The Importance of Women Mentoring Other Women

Elizabeth Lund, a vice president at Boeing, reflects on the lessons she's learned and passed on during her career as an aeronautical engineer.

Elizabeth Lund, Boeing's vice president of the 777 fleet

Courtesy of Boeing

B.R.J. O'DONNELL

SEP 26, 2017 | BUSINESS

In April 1994, Boeing unveiled the new 777 aircraft, a twin-engine jet used for long-haul flights such as London to Chicago. It was the first airplane to be designed entirely on computers. Since then, there have been almost 5 million 777 flights, and the aircraft has become one of the most familiar planes in the world.

Elizabeth Lund has been obsessed with the 777 since it first debuted. Today, she's the vice president and general manager for all models of the aircraft; leads

the design, production, and distribution of the planes; and oversees the enormous Boeing manufacturing plant where they are produced in Everett, Washington.

Lund graduated from the University of Missouri with a master's in mechanical and aerospace engineering in 1990. She got her first job at Boeing in 1991, when the "Triple Seven" was still just a drawing.

For *The Atlantic*'s series, "On The Shoulders Of Giants," I talked to Lund about the role mentorship played in helping her to advance her career, and what she hopes to impress on younger engineers. The conversation that follows has been edited for length and clarity.

B.R.J. O'Donnell: What have you found to be the most demanding aspect of your work?

Elizabeth Lund: As you advance through a company, your responsibilities become broader, and the weight that you carry on your shoulders becomes a bit heavier. The ramifications of your performance and your decisions really affect people and the business.

That understanding translates into the advice that I give. As I've progressed throughout my career, I think I've learned that the key to success is people—your peers, your friends, and your colleagues. The larger your work becomes, the more you will see how important that is.

O'Donnell: What are some of the biggest challenges in aviation in the present day?

Lund: If you think about commercial aviation, one of the real issues out there now is the war for talent. It's critical for us at Boeing to understand that we have a limited numbers of STEM graduates—people we need to work with us on IT or as engineers. The competition to hire these people is fierce, whether it's coming from another aviation company, a tech start-up, or maybe even an Amazon or a Google. The playing space for that same group of STEM graduates has really grown, and I think mentorship becomes even more important as a result.

Because for us, it's not just about recruiting people who can design, make, and distribute aircraft, it's about retaining them when everyone else wants them too.

O'Donnell: Whom did you look to for professional guidance?

Lund: When I was relatively early on in my engineering career, I ran across Carolyn Brandsema—a chief engineer who would later became the vice president for the 737 program at Boeing for many years. Carolyn stepped up and she helped me through any issues that arose and she gave me opportunities, but a couple of things really stick out in my mind.

O'Donnell: What do you think of first?

Lund: When I was working as a manager on interior components for aircraft out in Everett [Boeing's factory in Washington State], Carolyn was in Renton, Washington, as a chief engineer on the 737 MAX. I had an opportunity to take a new job within the company, so I called Carolyn looking for some advice. Not only did Carolyn say, "Jump on in and take it," she really rallied the troops.

O'Donnell: What happened as a result of Carolyn's effort?

Lund: Soon after we had that conversation, my phone started ringing with Boeing's chief engineers and vice presidents of engineering, and they were saying, "Elizabeth, you should take this job, you're the right person." That was really a defining moment. The way Carolyn supported me throughout that process illustrates something important in terms of what good mentors do. Not only do they affirm you and provide the support required to ensure you are successful—they rally other people to create that environment.

Not only has Carolyn served as a mentor to me, but she has also been a provider of good advice, a cheerleader, and an advocate—all rolled up into one. That has been so powerful for me—and that is very much what I hope to be to other people.

O'Donnell: After learning from Carolyn, can you tell me about someone whom you have mentored?

Lund: I am now a mentor to a growing number of people, one of them being Molly McLaughlin. Boeing hired Molly, a bright and wonderful young engineer, right out of college, and I have watched her career from the beginning. Within a few years she became a first-level manager, and our paths continued to cross. And I picked her to go through Boeing's formal mentorship program with me one year.

One of the first things I asked her was what she would really like to do, and where her strengths were. Molly told me that she wanted to go and study for a dual master's degree in engineering and global operations at MIT. Boeing selects two candidates a year, and we pay for them to earn this degree. We worked to put together an application packet, and I wrote her a letter of recommendation, and she became the Boeing-selected candidate to go to MIT. She was able to move to Boston for two years to get her dual master's there. When she came back to Seattle, she reached out to me and said, "I'm returning, do you have any suggestions for jobs?" So we went through that same process again, and she's now a senior manager in our quality-engineering organization. It's not formal mentoring any more, but every four to six months, when something comes up, we go ahead and get together, and it continues to go well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B.R.J. O'DONNELL is a journalist based in Washington, D.C.

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