
Women in Leadership: Carole Plant

Carole Plant began her professional career through reading Medicine at University and began to pursue a career in the NHS, before realising that she much preferred the business side of things. After going on to work at General Electric (GE) for 14 years and obtaining her Lean Six Sigma training there, the rest of Carole's career has been based in the Financial Services industry. Her career has truly been a journey. In this interview, Carole speaks about her role in Process Excellence, her leadership style and her view on what men can do in assisting more women to gain access to leadership positions.



Q&A with Carole Plant

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Can you give an overview of your career?

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I started off reading Medicine at University but I didn't want to become a doctor, so I trained as a radiographer and I worked for several years in the NHS but decided that I wanted to do something a little different. I started to work with some of the consultants in the hospital that I last worked at and I set up a business with them, running scanning centres. I discovered that I liked the business side of things more than the medical side of things. From there, I moved onto GE, working for GE Medical Systems and then I had 14 years in various different jobs inside the company. It was during that time that I was lucky enough to do my Lean Six Sigma training, so coming out of that I had the passport ready to go almost anywhere. I left GE having run one of the businesses there which was sold to IPO, but I didn't want to go with the business so at that point I decided it was time to leave. Since then, my career has been in Financial Services. I did 6 years of consultancy work until last year when I came back to a major global bank. The last 15 years or so have all been about Process Improvement. I didn't decide to go into financial services though, it picked me. I was doing a job at GE working in Jack Welshes office, which meant I had exposure to all different businesses. I had been in that job for around 18 months when one of the business heads said that they had a job for me and from then on, all my jobs have been Financial Services based and they have mainly been in banking. I would never have imagined doing this but opportunities come along and you decide to take them or not to take them, and that's the fun of it. You never know where different paths will take you. A huge part of it is making opportunities for yourself, for example networking is an extremely important skill to be good at. Someone might be able to make that introduction to you, or you might meet someone and then a while later they might remember you when an opportunity comes up. That's how most of my jobs have come along. It's not so much who you know but who knows you.

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What is your favourite methodology and why?

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Change Acceleration Process (CAP) is my favourite methodology, which I learnt at GE. This was in the early days of Lean Six Sigma where people looked at how successful process improvement was and they discovered that a lot of the programmes failed to take off. In some cases they succeeded but they couldn't sustain the changes and this was because people weren't accepting of those changes. GE came up with a framework where there are various elements that you need to go through and it is about starting to understand what you are trying to do and who the key stakeholders are, where they are now and where you want them to be and whether you have something around which people can frame themselves and see what is in it for themselves. Slowly but surely as you go through the programme, you build into the ways of working, a confidence in the people that are changing the process that it will work. So it is very much a framework where you can take bits of it, use all of it, whatever you think fits but if you don't do some of those things, then you will never get a good process to be adopted. You may have a great design but it won't fall into place. The biggest obstacle is the people and unless you get people to feel like they have come up with those ideas themselves, they won't change and they will go back to bad old habits if you don't sustain that change. Interestingly, I read something recently about how to get people to buy into change more readily. There is a huge revolt around mission statements right now as it is easy to give a quote and expect people to understand what it means, however now it is more important to build a stronger, more genuine form of communication into persuading people to do something differently. You have to have leadership driving change - management have to talk the talk and walk the walk and they have to be willing to spend time on it, to create an agenda and be willing to track employees progress.

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What is the hardest part and best part of your job in process excellence?

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The most difficult thing is trying to get enough momentum that you see a tipping point and the organisation wants to move. The biggest challenge to that is that it takes time and in most organisations, you get a fairly rapid turnover of senior leaders so one minute you could have a key sponsor who outlines what they want you to do and within two years they have moved on to their next role and the next person that comes in doesn't want to do that plan. Trying to make anything remain in situ is very hard. I haven't yet seen an organisation stick to its guns and follow something through from start to finish. I'm back doing something now that I set off to do 5 years ago and I asked what would be different this time, however I'm not sure a lot really is. Senior leaders get promoted - good people get promoted quickly and people are always looking for their next role so 3 years is around the time that people will stay in a role. That is the biggest difficulty of getting change to stick in an organisation. However, my favourite part is when I see people understand what you have been trying to explain to them and they want to go and do it and they get excited about it. I had an episode of this last week, as we had just run a difficult 7 week programme where some have taken it up really well and others not so much. But I presented it last week to a senior team and it was great to see how much people wanted to do it and wanted to be a part of it. It's that part of the job that I like the most.

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Is it difficult to make a process global? How do you go about this?

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The way I do it is by picking my battles. I need to win a few battles to show that the war is winnable. By that I mean, if I get some early successes, and pick where I think I am going to kick off, I can then persuade others. It will convince those that are undecided and this is what I mean by a tipping point - once you get enough leaders who have seen something, they know it works, then they start asking if they can come and do it for them, you know you will be able to ask most people to join in. There will always be groups of people who don't want to do something but if you want to introduce something that is standardised, the only way to do that is to get some quick wins, communicate those and celebrate them. It becomes obvious and the evidence is when people start picking up the phone and ask you to speak to their team about the particular change. It is a great feeling as that is what you have introduced and people have bought into it and you can see the lights go on in the room. Not my idea, however I have introduced it into the team and we have implemented it and made it work. You have to keep saying to people that change is like an elastic band - it doesn't work unless it is stretched and you will probably be a bit stressed. You must be honest about communication upfront and say that it won't be easy all the time but it will be worth it, so please trust us and give it a go.

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What type of leader are you?

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That's a really difficult one to describe. The only way I can answer that is to say that if I am a good leader, I will be the sort of person that others want to follow, they don't know where I am taking them but they are prepared to trust me enough that they will follow me. I can't put it any more succinctly than that because my job is to get people to change so at the end of the day, the leadership has to get people to say 'I'll jump off the cliff behind her because I think we will be ok and have a safe landing! In terms of values: transparency, honesty - don't sugar coat things. There are times when less is more, where there are difficult decisions that you will have to make and the only way to do that is being quite minimalist about what you say. If you are a leader, you shouldn't lead through power, you shouldn't lead because you are a particular grade or have a particular title, they should follow you because you do a good job. It should be about what you do rather than what you are. I am never afraid to bring someone onto my team who may be better than me and I don't just employ people who are similar to myself - you need to have people on your team who are different and who value open debate to make sure that you can have difficult conversations and they aren't just pushed under the carpet. As a leader, vulnerability is a good characteristic to have, that you also make mistakes and you are human as this will bring a group together and show that there is real trust and a bond in your team.

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What role do you believe that men play in getting more women into leadership positions?

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Men play a big role. You can apply a slightly different perspective to different generations. I've seen a lot of change in the past 30 years and some of that is because men in senior positions have daughters that grow up and they want to get into careers themselves so they see what challenges their daughters are facing. However, women shouldn't get a job because there is an issue of inequality in an organisation, they should get it because they are the best candidate for the job or this will cause issues for those to follow them. If there are a number of candidates who are completely equal and you can't decide, then only should you choose the female if you feel that your company has a diversity issue. But I don't believe that anyone should get a job unless they really deserve it. If a woman is hired because she is a woman but she can't actually do the job, this will put off junior women for applying afterwards as they will feel like they wouldn't be able to do the job too.

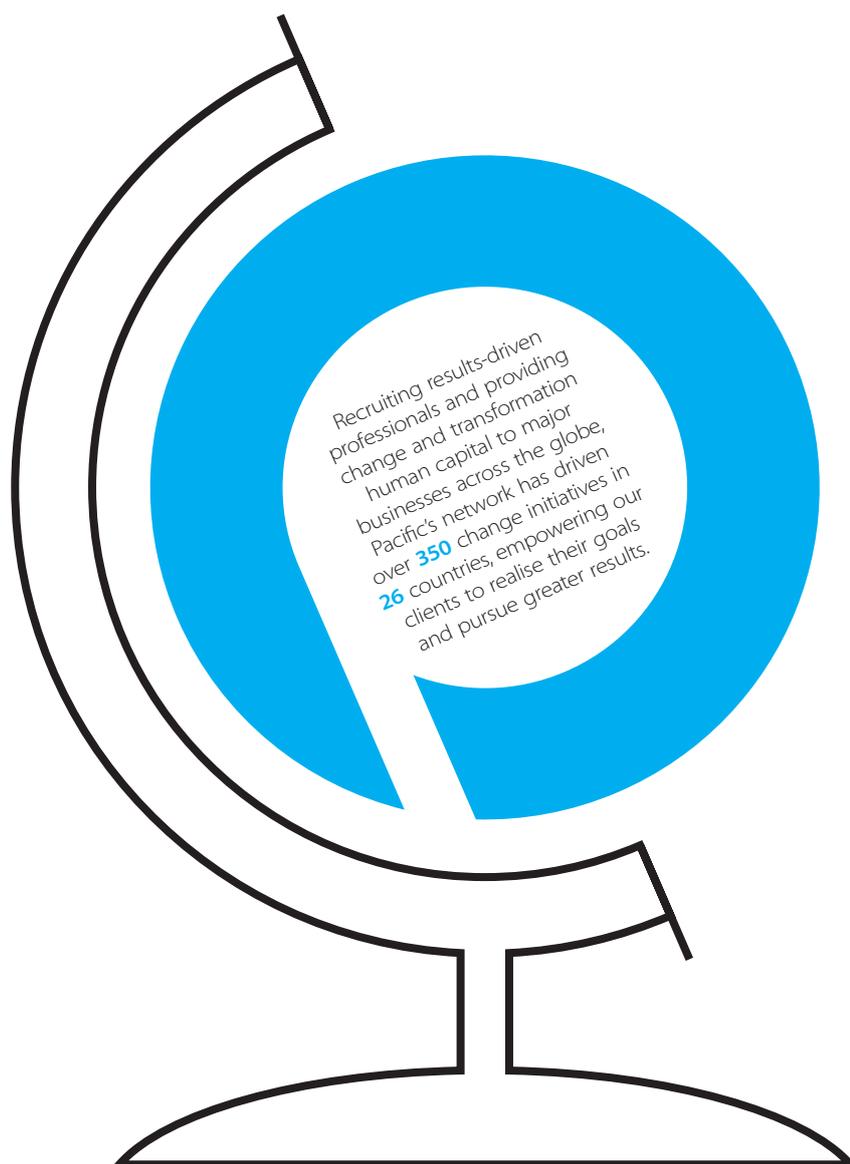
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**Why do you think that there are roles that predominantly women are in?
Human Resources for example.**

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HR seems to be where senior women end up. HR and Finance are so important in business – I remember someone telling me at GE just before I took my first MD role that there are two people that you have to know and trust. One is the Finance Director and the other is the HR Director and if you don't have two good people in those roles, you are stuffed. I don't know why you get so many women ending up in that area, but maybe it is actually to do with empathy and how we solve issues – some of the issues that you see in HR are the hardest to solve in business, as they are dealing with real life human issues such as someone dealing with a long-term illness, mentally or physically which can be incredibly different to handle and I think that women have more patience to be able to cope with issues like that.





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