

Alison Dean (00:09):

Theorem is the leading innovation and engineering firm for the Fortune 1,000. We design, build, and deliver enterprise-scale technology solutions and are very excited to present The Breakthru Podcast, an ongoing series where we interview technology leaders to share their experiences and perspectives on what's next in tech. Welcome to The Breakthru, I'm Alison Dean VP of operations at Theorem. And today, we are talking with Dr. Ellen Snee, the former global VP of leadership development at VMware and has also consulted and coached at Cisco, Goodyear, Marriott, Pfizer, and Schwab. Currently, she is an executive coach and advisor and the author of the upcoming book Lead: How Women in Charge Claim Their Authority. Love that title. Ellen sent me this quote from Ginni Rometty, the executive chairman at IBM, "I learned to always take on things I'd never done before. Growth and comfort do not co-exist." Hi Ellen.

Ellen Snee (01:16):

Hi, Alison, nice to be with you.

Alison Dean (01:19):

I'm so happy to have you. First, I want you to share your personal version of that quote.

Ellen Snee (01:24):

My personal version that I use a lot in coaching is that comfort is highly overrated.

Alison Dean (01:31):

And tell me and all of our listeners and viewers why that resonates so much for you?

Ellen Snee (01:36):

It resonates because I think women get confused. When something feels uncomfortable, they can come up with a reason why not to do it. They'll say, "Oh, I'm not ready," or, "I don't feel authentic." That's the one word I'm always after. Because authenticity is truth and honesty with yourself. But very often, I find women, in particular, infuse comfort into feeling authentic, and they want to feel good about it than okay, uncomfortable. And as Ginni says, comfort and growth don't co-exist. To embrace growth, to take a risk assignment, to be willing to put yourself out there, it's uncomfortable. And you can say to yourself, "Well, that's not really me, I don't do that." For many years I said social media really isn't me. But it was really that I was uncomfortable going on social media. And now that I'm on it all the time, I feel different about it. And it was never really a question of authenticity.

Alison Dean (02:48):

Yeah, you're on a roll with social media. I mean, you've kind of blown me out of the water.

Ellen Snee (02:51):

I'm like a kid in a toy store. I'm learning something new, so I'm very eager to do it.

Alison Dean (02:57):

You're great at it, I think you're doing fine. I want you to share the journey that you had as a Catholic nun and how that laid the foundation for you to explore human development and psychology at Harvard and ultimately to leave the order and start your own consulting firm? Pretty impressive.

Ellen Snee (03:14):

Well, thank you. I like to call it my eclectic past. But there's really a through theme in all of it, and that is making a difference and particularly for women. When I was 12, I had this aha moment where I realized I wanted to be a priest. It was during a visit of our local pastor who had come for dinner. And my devout father asked him to give us a blessing on his way out. And as he was praying, I thought, "That's what I want to do when I grow up, I want to be a priest and bring comfort and solace to people." So when we were finished, I stood up and said, "When I grow up, I'm going to be a priest."

Alison Dean (03:56):

I love that.

Ellen Snee (03:56):

And the whole room went quiet and the adults looked at each other like, which one's going to tell her this isn't going to happen? And finally, Father Tom said, "Ellen, you could be a nun, but you can't be a priest because you're a girl." And that was the beginning of my life's mission. And for decades, I worked for the ordination of women and went on and got a degree in theology. I was going to go teach at a seminary and change the church from the inside out. But a lot of things happened, including the church taking a very steep turn in a conservative way. But before that, I went on to Fordham where I met the Jesuits who are a very liberal, education-oriented group of men. And again, I wanted to be a Jesuit, but they wouldn't let me. So eventually someone introduced me to a group of nuns who were considered the female Jesuits. So I quietly found what I was looking for.

Ellen Snee (04:54):

What I loved about my life as a Religious of the Sacred Heart—it was a group of incredibly talented, smart, accomplished women who worked so hard and made a difference in so many people's lives, in universities, working with the poor, working with the elderly. We did it together, and that was what I was looking for was a mission where I was giving to others but in the context of community. So that worked extremely well for me until the church started getting very conservative. And by that point, I had gone on to get my doctorate in human development. And the reason I did that was I had an experience similar to my childhood where I had gotten to be trained for how to interview, I was put in charge of recruitment and admission. So I wanted to learn some skills. And they had a skill set for the priests and they had a skill set for the nuns. And our women were far more like the priests in profile than they were like the stereotypical nun.

Ellen Snee (06:03):

But they wouldn't let me, they wouldn't let me. I had to use the other profile. So I decided I was going to go back to graduate school and figure out how to develop some tools for nuns. And then while I was at Harvard, the church changed and became very conservative and pretty strict on nuns. And we were working more one-on-one than we were in groups. And so when I turned 40, it all kind of came together and I decided to leave. But I'm still very close friends with all of the nuns in my order.

Alison Dean (06:40):

That's quite the story, Ellen, there is a lot to unpack there. After Harvard, you started FineLine Consulting and amazingly ended up running leadership programs for some of the Fortune 500. Can you walk us through what these companies were looking to solve, what they were looking to achieve with their services? And in addition to that, were there any particularly memorable experiences that you can reflect back on as it relates to the work that you did with FineLine?

Ellen Snee (07:05):

Well, let me say a few words about how FineLine came about because there are a couple of lessons in that. When I was leaving graduate school, I needed to get a job, and I wanted to work with women. And I had an opportunity to interview with Deloitte, which had the premier women's initiative. It looked like I was going to be hired by Ellen Gabriel who was the head of it at that point. And then she had a return of cancer and the whole thing fell apart. So I decided I knew what I wanted to do, I would just do it on my own. And I was naive enough to not realize I needed to know more about running a business than I did. But I was very lucky, I had the opportunity to run this women's leadership program, and a week of it was at Harvard.

Ellen Snee (07:54):

And during that, I met these rising stars in all of these Fortune 500 companies. And each year, one or two or three would invite me back into their company to do work with women one-on-one. We didn't even know it was called coaching. At that point, we still called it mentoring. And also to run programs for their high potential women. It all happened very serendipitously. And I believe in serendipity as being an opportunity and wide eyes, kind of knowing what it is you're looking for. I'm always saying, what is your deepest desire? What is it you want to do? Because when you know what you want, when a chance opportunity comes by, you can go for it, and it makes all the difference in the world.

Ellen Snee (08:50):

No one knew what they were looking for or doing if I'm perfectly honest. It was the late 90s, early 2000s. The women knew they were not getting any support that was useful. And the companies knew these women were really talented and they didn't want to lose them. So when I came along, I was a solution to an undefined problem. Coaching at that point was still pretty new. So there weren't all of these requirements and the 360 interviews, it was much more tailored to each individual. You asked about memorable stories, and I have two that I love to think back on. And they're totally different in nature. One was I got invited by a woman from Goodyear Tires. Now, I'm all about women. So going to Akron, Ohio to meet with the execs at Goodyear Tires was not something I would have figured out how to do. She invited me in, and I went with someone on my team.

Ellen Snee (09:55):

And it was the CFO who was the executive in charge of this. And he and the head of HR and another person came in, a big top-down meeting. And what I remember so distinctly is he sat there with a serious look on his face the whole time not saying very much. And I think he asked one or two minor questions. And then he turned to the woman who had brought us in and he said, "Mary, what do you think?" And she said, "I think we should do it." He said, "Fine, nice to meet you ladies, Mary will be in touch." I was like, "Well, that was easy." And what it said to me was trust and respect are

the greatest foundation for getting work done. And that this woman had all of his respect and all of his trust, and all she had to say was do it and we were in.

Ellen Snee (10:51):

And later, we did major work, we were coaching a half dozen of their top women. We ran a program for 70 of their up-and-coming talents. So that was one long story. The second one was very early in my career. I was invited to come to meet with the CEO of a very well-known software company that no longer exists, and has since been acquired about coaching their most senior woman. And I got in there, and he started saying things like, "Well, if you can fix this, and the problem she has is this." And I was like, "You have the wrong person." So I very politely said, "I'm sorry, this isn't going to work because I don't do fix-it coaching, I do developmental coaching with women."

Ellen Snee (11:48):

And with that, I pushed my chair away and stood up. And he was like, "Oh, oh, oh, oh." I don't think anyone has ever done that to him. And I sat back down and we talked a little bit further. And I was clear about what I would and wouldn't do. And I looked back on that today and think, where did I get the nerve? And it wasn't nerve or chutzpah, it was just clarity about my mission. I knew exactly what I was doing, and I knew exactly what I wouldn't do. And so it was very clear and easy to do that. And it was a good experience to have early on because it gave me confidence later on.

Alison Dean (12:29):

To push back if you needed to, and to be very clear with what it is that you do deliver on. So yeah, I bet that was a very good lesson in that, that's awesome. So you consulted for a number of Silicon Valley companies, were there any recurring themes with what they were looking for or looking to solve under your guidance?

Ellen Snee (12:47):

I came to Silicon Valley in 2002. And once I started gaining clients and spending more time with companies, the first thing that struck me I have to say is that it felt like going back 20 years because so much progress had been made in developing women, appreciating women, women's advancement. And here it was just a new wilderness. Companies were not mature, so they weren't mature around diversity. And that was both a shock and an opportunity because I felt like I had all the wisdom and experience to offer. Having said that, because it was still so relatively new, it wasn't on the radar, never mind looking to solve problems. So I began working, I did a fair amount of work at Cisco because Cisco had early on introduced coaching for men and women. And I was brought in as one of the coaches for women.

Ellen Snee (13:54):

And then I worked with another colleague who had been in the valley for decades. And he brought me in for any new clients he had who were women. And so I kind of got brought in person by person, which I love. And it was all going great and then one day one of my clients said, "Oh, I wonder what it would take to hire you?" When I went home, and by that point, I was married I said to my husband, "She just said the weirdest thing to me today." And he was like, "Well, go talk to her." And I was like, "Well, that's scary to go in-house." It's just another case of my own discomfort with taking on something different even though it was the best thing that ever happened for me.

Alison Dean (14:43):

Tech is a largely male-dominated realm for us. It's encouraging for me to hear that even in that time you were brought in to help guide the women that were there. I'm wondering what that entry point looked like, was it one of the women that was calling you in?

Ellen Snee (15:01):

In the valley, it was a case where another consultant had a contract with a company, and had been doing coaching across the board. And then I became the kind of specialist. So I was brought in one time when a company was about to go public, and they wanted their chief accounting officer to have some support for that next step. Or another time where the general counsel was doing a fabulous job but was perceived to not have great communication skills. That always goes both ways, but it's easier to fix the woman than to take it on as a relational issue. Either that or a company really was taking a step in offering developmental services and I was part of a team. But it was usually through somebody else because I was starting over again just as a solo.

Alison Dean (15:59):

But still impressive, Ellen. The old adage, it's who you know. You were knowing all the people, Ellen.

Ellen Snee (16:08):

And word gets around. I think if you do good work, you become known. And what I've found when I was running my own company and then later here in the valley is that if you're brought in and you're successful, then there's another person they want you to talk to, and then another person they want to talk to. And so it's very easy to build a book of business once you're in.

Alison Dean (16:32):

Totally. Can you imagine if you had social media then?

Ellen Snee (16:35):

I think of that often, it could have been a totally different day if I had ever really got into marketing. But I was just very lucky, very blessed.

Alison Dean (16:44):

Well, I feel confident that you would have dove right in. I want to know about the previous initiatives that you worked on at other firms that helped drive how you prioritize what you first started doing at VMware because I imagine there were a number of things that they needed you for. But how did everything in the past help drive that?

Ellen Snee (17:05):

Great question. I feel very fortunate to have had the exposure to top-shelf companies that I did because I learned a lot of good practices even as I saw some things that could always be improved. But one thing that I saw over and over in the late 90s, early 2000s was an attempt to start work in the diversity space. And at that point, diversity was really primarily women. And I could predict that by the fifth meeting of a group the whole thing would dissolve. Because what would happen is there'd be great enthusiasm. And then the next meeting, even if they were executives, there would

be more people on the team. And then by the third meeting, they'd be trying to figure it out, what is it we're doing? And then they would start to ask the question, well, if we're doing it for women, what about the Asians? If we're doing it for Asian-Americans, what about African-Americans? But what about those who are disabled? And what about those who don't like coffee? To push it to the absurd.

Ellen Snee (18:23):

But you could watch in the third, fourth meeting where what had started out as a systemic intervention to address the attraction and retention of female talent, which was 50% of the population, then started to say, "But what about this group, and what about this group?" And by the fifth meeting, no one knew how to handle it. No one knew how to move forward in a way that could be systemic and run by the top executives and have one of everything. And so it would fizzle out or it would turn into employee resource groups where each group became its own identity. At that moment in history looking back, I think there were opportunities missed to have a broader perspective on diversity and inclusion because instead companies took the easier route to let each identity group have its own little group instead of understanding what were the corporate responsibilities. And I think companies are forced to do that today, so it's a catch-up.

Ellen Snee (19:35):

A couple of things that I learned from that for work I did with other companies but definitely when I got to VMware was it will not succeed if you don't have top leadership driving it. And it really has to come from the CEO. Now, the CEO can hand it off to the head of HR as the person who's going to drive it, but it has to be seen as owned by the CEO. That's what made the Deloitte program the premier because it was driven by the CEO from day one. And that's why it was so successful and became the model for everyone. The second thing was it has to be driven as a business venture. Not as a nice thing to do or an important thing to do or something HR will do for you, it has to be designed and delivered as any other business.

Ellen Snee (20:31):

Certainly in the valley but I think in any large company, that means data. So when we started the VMwomen initiative, first we started getting the senior women on board because you don't want to find out too late that some of them are not on board. And I remember one of them said, "Oh, no, I don't want any part of it because I don't want to be seen as a woman executive." That is not unique to her, but I think it was much more prevalent in the past than it is today. I think one of the great changes in the last decade is that women are finding ways to support each other and to work together much better than they did. So you get the senior women and then you get a working group, and then you figure out what is your goal?

Ellen Snee (21:22):

And our goal was to increase recruitment, advancement, and retention of women in every org at every level. And we hired a data analyst company, and they collected the data on the last five years of who came in, who was promoted, and who left by gender, by level, by org. And with the data, I went in to meet with the senior execs of each org. And I would take out my little PowerPoint presentation and open it up to all of the red, which meant that the women were not on par with the men. And they would flip through it and they'd say, "Huh, we have a problem. Now, what are we going to do?" Now, you have an executive without any pushback saying what are we going to do?

So then we were able to consult with them on what they could do in their org, and they would typically get a team together. But then they had to report back to the CEO on what they were doing. And within three years, their bonuses were tied to improvement in diversity.

Alison Dean (22:31):

Wow, that's awesome.

Ellen Snee (22:33):

Yeah, that's one of my proudest outcomes of that.

Alison Dean (22:36):

Yeah. So when you started at VMware, was VMwomen already at the forefront of one of the things that you wanted to do?

Ellen Snee (22:44):

Well, it's always at the forefront of what I want to do. But when I was hired, I was told by my boss who was the head of HR, "I have brought you in to do leadership development and organizational development not to do women." It was like, okay, this is not the time, but I got to know women. And I spent time talking to them and doing my thing in my spare time but ran all of the other programs. And then fast forward about four years and Lean In comes out. And I know Sheryl Sandberg gets really bad press sometimes, but I have to tell you that she and that book made an enormous difference for women in the valley and women generally. For VMware what happened was John Chambers at Cisco was on a plane with Sheryl coming back shortly after the book came out.

Ellen Snee (23:42):

And by the time he got to California, he called his office and said he wanted every VP at Cisco to have a copy of the book, to read it, and they were going to have a meeting to discuss. So it was from the top. So that word came to our CEO at VMware, and he went into the head of HR and said, "So what are we doing about women." And she said, "I'll get back to you," and she called me into her office and said, "Go do it," which was the greatest gift I've ever had.

Alison Dean (24:17):

Right. Yeah, that boys' club. So what pillars can you speak to that helped in attracting, retaining, developing, and advancing women? But I also am curious if you have general tips as women rise in the ranks of leadership. It's a multi-part question, Ellen.

Ellen Snee (24:35):

Let me see if I can take it apart. Let's start with what can they do to develop and retain. Women have become very savvy about finding out what the company is like in terms of its record on this. They have access to that data. And if you're not a female-friendly place, you're not going to get the best talent, so that's the first thing. In recruitment, it's critical to have diverse people on the hiring teams. And you also need to have some rules, not guidelines, rules that the population of applicants put forward will be diverse. So it's not acceptable to put five white guys up for a job. The days of saying there's no one in the talent pool are over because we all know the talent is out there. Having a savvy,

diverse group doing the interviews is critical. And then having some provision for addressing unconscious bias in how the final decision is made.

Ellen Snee (25:47):

I remember sitting in on a meeting with an organization, the top leaders. And part of the meeting was they had two candidates for this senior role and one resume, and one was a woman. And I listened to them discuss the two of them. And with the woman, it was like she had everything she needed to have, but there was just this, they couldn't put their finger on it. But the guy, he didn't have as much in terms of what the job required, they kind of hit it off with him better. And so I just reflected that back to them, "I kind of see this dynamic going on, and I'm just wondering where's the reluctance to give it to her coming from?" But they ended up giving it to her after some long and hard conversations. And so you have to have someone who's not invested in the team really in the room to provide that kind of feedback.

Ellen Snee (26:52):

Now, on development, I think companies still haven't figured out how to develop people well. They put together a lot of programs, and I was involved with a lot of that, bringing in speakers. I'm not sure that's going to be the long-term solution because it's fun, and it's interesting. But I don't think it sticks. And I am biased as a coach, but I think that a more customized approach to help a talented individual have their own board of directors, which can be an outside coach, it needs to be an inside sponsor. A range of people who will provide feedback and provide encouragement. For women, they need encouragement, they don't need negative feedback. It's okay if it's positive, they're going to grow and blossom and do more. Because if you give them nine positive compliments and one negative and have someone ask them the day after what their performance review was about, the only thing they'll remember is the negative one.

Ellen Snee (28:03):

So you need to keep that in mind if you really want to help someone to grow. Well, advancement is a place where the issues of equity are really problematic. And I'll tell you a couple of things I've seen that need to be addressed. One is that men, both applicants or the rising stars, the senior men look at younger guys and think, "Oh God, what potential he has because he reminds me of me at that age." They look at women and they say, "What performance. She just is a great performer, I don't ever want to lose her. And I may not want to promote her because I may have to lose her in doing that."

Ellen Snee (28:53):

So there are really two different scales used for the promotion of men and women. You hear it over and over, and over, and over again. They'll place a bet on a man, they'll give an interim position to a woman like, "Why don't you do this in addition to your current job. And then if it works, we'll promote you." There are dozens of stories like that. And I think people just have to be more scrupulous or more attentive and paying attention to what's going on and really asking is this fair? Because they're losing their talented women.

Alison Dean (29:34):



Yeah, yeah. So in general as you're in your practice with all these amazing women that you talk to, are there tips that you find yourself constantly repeating to these women as they're rising in the ranks of leadership?

Ellen Snee (29:49):

There are several. So the first to go back to something I said earlier is, do you know what you want? And then do you know how to articulate that? I think that another set of points is about thinking about performance and promotability as two different entities, two different realities because women strive to be high performers. I often joke and say, "Just cut back to 100% from the 150 you delivered early on and you'll still be ahead of a lot of your colleagues." And everyone laughs because it's true. Women don't have enough time because they do 150, just cut back to 100. Really work at that and then use that other time for something else. The second is promotability requires three sets of competencies in addition to performance. The first is it's about relationships, but not the relationships women focus on.

Ellen Snee (30:54):

The key for promotability is relationships with the senior executives because they're the ones that make the decisions about promotion, they're the ones who have to know you. And women fail to find ways for those executives to really know them. And what can you do to change that? You can apply for a senior job even if you know you're not going to get it because you'll go through the interview process and you'll get to interview with all the senior executives. You can come up with an idea and ask to bring it around. You could ask to have 30 minutes just to know. There are so many things you can do, but you have to ask, you have to make them happen because they're not going to happen for you, they're essential.

Ellen Snee (31:40):

The second is you need to demonstrate your ability to exercise judgment in moments of risk. So this comes to raising your hand for stretch assignments, for things that push you beyond your comfort zone and current job so that the execs can see can you do it, can you do a stretch assignment? Can you handle risk? Because senior positions are all about risks. And so that gives you a chance to show you're not only the absolute best ever senior director, but there's more to you, and you can do that. And then the third is to become systemically astute. Companies are individuals, relationships, networks. And the network and the culture and knowing how decisions are made and knowing who are the influencers. That's where I'm learning now with the book to try and figure out who are the influencers for my book. And I always had a good instinct for knowing the importance of influencers. And I'm good at pushing women to identify who they are, what are you going to do to build that relationship? Because it's not a *nice*, it's a *necessary*.

Alison Dean (33:07):

I like that, I like that. It's necessary. So I try and weave in questions from previous guests that have been on the show. So, Omar Ghani, he is the head of strategic sourcing over at Reddit, he sent me this question for you. "What is the best advice that you can give managers and directors of what to look for in candidates when they are hiring?"

Ellen Snee (33:30):

So I think in hiring, if it's for my team, I want to look for someone who is smarter than me, who brings something to the team that nobody else has but has the interpersonal skill that will be an asset, not a stick. So that's one thing. I'm a big believer in curiosity and imagination, especially today when we don't know what the future's like. And I think that rigid, it has to be this way and only this way approach is not going to work going forward. So I think someone who thrives in flexibility, who is creative and curious. It's those skills of being able to imagine the future, have the capacity to come up with ideas but also know how to work with other people so that one plus one equals three.

Alison Dean (34:30):

Yeah, one plus one equals something's happening. What Silicon valley projects come to mind that you're a part of for being the most memorable?

Ellen Snee (34:38):

There are two events actually. The Grace Hopper conference, which was begun I think 10 or 15 years ago, and it's for women in technology. So we had 70 people from VMware including a dozen of the top execs. And to see that many women engineers and in technology in one place interacting, learning, talking about things I'll never understand. But the most fun was to see the SVP of one of the engineering divisions, a guy in the mix, and at the party dancing up a storm because it just said to me there's hope for engineers and women in tech. And the second was a program at Stanford on the future of work. It was a number of years ago, I think it was in 2010 or 11. And they were really grappling with what is it going to be like in the future? They had someone reporting on a study in China on a hybrid work schedule, something we never dreamed we would be talking about now.

Alison Dean (35:50):

That's awesome. Boy, has 2020 given us a whole lot of future of work nuanced conversation, hasn't it? Your upcoming book Lead has a wealth of information and some fabulous real-world stories that you share. And I want to call attention to a statistic that you referenced. The 2015 right management global career conversation study reported that only one in five female leaders has ongoing career conversations with her manager. Now, you already unpacked a bit about performance and promotability, was there anything that you didn't touch on as it relates back to this statistic that you want to speak to?

Ellen Snee (36:28):

Yes, yes. Having career conversations is probably the most important thing for women to do and for managers of women to do. I'm saying whatever the performance review, whatever the HR process is, just do it and be obedient. But a real career conversation is like, what do you want to do? It's going back to that important question, what do you want? And women need to be able to ask that question and tell people in power in their company what that is. And the senior people need to listen, and they need to hear it. Not just listen, but to actually hear it because I have had too many clients try to have the conversation, even half the conversation. And then a year later it's like it went nowhere, no one remembers it. Eventually, women then start listening to the recruiter and answering the recruiter, and they go.

Ellen Snee (37:31):

And then when they go into their boss to say I'm leaving, it's like, what, why? I remember when I first started this work in the late 90s, it was a woman at Pepsi. And that was the biggest story of the day. She was going to be the first woman EVP or possibly CEO. And when she went into the CEO and said she was leaving, it was an earthquake on the East Coast. I talked about her for years, I don't talk about it out here. That's like 20 years ago and women are still leaving for the same exact reason that no one is proving they want the woman to stay by giving her the opportunities. Over and over, her male colleagues get the jobs she's asked about or get jobs she never knew were becoming open.

Ellen Snee (38:34):

And there's a lot in the literature now about doing away with performance reviews, that they're not doing that anymore. But then what are they putting in place? And as a manager, you need to let this person know you care about where she's going. In today's world, the younger generation sees their career as two years here, two years there. And you want to at least build a good relationship so that they will consider coming back at a later date.

Alison Dean (39:04):

100%, I agree with that. It's a little scary I think sometimes for managers to bring on someone that maybe is newer in their career and the fear that you're grooming someone and then they might go. And you're like, oh, it's all this time or investment lost. And I think it's needing to reshape what that means. How much value can you bring to this person who is going to have to have career growth and change and all that stuff and at least create the relationship that's positive enough where you'll be a fixture in that person's life as they rise the ranks? My old boss at Disney, I remember when I was working for him, I think it was right before when we were at the startup company that he was one of the founders of. And I remember at some point he said to someone or in passing, he was like, "Be nice to Alison because I know that she's going to be my boss one day."

Alison Dean (39:54):

That type of comment obviously leaves an impact on you, right? You're like, "Wow." But it's these sort of things that not all managers understand as much as they should. It's something that systemically needs to shift. And it's not necessarily obvious how you can imbue these things into managers so that they feel okay about it. So many things to consider.

Ellen Snee (40:16):

That's right. But what's more fascinating and challenging and rewarding than developing other people, and who has more impact than bosses?

Alison Dean (40:26):

You're saying correct things. I want to know, does the meaning of executive presence differ across the companies that you have worked for?

Ellen Snee (40:35):

So let me start by saying executive presence is a term I love to hate. And it's because over the years it has been used as code to describe something that isn't working right. So in the early days, I would be brought in to work with a woman to help her develop executive presence. Sometimes that means

she makes the male bosses or the male colleagues uncomfortable. And so she's the one who has to be fixed, she's the one who has to change so that her presence as an executive makes them feel comfortable. There's that dimension to it. But there also is a certain gravitas that when you are an executive when you are in authority and have power, you need a certain gravitas. My favorite person for gravitas is the young Swedish environmentalist.

Alison Dean (41:36):

Greta Thunberg?

Ellen Snee (41:36):

Thunberg, yeah. I think she has enormous gravitas.

Alison Dean (41:40):

She does, Ellen.

Ellen Snee (41:41):

At like 18. So it's not a certain personality or what you wear but how you put yourself together, how you dress, how you present, how you talk, the language you use, the body language, all of that, is it composite to have an impact on other people. It's not so much what you do, but it's how you make people feel. So that differs in different companies. What I would wear going up to Schwab in the city isn't what people wear in the valley if you're going to be working with the engineers. So you have to be true to yourself and find your own rhythm but also recognize that different cultures are different.

Alison Dean (42:30):

I remember when I went to Disney, because I was working in Imagineering. And specifically working in R&D, which is this amazing bubble of Disney Imagineering where robots are passing you in the hallways, and it was this crazy place. I remember the persona that I had there, I equate it to Mrs. Frizzle in the magic school bus. I had the most quirky outfits that I always wanted to wear because it just felt so fitting. I was on this epicenter of creativity and I just thought, "Yes, I should have a dress with school buses all over it, and this is the perfect time to wear it."

Ellen Snee (43:05):

That's right, and it's exactly right. And I want to pick up on your comment about persona because I often say to women when the issue of comfort or authenticity comes up that work is a stage and you are an actor on that stage. And the important thing is to have that perception, to put on whoever your favorite actor or actress, the one you want to be in this environment. And it's what you put on, it's what you do on the stage. And there's nothing wrong with that, it is a persona to be effective.

Alison Dean (43:45):

So true. What are the biggest lessons that you have learned from working with all these leaders?

Ellen Snee (43:51):

That people are always more fragile than they appear. That women, probably men too, can often put a level of interpretation on something that was said by a boss that makes it so much worse. And I think this has become so much more exaggerated in our time of instant messages. It was bad a few

years ago because emails got long convoluted. Now, the messages are too short, and so you don't have any context. I have seen that someone will be so upset because her boss said thus and such. And then I'll unpack the whole story, there's no data to say he meant something else, but there's really no data to say he meant that in a negative way. So it's important to go back and ask for more.

Ellen Snee (44:46):

And I have found that that's true in my own life. It's easy to put in interpretation on something without enough data. And it's important to go back and clarify and ask. And even when we're running so fast and failing to communicate, it's really important to keep clarifying the power of language and the power of clarification. But that calls for the meetings. And I think it's one of the things I worry the most about in our future of work where we are heavily remote in the sense that our lives are driven by scheduled meetings. And we have lost those serendipitous moments, those moments over coffee, those moments when you just pop in someone's office. That builds the glue and the marrow, it's what makes it all work. I think that's going to be a real issue to look at as we move forward. I don't know the answer to that because technology has not caught up to provide that.

Alison Dean (45:57):

It's interesting though that you bring that up because I'm thinking about it as it relates to my own team. There is an art to managing remotely and what that looks like. And some people do it really well and others are still figuring it out. It still is very different. If you're in the room with someone, it feels different than being over Zoom with someone, it's different. So I don't disagree, but I do think that people do it better than others.

Ellen Snee (46:18):

I agree. And one of my clients is totally remote, has always been remote. Every once in a while I'll say something about how we're coping after the pandemic, and she reminds me they've handled this all along and handled it well. I want to kind of correct my concern, I think there is knowledge out there from people who have been doing it, and everybody in the company has been doing it. It's a remote-only company. But I think in the companies where it hasn't been the norm and where they're trying to balance, well, some have it and some won't, that's where it's going to get really tricky. You're going from not in your DNA to having to learn how to do it. And then the danger of inequity along yet one more variable is going to be pretty serious.

Alison Dean (47:12):

I agree with you. Okay, a few more questions for you, Ellen, what are the most important lessons that you've learned from your own mentors?

Ellen Snee (47:20):

To trust myself, to find people who know more than I do. But really to have confidence. I guess I message what has been messaged to me, but I think my mentors believed in me more than I did along the way and have always been willing to be honest with me. It's the women and men who have been willing to be honest that I can then trust what they say rather than someone who thinks everything's wonderful or nothing's wonderful. And they're harder and harder to find.

Alison Dean (47:57):

Good answer. What conversations are you most looking forward to as you continue coaching?

Ellen Snee (48:04):

I'm looking forward to working with women on the challenges that are ahead of us because of the pandemic. One of those is I think a lot of people, men and women are reassessing what they want out of life. They're trying to decide what do they want to do now? Do they want to keep working? Do they want to do something different? Do they want to move to an island? And I think that's going to subside in probably six months and then people will be more grounded in trying to answer those questions. But the thing I'm looking forward to is helping people take that question seriously. I love the fact that the pandemic has pushed people to ask the question. Now, I'm looking forward to discerning with them on what the best approach is. And in particular, I'm eager to help women avoid making a premature exit.

Alison Dean (49:09):

Okay. This sounds like it could be the topic of book number two, Ellen.

Ellen Snee (49:15):

Or a good talk.

Alison Dean (49:18):

What future innovations, could be anything, are you most excited about? And that could be for you personally or in your professional undertakings.

Ellen Snee (49:28):

So I'm looking forward to the next level of Zoom. Because Zoom has enabled me to connect with people that even if they were nearby I never got to see, but now I get to see regularly. I get to see my three friends from college every weekend, it would take us six months to find a date to get together in-person. And to do work and to meet colleagues and learn more things, it's just been absolutely amazing. But I still miss the in-person touch with people. And I think that there are going to be new innovations in how we experience this technology. I don't think I'm going to be able to reach out and touch you, but it has come so far in such a short period of time. I think future innovations are going to be amazing, and I'm looking forward to that.

Alison Dean (50:27):

Okay. And we always punctuate all of our conversations with this question, can you speak about a breakthrough that you've had recently?

Ellen Snee (50:35):

Yes, yes. In addition to my breakthrough that now I love social media, six months ago I never would have said. I've had a more profound breakthrough after George Floyd's murder. I belong to an organization called the International Women's Forum, and it's a global organization of women leaders. And we have a Northern California branch that I've been a member of for 20 years. After George Floyd's death, I and another woman convened a group to start to look at racial equity. And we have met every Monday night for over a year in order to educate ourselves, to engage each other and after a few months, our members around what do we need to do to foster racial equity in

our country? And so it has been a soul-searching experience for me in terms of breakthrough to realize that my consuming passion for gender equity failed to carry over to racial equity until very recently.

Ellen Snee (51:56):

That I've been blind to my white privilege and to the absence of men and women of color in leadership roles in most of the companies. And I can see that now, and I regret it. But more importantly, I'm committed to letting this breakthrough really drive me to action. Even around my launch, I'm doing certain things to not just have a diverse population involved, but I'm really trying to change my framework and change my assumptions and recognize the history that our country has around race and how that has impacted women and men, and the enormity of that impact that we all need to do something to change.

Alison Dean (52:54):

Well, that's a pretty good, impactful way to leave us off. Although I am going to say, do you have any other final thoughts for us?

Ellen Snee (53:02):

I think I would leave with the hope that women will identify what they want, find the people who will help them pursue it, ask for what they need, have confidence in their competence. Because the world needs you, women leaders, and the world needs the men in the audience to really step up and take the steps that I've discussed that they can do as male allies to make sure that we have a more balanced and more equitable and better leadership for the future.

Alison Dean (53:44):

Well said, Ellen. I thank you so much, this was a robust conversation that we've had. We've touched on many things, so thank you.

Ellen Snee (53:51):

Thank you, it's been a joy and a privilege.

Alison Dean (53:55):

Good, good. Thank you for tuning into The Breakthrough brought to you by Theorem. Make sure to hit that subscribe button and leave us a comment. You can find us wherever you listen to podcasts. And for more great content, follow us on Twitter and Instagram at Breakthru Pod. That's break, T-H-R-U, P-O-D. I'm your host Alison Dean, until next week.