

Women in Business and Technology

Transcript of Episode 006 - Journey to the C-Suite with Marimekko's CEO

Featuring: Tiina Alahuhta-Kasko

Summary: In this episode Sonia shares her experience at the Lean In Seattle chapter's monthly event, and we hear from some of the attendees. Then, Colleen goes in-depth with Tiina Alahuhta-Kasko about her journey to the C-Suite at Marimekko, a renowned global design company. In the Cutting Edge segment, Colleen and Sonia discuss how the normalization of remote work could help solve tech's gender gap.

Find audio and more information at Microsoft.com/WIBT

[MUSIC]

Retail's big show, the 2018 National Retail Federation, or the NRF Conference, is returning to New York City from January 14th to the 16th.

For more than a century, NRF's annual convention has been an important gathering for industry leaders. Microsoft is one of the largest sponsors of this event and this year we are looking forward to having an in-depth conversation around home and online, front of house, back office and connected supply.

For more information about the event, visit www.nrfbigshow.com.

[MUSIC]

You're listening to the woman in Business and Technology part cast for Microsoft. In each episode you'll hear from woman in amazing technology and business roles. As well as male Ella who are helping make the industries more inclusive.

We are diving into programs that promote greater diversity in the popular, and bringing you tips on how to pull the successful career in a supportive community. Welcome to woman in business and technology.

[MUSIC]

>> Welcome to episode six of Women in Business and Technology, I'm Sonya Dara.

>> And I'm Colleen O'Brien.

>> We're gonna kick things off in our Community Connect segment with a visit to Lean In Seattle's monthly chapter meeting.

>> And then, we'll jump into an interview I had with Tina Cosco. She's the President and CEO of the textile and fashion company Mera Meco.

>> And finally, we'll wrap things up in our cutting edge segment, by diving into an article about how remote work can actually help shrink tech's gender gap.

>> In our last episode, we recorded live from Microsoft Ignite. An innovative conference for IT professionals to get up to speed on technology trends. It was the first time that either of us had the chance to attend and I'm wondering what you thought of your experience.

>> I loved it. I thought it was awesome.

And my role on the service marketing team now,
I'm focused on a commercial audience for the first time.

So it was great to connect with IT decision-makers
in person in Orlando.

I also had the great opportunity to demo and
present along with my manager on some of the latest and
greatest in the surface world.

What about you? What did
you think about the conference?

>> I had a blast.

I was really focused
on supporting my manager Jason Zander, and
his key note presentation on Azure Infrastructure.
So I love that I've been able to double back and
watch some of the sessions online that I missed in person.

[MUSIC]

>> For our listeners if you'd like to check out any of
the content from Microsoft Ignite, visit
myignite.microsoft.com/videos.
Specifically, to find all of the incredibly cool women
in business and Technology programming from the conference.
Search for wibt.

[MUSIC]

>> Community connect.

Get involved and stay connected.

[MUSIC]

>> On October 7th,
we joined over 100 women from the Lean In Seattle chapter for
an event entitled, Real Talk: The C Suite.

What it takes, and how to get there.

LeanIn is a non-profit organization founded by
Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg
with a mission to empower women to achieve their ambitions.

There are over 4,000 members in the Seattle chapter.

Which shows monthly events on topics including interview tips,
team building guidelines and fund raising strategies.

These particular Saturday morning sessions
featured an impressive panel of female executives.

Including Microsoft director of commercial category management,
Aimee Hanson.

We spoke with one attendee, Carla Rubio, a sales and
marketing executive,
who was particularly inspired by Amy's story.

>> I think it's important because sometimes we do lose
ourselves and like Amy spoke,
she's worked in a very male dominated work environment.
And I feel that when we know that other women are going
through similar situations and are overcoming and
have success stories, it really empowers us and
encourages us outside of the workplace.

>> We then spoke with a few attendees about their motivations for prioritizing the event.
Boeing aerospace engineer Katherine attended in hopes of finding a community of more women in STEM.

>> Sometimes, I go in a meeting room, and I'm the only woman and we were like five or seven people and I think is really important, especially in science technology fields to get more women in there and so yeah, I wanna get to know other like mind of women, try to encourage. There are women, and possibly younger women to get into the STEM industry.

>> Technology account executive Meridith Falzone was seeking different perspectives on career planning.

>> I decided to participate because my inclination, or how I think is so analytical, and the people that I'm around every day it's about data and dissecting the data and using that to pick things apart and make decisions and when I saw the piece about creativity and have that is so critical, particularly to getting to the c suite which is where I I'm headed or where I know I'm headed I should say. I thought this would be a really good exercise to switch my thinking, or challenge the way. I think about things, and the people that I'm around, how they think about things, too.

>> Marketing and Communications consultant, Christine Owner, is

a member of the leadership team for the Lean In Seattle Chapter. She's seen firsthand how these events can empower women in their careers.

>> Last month we had our negotiation event and I got so many emails from women who had gone into their imminent negotiations and got exceptional results because they asked and they knew what to do in that environment.

And they had to negotiate for themselves.

And it was incredible.

So I know for a fact that events like this change women's lives.

>> For more information about Lean In Chapter events near you visit www.LeanIn.org.

Now, let's move on to the interview.

[MUSIC]

Today we are excited to welcome to the studio, the President and CEO of Mara Mecco, Tina Alahouta Casco.

Tina, welcome.

>> Thank you.

>> Earlier today you had a fireside chat with corporate vice president Tuula Ryttila, for the Women of Microsoft and it was there that I learned a little bit more about the history of Marimekko and how foundational women have been at the company.

Can you tell us a little bit more about the company's history and the visionary women who helped to lead it?

>> Sure, my pleasure.

Marimekko birth story is very special and it very much had set the mark on the mission that we are and continue to be today on as well.

There was kind of late 1940s England was very grey, after the war.

It was a poor country during that time and there was a lot of functional needs that people had during those days but at the same time there was this sort of culture vacuum that prevailed.

So this visionary woman.

Her husband used to have an oil cloth producing factory in Finland, so what she did was that she started to gather around herself this group of young female artists and creatives.

And asked them to create avant-garde ball prints for her husband's factory.

The couple had remarked that people had been admiring the fabrics, but didn't really know what to do with them.

So the couple decided to organize a fashion show in Finland in 1951.

The idea was in no way to start selling.

It was just to give people ideas what they could make out of the fabric.

But obviously then what ended up happening was that people, when they saw what they saw on the catwalk that was utterly different, energizing in the gray post for the times, something that was very bold and positive.

They fell in love with it.

And people wanted to start ordering.

And that's when the couple decided to found.

[FOREIGN] is Mary's dress in Finnish.

So [FOREIGN] is Mary and [FOREIGN] is dress.

So funnily enough, this marks the beginning of kind of birth of the [FOREIGN] lifestyle concept.

So it all started from the art of print making,

that still is the core vehicle for

injecting joy into the everyday lives of people.

But then the first product that kind of started the brand story was the dress.

>> And even in recent years, there's been a lot of female leadership at the company, right?

>> Yes, so as you mentioned early on,

[FOREIGN] is quite synonymous with strong women.

The founder was a strong woman.

It was quite special when you think about it.

1950s, a woman to head a company and start internationalize it right away, having a lot of female creatives involved, kind of setting the foundation for our design language.

Then also when I started with the brand some 12 years ago, the woman who had led [FOREIGN] to also commercial success, who headed the company for 16 years and retired at the age of 80 years old, was a very strong woman.

So I think of the story, very empowering story of the brand.

Our mission has always been to empower people to be

happy as they are and bring joy to people's everyday lives with our bold prints and colors.

So I think that has also resonated with the female audience and that's how the journey has evolved.

[LAUGH] >> Absolutely, and you mentioned your 12 year tenure.

>> Yes. >> When you started 12 years ago, did you have your sights set on the CEO position?

>> No, definitely not.

>> [LAUGH] >> Not in my wildest dreams.

Obviously when I was a student at the Business School, and I had always been extremely passionate about the fashion and design industry.

And really wanted to understand the self expressive side of it and how brands are built, and so on.

Obviously, when it came down to the time of applying for internships, it was kind of obvious for me to apply for an internship at [FOREIGN].

When I started, something that really kind draw me into the company was the creative culture, and the very kind of open organization, where even as an intern, we were able to explore different sides of the business.

So that kind of really made the mark for me.

So for me, it was just a journey.

And I have to say that I've been very lucky during the course of that journey that I've always had the chance to do work that I

really enjoy and I'm passionate about.

And most of all, where I've always had the chance to learn.

And I think that's the key notion because life is about learning and kinda opening new doors and finding new areas you might find even more passion about.

>> Tina, in the US there are 32 female CEOs on the Fortune 500 list, which means that just 6.4% of the country's biggest companies are run by women.

Do you see this sort of discrepancy in Finland?

Or I guess another way to think about the question is, do you feel like a female CEO?

Is gender always a part of the conversation?

>> In Finland we don't have many female CEOs, public listed companies.

But that is changing and

the number women in those positions is also increasing.

I see myself as a CEO.

But I think that basically something that I've reflected upon recently is that I hope that maybe with my own example, with my own story, maybe it will help inspire some more women in these positions, should it be a route that they would be eager to jump into because I think that diversity in these matters is also an asset for everyone.

>> Yeah, I think you're exactly right.

We've stated on this show before a quote by Marian Wright Edelman and she says you can't be what you can't see.

Sort of touting the importance of representation and taking advantage of opportunities like this to be more public about who you are and the position that you hold. You've mentioned some of the core tenets of the brand around openness, authenticity, bringing joy to people's life. Earlier in the Fireside chat today, we had a bit of a conversation about how it's very rare that you would use those words to describe the fashion industry at large. So I wonder if you could tell our listeners how you as a leader are empowering your company, your directs, to make more inclusive, joyful products in an industry that doesn't necessarily tout those values?

>> Yeah, and I thought that that was an excellent question that you posed on the Fireside chat.

>> Thank you.

>> Because that really pinpoints the topicality of what we think that is the [FOREIGN] philosophy in today's world.

What we can see happening is that maybe with the uncertainty in the world, people are kind of going back to their roots in terms of values and also reevaluating what is important in life.

And what we can see happening is that there's a change in consumers' values.

There's a real definition of what luxury means too, from the status symbols going back to making the right choice as the consumer.

>> Like along the lines of corporate social responsibility.

Like people are voting with their dollars.

>> Yeah exactly,

understanding what is their role as a consumer, as well.

And what we can also see is that the consumers are gravitating

more and more towards brand that build on authentic,

timeless values, that have a true story,

that walk their talk, that have character and personality.

What we often talk about in our industry,

that there is this kind of thirst for authenticity.

And when you think about the [FOREIGN] story and

what we've stood for for over 65 years, we think that

maybe this thinking is more topical today than ever.

And that's why actually within the [FOREIGN] culture,

because it all goes and starts and ends with people.

So for us it's of utmost importance that every single

person that works with us, all the [FOREIGN] people from all

around the world, that we're aligned on these values.

Whereas many of the fashion and design brands have been built on

exclusivity, on kind of defined pictures of how one should lead

their own lives and how one should look like and be.

We've been always the brand to say and

encourage people to free their own creativity, make it their

own, embrace who they are and express this freely.

So it goes without saying that in everything that we do

at [FOREIGN], our values,

they also act as this kind of brand checkpoint.

So every single product that we make,
every single store experience that we create,
may be online or physical store, every event.

Every encounter that we have with our customer needs
to fulfill those values.

And we take full pride in that,
because we feel that then our mission is meaningful and
we can maybe make that little bit, the everyday life of our
customers around the world better.

>> Right, and as a brand that's globalizing and
has pretty rapidly, I imagine that that brand checklist
might get difficult to check off on the other side of the world.
So how do you make room for
cultural inclusion when you're expanding to a new market?

>> So a very important topic because obviously,
as you mentioned,
how the internationalization of [FOREIGN] has really kind of
fast forwarded within the last five to seven years.
We've grown from a company that has been very strong
in the domestic market into a company with key markets
in Asia Pacific, North America, Northern Europe,
with some 160 stores in 17 countries.

>> Wow.

[LAUGH] >> So
you can imagine the internal learning curves,
but also the evolution of the culture

into becoming a truly global company.

>> Mm-hm.

>> And that's why actually it is extremely important for us to get every single [FOREIGN] employee and also our customers involved.

Because we think that it's together with the customers that we actually create the brand through the community.

And where we spend a lot of time on is, what do these values mean, these kind of inherent core values of the [FOREIGN] philosophy?

What do they mean in different contexts, in different cultures?

How can we ensure that they're relevant and that they're understood in the right way, respectfully, for different cultures.

So, we work on those topics in a very integrated, together manner.

>> So, today's event was an amazing session with the women of Microsoft of some career advice that you dispensed, which was greatly appreciated.

But also, an announcement of sorts, of your partnership with Microsoft Surface.

Can you tell us a little bit more about how that partnership manifested, what are the products that people can look forward to seeing now, and why Microsoft Surface felt like a good brand alignment for partnership?

>> Actually, one of the kind of key foundations for the modern design has always revolved around the way that it's been created.

Ever since the beginning it's been created through this creative collective of designers and artists from different sides.

The business all gather around the same table, and then coming up with new progressive ideas.

So we've always believed in enriching collaboration and dialogue.

And we've always been fascinated by how we can stretch and what kind of ideas can come about by taking the modern commission of self empowerment and self expression and translating that into different areas.

And following that thought, we felt a very strong cultural match and value match together with Microsoft Surface.

Both of us representative, a very bold and positive inclusive approach, both taking pride in making beautifully crafted, original designs, and personalized experiences.

So I think that based on the products, the accessories collection that working on together really manifests the true match with these two brands when it comes to the products in this very exciting collaboration.

So obviously, we are very happy to offer some of our most iconic and also ordering classic prints, the skins for Microsoft Surface Pro, as well as,

now something that is coming out in the course of this fall to sleeve in the most monochromatic prints, The Poppy Print, which is almost the symbol of modern with the flower.

>> Yeah, it's my favorite.

>> And then [FOREIGN], a lovely Finnish word,
which is that very much modern new class [FOREIGN] design.
And actually, these leaves are printed in the [FOREIGN] house
in Helsinki, in our own factory.
So we feel that with these products,
we can give the opportunity for
the Surface users around the world to personalize and
express themselves also through the accessories.

>> I love it.

I love that you are bringing a little bit more personal style
to the technology world.
I know that Marimekko's fame, in the US specifically,
was helped by Jackie Kennedy, who wore
Marimekko dresses during the presidential campaign in 1964.
And personal style continues to be this big conversation on
campaign trails here in the US and
in major industry board rooms.
But it's not very popular in the technology industry
where Mark Zuckerberg's hoodie has become sort of this
iconic state ball of what we were to work.
So do you have any advice on why it's important to invest in
how we show up at work and the importance of personal style?

>> Yeah, I think it's really all about you and
your own personality.

And I think that when you wear something that you feel comfortable in, something that reflects your own personality, you feel kind of a stronger sense of self.

So I think it's really all about that.

And I think it's really all about making your style you.

>> Mm-hm, I also think a lot of the Marimekko prints are so memorable.

And I think about wanting to make a big splash, a big memorable splash giving a presentation, how I always think a little bit more about what I'm going to wear on those days.

Marimekko has seen some incredible growth over the past several decades since it's founding.

During your tenure at the company, during those 12 years, what have you been most proud of?

>> The people, of course, that is my true passion and that really is my key source of inspiration every day.

And I think it's beautiful to be able to work with even more continuously more international group of people around this shared of bringing joy to their everyday lives and empowering people around the world with our designs, with the bold prints and color.

We feel that we're in a meaningful mission today and for tomorrow.

And it is extremely energizing and inspiring to discover new learnings along the way of our shared journey with our people and see the individual and team's growth stories along the way.

[INAUDIBLE], the other founder,
understood that design is a universal language that connects
people across cultures around the world.

So we're on this journey today and it's been very exciting to
be able to see the strengthening of our international foothold,
and most of all, to see the impact when people find
joy through our desires in our everyday lives.

So I think that kind of really makes the mark.

>> Yes, with such an international team, I imagine
technology is a significant part of your day-to-day.

How has tech changed how you do business,
maybe both internally at the company but also externally,
how you're showing up to your customers?

>> This is an area in which we are actually looking into
pushing progress further in.

Traditionally tech, style, and
fashion industry's quite conventional.

There's a lot of long traditions and ways of working.

And we believe that developing this technology and
digitilization, it just offers completely improved place for
doing things.

And this is something that we see as a tremendous opportunity.

So how it obviously translates to us today, obviously,
it has a lot to do with how we meet with our customers.

And something that really connects the Marimekko friends
around the world is if you're a Marimekko fan in Finland,
or if you're a Marimekko] fan in the US, or in Japan, or anywhere

in the world, you have something you can share with each other.

>> Mm-hm. >> So for

us, our approach for building the whole brand is really about building it together with our customers.

So building this community of Marimekko Friends, and creating even further and more interaction between that community, and within that Community, so really kind of taking our customers as part of the brand journey.

What goes without saying is obviously the effects of digitalization when it comes to e-commerce and digital business opportunities.

I don't even go into that because it's so obvious.

But something that we're continuously thinking about and planning is how can we use digital tools in which our physical store experience.

And I think that is also very exciting because, at the same time, what we can see is that consumers around the world, when everything is available digitally, there's still a place for physical retail when you're able to create true emotional experiences and adventures.

But I think that, even within that experience, digitalization can offer enriching tools to build that.

>> It's great to hear that you've been able to connect your fans, regardless of location.

Here at Microsoft, we have this great program, called the Windows Insider Program, where, regardless of location, our fans are helping build the Windows

product around the world.

>> Wow, exactly.

>> So it's an incredibly inclusive step for a company to take, to round up fans regardless of where they are in the world, and commit to a product development journey with them.

>> I fully agree, fully agree.

>> To wrap things up here, can you share a piece of advice for anyone listening who didn't realize that CEO of Marimekko was a job that they could have, and wants to be in your position one day?

What I would probably say is just to keep an open mind and a curious mind.

I think that's kinda the two things together that really kinda helped me on my way.

So if I, in hindsight, think about my own journey to this position, I took steps that I could never have imagined when I was in business school. I could have never imagined myself Being an acting interim, creative directive.

Not being a designer myself, or working within supply chain, which was not my core.

So I think that it's really all about understand that it's a path of learning and sometimes you might find your truest passion in the most surprising places.

So open curious mind and really kinda use
mistakes as kinda seeds for personal and team growth.

That's really great advise.

Here at Microsoft we often times refer to that culture of failing
fast or staying curious as growth mindset,
which is an ideology coined by Carol Dweck,
that we've adopted here as a way to innovate more quickly.

>> Tina, thank you so much for the conversation today.

>> Thank you.

>> I really appreciate you sharing your learnings, and
I cannot wait to see the products in store.

>> Thank you.

>> The full collection of for Microsoft surface accessories,
including the skins, sleeves and more is now
available at Microsoft stores and at www.microsoft.com.

>> Cutting edge, our take on stories in the business and
technology world.

[MUSIC]

>> In this week's cutting edge segment, we're going to discuss
an article that was published on Huffpost this summer, entitled
Girl Power, how remote work can help shrink tech's gender gap.
The article starts off by citing a study from the National Bureau

of Economic Research which suggests that homeworking lead to a 13% performance increase.

And homeworkers also reported improved work satisfaction and experience less turnover.

I have definitely experienced this myself.

I know that cutting out the commute from my day, and having more access to the comforts of home, make me feel a little bit more productive.

I'm not shuffling in between meetings, I don't have to schedule time in my day to go get lunch, with everything at my finger tips, I definitely feel more productive on days that I work from home.

>> Yeah, and the article then juxtaposes this with stats, specifically about women in the workforce.

So the first stat is the National Center for Women in Information Technology reported that 56% of women in the tech industry leave their jobs mid career.

The second stat is Pew Research Center states that 51% of women said being a working mother made it difficult for them to advance in their careers.

In a third stat, a study from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee found that close to 33% of women left the tech industry because companies were not allowing work-life balance flexibility.

And I know personally for me that was one of the main reasons why I even looked into Microsoft, is because they actually are very good and vocal about how they promote work-life balance.

>> Yeah, sort of across the board,
the tech industry is heralded in juxtaposition to the finance
world as allowing for greater work-life
flexibility because we have the technology to empower that.

>> So then the article concludes by suggesting that remote
working benefits women who are wanting to begin families
by providing them with the physical flexibility and
time self-management options that they need.

>> But the big problem that I see here is that that same
study that's cited at the beginning of the article from
the National Bureau of Economical Research
also suggest that for these home workers, they're promotion rate
conditional on performance was falling.
So people working from home,
people working remotely, aren't getting promoted
at the same rate as people who are showing up in the office.
And consequently the result of more women working from home
might mean that even fewer women are rising to the upper echelons
of business and
technology companies to lead those companies.

>> Yeah, I agree.
Until remote work becomes more of an industry norm across
the board and the concept of showing face is not
an input to employee performance.
Unfortunately, I don't really see this as

being a solution for us.

I mean, I personally love to work from home and I think I am also very productive when I'm at home, but if I were to know that that was me sacrificing, then, a promotion cycle, I'd be weary of it.

But fortunately, with the increasing popularity of coworking spaces, like the Riveter, and the Wing, they're normalizing working remotely.

I'm pretty hopeful that flexible ways of working will prevent women from needing to decide between family and work.

All right, well, I think that was a great episode, [LAUGH].

>> I agree, great work this time around and as a reminder to our listeners, please subscribe to our show, we appreciate any readings that you're able to provide and please share our show if you know someone who you think might like it.

Send them a quick text and let them know.

We're available on Apple podcasts, Google Play, or wherever you get your podcasts.

And we're always looking for feedback, questions, any concerns you might have.

>> You can email us at wiet@Microsoft.com, or you can tweet us @MicrosoftWomen.

>> And we know that there was a lot of great life and career advice on this episode, so get out there and crush it this week.

>> Yeah, go get it.

[MUSIC]