all of them. I think people say, "That's okay?" Yes, it's okay. All of them are okay. It's going to take all types of food, regardless of where you're at. In some instances, maybe biotech isn't the solution. We've come to understand here in the Americas and in other parts of the world, the great benefits of it, but we're open-minded to a lot of ways to advance yields, to advance quality, and really to put, like I say, a better product of food on people's plates. That's really the focus.

Obviously, we have lots of new technologies. We have gene editing, excitingly. Two of those innovators, both women, were just recognized with a Nobel Prize for chemistry, super exciting if you think about women in science, and the advances that women are making just in contributing to really great technologies. Certainly, we're looking at in there and actively involved in those new innovations. We obviously are continuing with real conventional breeding methods which have brought a lot of benefits, and we're continuing to be focused in biotech.

It's not one or the other, it's all of them. Each region is going to have, and each crop specifically will have, a really unique fit of how we're going to integrate some of those technologies in the marketplace.

I think you said an Xbox was in 2.6 years and the Boeing Dreamliner was in 8 years but it takes 13 years to get an ag product to market and \$136 million.

Shannon: Yes, it's a terribly long time. It's getting longer too. When we started down this path, it was probably closer to the 8-9 years. Now it's 12-13 and creeping even longer. It's not the inventing. It's not the developing. It's satisfying regulatory agencies around the world in an environment that's highly political. That's become the single greatest expense of time, as well as we bring new technologies to the marketplace.

Frankly, it is only the large companies, when you think about that expense and time, that can participate because it is so expensive. I'll tell you the \$136 million is creeping up really, really fast in some of these technologies. Like I've said, it's not the science, it's the political challenges or even the misunderstanding of the science around the world. Even in the US, we have challenges of getting products through and registered.

While we have greater challenges in other parts of the world, it's not without saying that we don't have our own challenges here that we're really putting a lot of effort at, to ensure that our technologies have the opportunity to get to farmers. Fortunately, our farmers are our greatest advocates for these technologies. They show up and make sure that those regulators understand the importance of getting access to these technologies. It's not whether the technology comes from the company that I work for or another company. It's how do we get technologies to farmers.

Frankly, that's good competition for all of us. We're all striving to have a better innovation, so that farmers-- they write a check once a year, and we want them to write it to us. It's expensive, and it takes a lot of time. We're committed to it, but we know that there's a lot of opportunity to improve the process as well.

Lisa: Well, I know you guys aren't stopping, because you spend a whole lot on R&D and innovation. So I know you're not going to stop.

Shannon: Absolutely.

Lisa: I appreciate what you said before. That's what really gets you up in the morning. I can't think of a greater mission truly than to put food on the table. Everybody needs that right. Shannon, I know that you speak a lot in women in science conferences and things and diversity inclusion is really important. You've actually seen this play out and some of the teams and how diverse teams just do better. Talk to us a little bit about that if you would.

Shannon: Yes. Both diversity and inclusion is important to me personally and also as a leader in our company and advocating and advancing initiatives around diversity and inclusion. I think about our R&D organization and we know diverse teams have better innovation, right? For us, diversity is a lot of things. The one I'm focused on obviously is gender diversity. I think about some of the great innovations that have come out of our company and there are women behind those innovations and there are diverse teams. It's a great example of how we can put diverse teams together. We just don't want teams that are diverse to be diverse. They have to also be included.

If you have a seat, it's not just having a seat but it's asking the person in that seat to make sure that they're contributing and adding value to that team. I wouldn't say we're at where we want to be. We struggle like every other large company. As leadership levels increased, fewer women are part of those leadership teams, but what we are committed to do is to change the outcomes. How can we change as we move forward and we select individuals that were developing and advancing women? We know the benefits. We know both the business outcome benefits and we know the benefits to creating a great work environment as well. We have a number of initiatives across the organization that are really focused on both the metrics, but then the quality of the programming that we have.

I can say that women in science, we're not a coffee club. We don't get together and drink coffee. We're solving problems and people to your leadership table and we want to be a part of it. How do we develop and advance those leaders?

Absolutely, we've made progress and we started this initiative about five years. We've made both progress in the metrics which is always important, but we've made progress in how people talk about it and the quality of our leaders as we move forward. It's not without a lot of time and commitment but every single minute and hour spent on this is well worth it.

Lisa: Well, as you were talking I was just thinking, you just can't leave it to chance. You, guys have been very intentional.

Shannon: When I think about from five years ago, we knew diversity and inclusion was important. We knew having women in leadership was important, but how much effort were we going to spend on changing the outcome? That was where we had to be incredibly intentional as we thought about women leadership, as we thought about their development. As we think about slates of candidates. I brought two more women into my leadership team and I actively and aggressively recruited them.

They are exceptional talent. That's the difference. They might not proactively apply for your job, but if you reach out to them and tell them more about it, I bet they're going to be willing to sign up for it.

Lisa: At least to listen.

Shannon: Absolutely.

Lisa: That's just great advice for companies out there that say, "Oh, yes. We want a diverse culture," but you just can't hope that it happens. Hope is not [unintelligible 00:23:29]

Shannon: No.

Lisa: You and I met through the most influential businesswomen. We are both very honored and humbled to be a part of that group this year. I want to ask you. When you think about being most influential, when you think about influential, what does that mean to Shannon Hauf?

Lisa: What is the all adage "Don't really know until you've walked a mile in that person's moccasins." We really don't understand unless we've been there, right? Even at that, there's just so many differences. I love empathy and we do need more empathic people in the world that's for sure. I know we've talked a lot about women. We've talked a lot about how important diversity is and you being so intentional with growing women leaders, what are you doing?

I want to give you the opportunity, Shannon, to talk about some of the things that you're passionate about where you're trying to grow younger leaders. If our listeners say, "Hey, that resonates with me. I want to get involved in that," how could they get involved?

Shannon: I think certainly two initiatives that are important to me. First is, I'm a leader in 4-H, which is an organization of youth. The largest youth organization focused in agriculture, STEM, and leadership. Certainly, it was historically, I think, thought of as for rural communities, but 4-H today is actually very much urban. It also just teaches life skills. Where can we just get life skills? Then thinking about leadership.

Then the second is, I have the opportunity to join the board at Marian Middle School, which for me is, how do we tackle the issues of racial injustice, social injustice and then also creating a generation that has interest and excitement for pursuing careers in STEM. Both initiatives that are really important to me.

Lisa: Well, I think about Marian and I think about equal access. I too as you know love the Marian model. I think one of the big differentiators for them is the graduate support program. They say one of their taglines is "Once a Marian girl, always a Marian girl" and walking along beside that girl, even through graduate studies. I love that you're part of that. Thank you for everything that you're doing to grow this next generation of leaders.

Shannon: I see it as a responsibility.

Lisa: Well, we've been given so much. Have we not, Shannon?

