

Women in Business and Technology

Transcript of Episode 016 - Celebrating International Women's Day with CVP Toni Townes-Whitley

Featuring: Toni Townes-Whitley

Summary: In this bonus episode, Sonia and Colleen celebrate a very special moment - International Women's Day 2018! To mark the occasion, the hosts break from their typical show format to dive into the history of IWD & offer some ways that you can take part in the moment. Toni Townes-Whitley, Microsoft Corporate VP of Industry, joins Sonia in the studio for an incredible interview, where she covers topics like career majors and minors, her work-life balance philosophies, and the importance of representation

Find audio and more information at Microsoft.com/WIBT

(Opening music.)

VOICEOVER: You are listening to the women in business and technology podcast from Microsoft.

In each episode, you will hear from women in amazing technology and business roles, as well as male allies who are helping make the industries more inclusive, and bringing you tips on how to build a successful career in a supportive community.

Welcome to *Women in Business and Technology*.

(Music.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Welcome to a special edition of *Women in Business and Technology*. I'm Colleen O'Brien.

SONIA DARA: And I'm Sonia Dara.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: For our dedicated listeners out there, this episode, number 16, might be coming as a surprise to you. We typically publish this show twice a month, but we're coming to you today with a bonus episode in honor of a very special occasion.

SONIA DARA: That's right. We're popping into your podcast feed today to celebrate -- drumroll, please -- International Women's Day!

We wanted to mark the occasion with a truly inspirational conversation that I had with Microsoft Corporate Vice President of Industry, Toni Townes-Whitley.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: So today's episode format will be a little different from our typical shows, and that's because we wanted to bring you as much of Toni's interview as possible.

But before we jump into that conversation, I think that we should take a few minutes to learn a little bit more about International Women's Day, or IWD. Sonia, what do you have for us?

SONIA DARA: Sure. IWD takes place on March 8th, and is a global day of celebrating the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women. The day marks a call to action for accelerating gender parity.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: IWD has occurred for well over a century, I couldn't believe that when I first read it --

SONIA DARA: That's awesome.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: -- but that's really cool. With the first March 8th event supported by over a million people in Austria, Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland.

Prior to that March 8th, you know, becoming this lightning rod for the cause, campaigns for women's equality were led by the Socialist Party of America, the United Kingdom's Suffragists and Suffragettes, among a lot of other groups.

SONIA DARA: And today, IWD belongs to all groups collectively. It's not country, group, or organization specific. As renowned feminist Gloria Steinem once explained, quote, "The story of women's struggle for equality belongs to no single feminist, nor to any one organization, but to the collective efforts of all who care about human rights.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: This year, the IWD campaign theme is #PressforProgress. This notion of motivating and uniting friends, colleagues, and entire communities to think, act, and be gender inclusive.

SONIA DARA: The campaign challenges individuals to commit to action, whether that's challenging stereotypes and biases or celebrating women's achievements, concepts, and personal commitments that we've discussed a lot on this show.

And you can find all of that pledge information, the history we covered, and more, at InternationalWomensDay.com.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: While IWD is still this free agent in the global holiday game, the United Nations began observing it in 1975.

The U.N. actually has this entire entity dedicated to gender equality and empowerment of women called U.N. Women. This year, the U.N. Women IWD campaign is also about converting momentum into action, but with a focus on rural and urban activists transforming women's lives under the moniker of "time is now." You can read more about that campaign at UNwomen.org.

SONIA DARA: Yeah, I really love this call to action quote featured on their site from U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres, quote, "On International Women's Day, let us all pledge to do everything we can to overcome entrenched prejudice, support engagement in activism, and promote gender equality and women's empowerment."

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And speaking to a commitment to women's empowerment, Sonia, I can think of no better best to feature today than our very own Toni Townes-Whitley.

SONIA DARA: It was the most amazing interview ever! I love her. (Laughter.) (Music.) She's so inspirational, she's so well spoken, eloquent, total badass. I'll let the conversation speak for itself, let's roll that interview.

(Music.)

SONIA DARA: We're very excited to welcome Toni Townes-Whitley, the CVP of Industry, to our studio today. Thank you so much for joining us, Toni.

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Thank you. It's great to be here.

SONIA DARA: As the Microsoft Corporate Vice President of Industry, you lead the company strategy for driving digital transformation across public and commercial-sector industry customers. Can you tell us and our listeners more about your role and perhaps what your day to day looks like?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Sure. So in terms of the role, in some ways, it's a new role. We've combined all of our industry go-to-market expertise into a single organization that drives and accelerates our growth with our field sales team across really six core industries: Government, education, health, manufacturing, retail, and financial services, as well as about three to four emerging industries for us where we have oil and gas, if you will, and media and coms and a few others.

When I think about what my team does, the goal is really threefold: It's, first, to really nail down our point of view and let that be a consistently changing, adapting to market reality point of view about where Microsoft wants to light up its capability in these industries.

Second, it's about enabling our field team to feel confident that we can sell the Microsoft technology platforms, solutions, and services to these industries at every level, from the CIO to a CXO or business decision-maker.

And then, finally, it's really important that we have a feedback loop, that we start to learn the requirements of these industries in terms of how we build with the engineering teams, how we market with the marketing teams, and quite frankly, even how our executives land these messages with some of our top customers.

Day to day? Hmm. (Laughter.) It's a full-body workout. The job, you have to prepare for. Because I do span six to eight industries within a month, speaking to customers around digital transformation, engaging with our field teams on how to sell industry solutions, engaging with our partners, who are so deep in industry, often they're trying to understand how to attach to and build on top of our platforms. I can meet with government officials at the most senior levels, retail, so just if you think about even today, I've met with three different industries and started with the public sector into retail, manufacturing, this conversation. Next week, I'll be in three different European countries, going to a plant opening in Spain --

SONIA DARA: Wow.

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: -- with public-sector customers in Munich, and then with a range of different industry customers in Brussels at our EBC.

So it's circumnavigating the globe, it's hitting all of our core industries, it's driving the field teams, and mostly, my most excitement is engaging directly with customers.

SONIA DARA: So you mentioned a little bit about digital transformation, and you've added this new perspective of digital leadership to your work, not just connecting with customers with the right technology solution, but landing it responsibly and creating the right culture internally. What does a responsible technology rollout look like?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: So we think about transformation that's occurring across all of the industries. One of the reasons I joined Microsoft and one of the things I think that differentiates us as a company is this focus that we have on making sure we operate by principles, that we understand principles around security and privacy and transparency, even, most recently as you've seen in the book, *Future Computed*, our principles around and creating principles around artificial intelligence and data and sovereignty. And so it's really important when we're doing rollouts of transformations with our customers that we're doing it in ways that are compliant, that build policies, that sometimes right now lag the technologies that we can implement. That we think about and hold to our principles that the data belongs, if you will, to the citizen or to our customer, that we focus on our customer success, not just Microsoft success, and that

not only do we have a principled framework, but we're willing to stand behind that all the way up to a Department of Justice in our own corporate headquarter -- in our own country, to really change anything that comes against those principles.

And so we think about being responsible. It's about making sure, and we have more certifications, as you know, in security than any of our competitors in this space. But it's beyond just certifications.

SONIA DARA: Right.

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: It's beyond just having regulatory and compliant policies, it's about leading. It's about leading the conversation in the country as well as around the world. What's the future that we want for this planet? And are we willing to do the sustainable and the equitable activities?

So digital leadership that I've been talking about is, yes, we have to transform, we are, how we transform is just as important, and how inclusive we are, ensuring that everyone benefits from that transformation, is the ultimate in digital leadership.

SONIA DARA: As the nature of work is changing, there is a widening global gender gap within the workforce. You've previously quoted the World Economic Forum stat that by 2020, there will be one new STEM job for every four jobs lost to men, but women will only see one new STEM job for every 20 jobs lost.

In the same vein, the Institute for Public Policy Research published a paper in December that suggests a greater share of jobs that women hold have the potential to be automated. What is our responsibility, with those statistics in mind, as technology professionals and as citizens of the world?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: It's really all of the data is really leading to this same conversation, that we have to be aware of "pink-collar" jobs and the impact of technology and disruption as well as transformation on this very, very important part of the workforce and the diversity of that demographic.

And so what we're finding is for the first time, really since 2006, we see in the gender gap study that's run by the World Economic Forum, we're actually moving backwards. For the first time in 11 years, we're seeing that gap widen on economic parity, on social and political justice and engagement, and on education and attainment. It's starting to - and what the cause, the root cause of that that is being pointed to is around technology, that because women are disproportionately in jobs that are ripe for automation and for artificial intelligence, that somehow, they will be disproportionately impacted, and negatively.

I look at Microsoft, and first it's about acknowledging there's an issue. And as a company, I'm thrilled that we're out there having this conversation, looking at the data.

Second, all of our activities from DigiGirlz to Pink Cloud to STEM activities to really get that audience, particularly those through, I would say, classroom to boardroom. Getting women all the way through the technology continuum, staying excited about technology. We know that there are "off-ramp" years in college, right after college, three years into your career. How do we stimulate those opportunities? How do we make those opportunities available at companies like Microsoft and others?

How do we start to build the startup community for women, entrepreneurial activity, student activity? And so we've got a range of programs all focused on this continuum of classroom, and I'm really excited about our recent partnership with the Athena Alliance, which is all about getting women on corporate boards. We've got to go all the way across in this technology industry, and we've made some great strides in our own company, and we've got more to do. But this is the new dialogue that we're having around pink collar.

SONIA DARA: You received your bachelor's degree in public policy and economics from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School. We talk a lot on this show about different paths into tech. How did that education prepare you for the work that you're doing today?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: What I love about the economics underpinning of my academic pursuits was this idea around being able to model. All economists, if we can't get anything else done, and some of us are concerned if we'll ever get a job, it all starts with modeling. It all starts with being able to model and test against that model.

So when I think of the core skill sets that I gained in the economics and public policy, I start with the economic underpinning and that framework of looking at the world and being able to create a model, which really transcends, quite frankly, many disciplines -- engineering, computer science, all forms of physical science. And so modeling was very important.

Being able to run a regression against a scatter plot of information is really, to me, the newest kind of capability that I'm so thankful we did a lot of in school, which was regression analysis. Right now, we all have imminent amount of data and information coming at us, it's all about where you make decisions, where you focus. And running that regression is really critical to be able to know where to focus, what's the most important?

Finally, public policy helps you understand the interdisciplinary nature of all decisions that are made. So we make a decision for public sector to try to address an issue like refugees that are in camps, and how do we get the right resources? What does that

supply chain look like? Even though that's a specific issue and audience, it has so many policy ramifications and implications. Public policy is a great way to understand how every decision, every action, every investment in technology has, if you will, a corresponding action and set of implications.

And I think that's the intellectual framework that I draw on to do some of the work that I do right now across industry for Microsoft.

SONIA DARA: Since graduating from Princeton, you've received certifications from Wharton's Executive Education Program, NYU, and the Performance Management Institute. What is your philosophy around education and how do you chart your personal development goals?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: So when I think about, you know, just sort of after-degree education, through continuous learning, some of the institutes that you just referenced that I've been a part of have been about sharpening certain parts of my professional experience base.

Particularly at Wharton, it was around really understanding how companies manage their P&L, it was about how companies grow and what that balance sheet looks like. How am I going to talk to commercial organizations about technology and/or consultative capability without knowing what they're really held accountable for?

At the same time, you know, NYU, that capability was really around a very specific vertical that I was working at that time around real estate. And so one of the things that I think of when I think of continuous education, I really align it to my career approach. My career approach is both vertical and horizontal. It's like really climbing a staircase. At any point of your career, you're going to have a vertical climb, where you're going to stretch with new skills and really new experiences. This is really going to test you.

At the same time, there's going to be a horizontal step out where you get to apply what you just learned. And at any point of your career, you should ask yourself, "Where am I on the vertical and where am I on the horizontal?"

Same with your educational learning. Where am I gaining new skills, and where do I have the opportunity to apply that in applied models and applied innovation?

With what I see happening, sometimes people stay too long in one direction. They want the adventurous vertical climb, but they never apply their skill set. Or they apply their skill set, become the expert at the table, and not willing to take a next vertical step.

So my educational approach really follows my career approach. Coming to Microsoft was a vertical step for me. I had just done an applied step the five years prior, and so

you have to know where you are on the staircase, and you've got to be willing to keep climbing.

SONIA DARA: I love that analogy, that's great. Growing up, your father was a general in the U.S. Army, and your mother was a school principal. This notion of service seemed to be deeply embedded in your upbringing. You even went on to serve for three years with the U.S. Peace Corps as a village teacher in central Africa. How do you think about the work that you're doing as a technology professional in relation to that value of service?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Yeah, so first of all, I had no choice to be a public servant in some way. I am the child of public servants, and it was a mantra in our home, "To whom much is given, much is required." So I've been blessed ridiculously. And so the idea of service is one that's pretty deeply embedded.

I will say this: I will say that part of the decision to come to Microsoft and why I'm so engaged on a day-to-day basis at this company is the opportunity to be purpose driven in our technology. It's one of my core values that I've always seen technology as a means to an end, and that end is always about purpose and social impact.

And so when I first got to Microsoft and I had the public sector business, it was really important to take an external measure of impact. At that point, it was the 17 Sustainable Development Goals that had been approved by the United Nations. And take a look at all of our solutions and align them to an external definition of impact. Not what we say is impact, but what the world said was impact.

And so we've been doing that cross industry and our CityNext program, always looking at external measures of impact. Because at the end of the day, what gets my team excited, we've got such cool innovation, but at the end of every day, we're asking ourselves: How did it make an impact? Who did it change? What process did it improve? What world issue did it solve? That's where we get our energy.

SONIA DARA: I learned in your blog bio that you and your husband have five children and two grandchildren, and that you're currently working on your first screenplay. It's so encouraging to see such a successful business person with a big life outside of the boardroom.

In the wake of the debate about, quote, women having it all, end quote, it seems like there's a new narrative about bringing your, quote, whole self to work. But that hasn't always been the case. Have there been times in your career where you've felt pressured to hide or maybe suppress your life outside the office?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: I think it's difficult at different stages if we are discreetly focused on what was -- when I was growing into the industry, what was called "work/life

balance." I always questioned that because if we were ever to put my family on a balance with work, work would lose.

SONIA DARA: Yeah.

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: At the end of the day, I will always choose family. But I think that is a binary setup that is not really viable. What I have seen and what I've lived through with the five kids and four now, four grandkids, so yeah --

SONIA DARA: Four grandchildren?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: I'm just getting older and older.

SONIA DARA: Nice. (Laughter.)

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Yeah, we keep producing in the family.

SONIA DARA: Congratulations.

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Thank you. So -- but what I've seen is that we all bring some of ourselves to work and our work home. Some of my best ideas about work don't happen at work, and quite frankly, when I'm at work, there are times where the family dynamic is there as well.

Rather than get into some kind of odd binary construct, I think what we've found -- and my generation was told, "You can have it all." What I have learned is you can have it all, but not at the same time. There are, in fact, tradeoffs that you have to make, and one of my core values is personal boundaries. You have to know ahead of time what are those boundaries? There will be tradeoffs that we make, and a tradeoff, by definition, means it might cost a little bit. But you set and set the expectation of what matters most.

For example, my husband and my -- our anniversary, that's a special day for us. That's my guy, Big Poppa, he's hanging with me no matter what the share price looks like, if the team doesn't like me, if the customer isn't happy, he's still Big Poppa.

So that day is a special day. And you will find me leaving early on that day every year because that's our time.

So whatever your personal boundary is, you've got to set it and you've got to hold it with some conviction, and know that your career is a season, a set of seasons, quite frankly. And in any given season, sometimes you are over-arching for the company, just absolutely giving it all, and there are times when the company may need to over-arch towards you.

And so if you look at it as a longer continuum, I think it helps people look at where they are and which season they are, rather than this sort of constant pressure that they are daily doing some kind of balancing, juggling act.

Have I had some moments where I've had to make really tough trade-offs? Yes. There are times where I have felt like I have been deficient at home, there are times where I felt like I've been deficient at work. I think most women that you talk to of my generation feel like they've lived on that continuum.

What I did was allow my kids to all give me feedback. I don't suggest that for anyone else. Some of it was very difficult feedback, I'm getting over it now, but I allow them to give me feedback about what it felt like growing up with this mom moving in this many directions, and to help me kind of calibrate when I was too far leaned in or too far indexed in one direction.

So, you know, we did the feedback thing all the way through, and it did help me kind of direct course sometimes.

SONIA DARA: Full-time corporate jobs haven't changed much in the scope or time commitment from an era when most employed people, largely men, had a partner at home thinking care of family, food, other tasks. With such a broad perspective on different industries, do you see any trends on how work and life intersections are evolving?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Well, I would say cross-industry, there is the integration of work and life. And what I think is an opportunity for Microsoft is to -- using technology to enable that integration. People want to move seamlessly between the different modes of their day. And they want to be able to connect in and weigh in, whether it's sort of device agnostic, weigh in on the different parts of their lives.

And so I see much more integration and fluidity across industries. So there are many industries where there are front-line workers who are getting more and more empowered with new kinds of technology that they can work anywhere and they can be connected.

So probably the theme that I see most is this idea of being able to work anywhere and be connected and know how to engage with different forms of technology.

In the health industry, moving from data input to voice-activated text is really important because you now can see the patient. If you are in clinical care and all you're doing is inputting, you've been -- all of us have been in the situation of sitting in that clinic room and, like, almost waving to the clinician saying, "I'm still here," because all they're doing is data input.

So there are some great technologies that allow, by industry, folks to engage differently. If you're in financial services and retail banking, having a real immersive experience with your customer, because we've brought so much data to the fore, knowing how to have that in both EQ and IQ. I know a lot about what you're doing with my bank, but I also know and can read and understand what your experience is.

So I'm finding that people are getting more immersive in their way that they can work, a lot more freedom and autonomy. It's going to be interesting, I'm probably not far enough in -- in analysis of what that means in the traditional home setting, but I will tell you, I think people probably feel more empowered than they ever have, whether that's the female or the male side of that equation, however that works.

SONIA DARA: How do you foster a culture of inclusion on such a large team?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Look, I think inclusion starts with a diagnostic. It's hard to include folks without knowing who they are, how they work, what motivates them. So there's work to be done in an inclusive environment.

Inclusion, to me, is not just the act of inviting someone. There are many things that have been written, a lot of research that says you can be in the room and not feel like you're part of "in" group. And even the work that we've done at Microsoft to understand our growth mindset has really helped us to understand in group and out group. So just because you're physically there or you've been invited doesn't mean you feel a part.

So one of the things you have to be quite observant is to watch the patterns and engage with people to learn, what is it for them to feel included? Not my definition, but theirs.

So I look at my leadership team. My leadership team is an international team. I've got folks from all over the world, different races, different ethnicities, different ages, different gender, different background. First, I need to know what motivates each of them. Second is to help them connect to each other, right? So that they build some fabric of shared outcome, shared interest. And so that, I think, is also the role of the leader.

The third part in terms of building an inclusive piece is when you have a global team, some virtual, some you're seeing directly, they represent so many cultures. You've got to set a mission or a north star that they can all attach to. And that north star has to be reflective of different cultures and different outcomes.

And so when you set that mission, for us, for public sector, when I first got here, our mission was, "Lead the way." We felt, "Gosh, you know what? With government and public sector, when I think of cloud, security, artificial intelligence, workplace,

government can lead the way." It used to be commercial that always was best practice into government. Government can lead the way.

So we all got behind "lead the way." Lead the way for the company, lead the way for the planet. And, boy, I'll tell you, when you're all triangulating on a mission, it helps to, if you will, diffuse some of the differences that can create friction, and also inspire towards something bigger than ourselves.

So I think for inclusion, you've got to have a north star, and there's nobody who sets a north star better than our CEO. And I think that's why a lot of us have joined the organization, to be fair.

SONIA DARA: Absolutely. Achieving a diverse team is everyone's job, but women and people of color are called on disproportionately to proactively represent diversity at recruiting events or in interview loops to, quote, show diversity. Have you experienced this tax on your time as both a woman and a person of color? And how can we address the desire to diversity the tech environment, but to respect that, quote, representation is very rarely part of a job description?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: You know, it's a phenomenon question that is rarely asked, and I -- so I first want to commend you for asking the question. And I don't know if I would use the word "tax." Some people might see it as a burden. I see it as a responsibility. That I think it was said a few times in previous sort of conferences, as I lead the Blacks and Africans at Microsoft with Rik van der Kooi as executive sponsors of BAM, that diversity does beget diversity. It is important, and we should be aware of that, and open in our dialogue.

When I look at Microsoft as an opportunity, I do look to see what the diversity looks like. What is it to move to Seattle? What is available in this area? How comfortable will I feel? How comfortable will my family feel? So let's not act like that's not part of the equation, and it is a different conversation that diverse peoples have among each other when they're considering working at and moving their careers to Microsoft. So we need to use and leverage the community of diversity to bring more diversity, both our contacts, our associations, and our experience.

It can become burdensome when it is the only responsibility of that community. And so -- and, look, as someone who's an African-American female, as I say to my team and others, I don't come to work on Monday as a woman and Tuesday as a black person. I come, generally, as both.

And so in that context, sometimes you can feel it multiple dimensions of bringing women and bringing people of color, and people don't always see that there's diversity within diversity, that women of color do not necessarily have the same experience of white women at Microsoft.

SONIA DARA: Right.

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: And so let's acknowledge diversity within diversity.

In terms of the burden and sort of balancing that, one of the things I love about having Rik van der Kooi as my executive sponsor, my Dutch executive sponsor for blacks and Africans at Microsoft is that you need to have people outside of the community weigh in and engage and show that we can build diversity in many ways.

Rik is a phenomenal partner for that, and that happens across many of our ERGs at Microsoft. I would suggest that as a company, every time we have diversity as a discussion, it can't only be someone from that community that's speaking. That's when you know that it's actually become a collective goal, mission, and aspiration for the company, when more people feel comfortable having that discussion.

SONIA DARA: In addition to being an executive sponsor of the Blacks and Africans at Microsoft, you also supported last year's NextTech Africa event, that we had the chance to meet in Nairobi. What about these initiatives, though, prompted you to sign up? You kind of touch upon this, but you're dedicating quite a bit of time and energy into it as well. So what really prompted you?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Well, look, as someone who lived in sub-Saharan Africa from Gabon to having done courses in Senegal and living outside of Nairobi in Ngong, I'm a huge fan of that region. I see great opportunity for technology. I see other countries and companies sensing that opportunity and moving faster than some of our U.S.-based technology companies, to be fair.

It also means quite a bit to Africans to work at Microsoft to see parity and how we look at different parts of the world, how we look at opportunities. So NextTech Africa was an opportunity to represent Microsoft, to be a senior person in the room, to show that it was important. Obviously, anytime I can get back to Kenya, love it. Gives me an opportunity to be in one of the most beautiful countries in the world.

But more importantly, it also is important for Microsoft to not have, maybe through some unconscious bias, to not have a perspective on Africa that is limited and narrow. The technology opportunity, in fact, our highest cloud mix in the company is in Nigeria, right?

So -- and I give people that quote just to help people understand. Sometimes not having the large infrastructure and this legacy of technology allows countries to leapfrog. So we need to make sure that we don't have some unconscious bias in the way we think about investments, where we put our institutions, where we put, if you will, our research organizations, where we show up, and sub-Saharan Africa,

particularly, is an area that we have great, great promise. And so I will always support developer communities. As we saw there, what amazing technology --

SONIA DARA: Amazing.

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: -- and innovation occurring down --

SONIA DARA: The leap-frogging --

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Oh, the leap-frogging was just three-person, four-person companies, developers coming together and solving real societal problems --

SONIA DARA: Mobile financial services --

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: -- infant mortality, mobile financial services.

SONIA DARA: All that.

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: I mean, I really was so inspired being there.

SONIA DARA: How do you communicate the impact you're having as an executive sponsor to your leadership chain so that your time spent working with Blacks and Africans at Microsoft, or NextTech Africa, is not looked at as time away from your work, or too much focus on, quote, side projects?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: You know, it's the same integration story I say about work/life. You know, it's the minute you get into a binary conversation, you kind of lose the game, right? Because it will never be a see-saw between my family and my work, and it will never be a side project in how we show up as Microsoft in different ways.

So showing up as the leader for Blacks and Africans at Microsoft with Rik is part of, what I would argue, my role to promote Microsoft and to build diversity and inclusion at Microsoft, showing up in sub-Saharan Africa and at different events is part of my role to drive the industry and growth. I don't do it just as an interesting thing to do or a personal passion, it's actually driven with a growth mindset as well as the expected growth and long-range plan for our company.

So new markets and opening up new markets is what I think is a day-to-day job for me. But I think, overall, for leaders, where maybe that's not quite as aligned and they've got to feel some sponsorship, or feel like they've got to sort of explain that activity, my hope is that the entire leadership team of Microsoft always sees themselves as having a major and a minor. There's always a major and a minor from university. And so my major may be sales and industry, but there always will be a minor.

And anyone who I meet, I ask, "What's your minor? What are you trying to do?" Because, at the end of the day, we all have a day job, but I hope we're here for more than that. I mean, you -- why work at a company like Microsoft if you're not here for more?

SONIA DARA: You talked about diversity and inclusion. You mentioned a few places where it's embraced, but how do you think it needs to grow?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Well, look, I think we've got to be very honest with ourselves about -- specifically as it relates to diversity, we need to make sure we're measuring the difference between "build" and "buy" diversity. We can buy diversity from the market, but if we buy diversity solely without building diversity, meaning those who are here who are diverse individuals, have to see a career path, have to see progression, have to know that this is not, if you will, a "one-and-done" activity.

And so we've got to have some balance in this "build and buy" discussion of diversity.

I think we also need to look at diversity in a few different ways. About 15 years ago, when I was working with one of the global SIs, we started to look at what we called an "assignment board" which was our opportunity to say, "Where do we have diversity in the slate for some of the critical, career-moving positions in the company?" Because you can have a diverse pool, but if that pool is not set up against your most career-moving opportunities, the largest opportunities, at the end of the day, you will continually find that you have your diverse candidates need your diverse employees not as senior in the organization.

So I think that's an important -- the other piece is to make sure that we are aware of the mental bias that has been proven in so many different research studies on how we promote people based on what's proven and what's potential. And all of the research indicates that women particularly are promoted more so on what has been proven than what is potential.

That will always create a gap. So we have to be purposeful in looking at mid-year promotions and different kinds of cycles to say, "Hey, we have two of the same candidates, why are we speaking on proven in one and potential in the other?"

So there's some mindset shift, there's some process shift, and there's some cultural shift that has to occur.

SONIA DARA: In your 2017 profile in *Fed Scoop*, you talked about the personal agility that you've honed raising five kids in a blended family. Do you mind elaborating a little bit more on that?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Look, I don't think I'm unique in any way. Everybody has some form of family dynamic that they're dealing with. What's great about the five kids is the continuum of watching them evolve and almost going through the same -- the Groundhog Day, the same season over and over again.

But even with the same season, all the kids are different, and so they take us through some different paths along that. I think the agility is how to connect and engage.

You know, the example I give, when you have your biological kids at the table and they have a friend over, the friend comes over and spills red wine on the table and on the tablecloth, and your reaction as a parent is, "It's okay, no worries." You start cleaning up. Your own kid spills red wine on the table, let's just say you go to a different place. (Laughter.)

That is the reality of blended families, of the engagement that is, in fact, different that you have to, then, become -- find a new place of how do we engage and what's our new family dynamic?

That plus a husband who travels with his own career, parents who live next door, a large family, a needy cocker spaniel, all of that in the mix becomes a new agility model. I say sometimes I go to work to get my rest. But you're doing that agility model all the time. Each kid needs something different, they need me differently, they engage with me differently.

And so you're running that scatter plot, and the regression every day is: Hey, how do I work it today? Our rule in the family is, look, the 80/20 rule. If four of the kids are happy and one's pissed at us and it's -- as long as it's not the same kid over time, we're doing pretty good. We call it success. Yeah, we absolutely claim success.

SONIA DARA: Two thumbs up.

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Yeah.

SONIA DARA: You sit, currently, on the nonprofit board for United Way of King County, and advise the board of The Women's Center of Northern Virginia. We're close, but women still have not achieved parity in nonprofit board seats, holding only 48 percent of board seats as of 2015, according to *Board Source*. Nonprofit board service is a great way to strengthen ties to a community, to build your personal network, and to hone leadership skills.

Can you share any guidance on finding the board that's right for you?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Yeah. Look, I'm a big proponent of particularly women and people of color on boards. The board experience is one that really helps you

understand another dimension of how business occurs, how mergers and acquisition occur in the market, how industries actually perform, and what it is to really provide guidance to a senior leadership team.

I have been involved with board service and getting women on board for probably about 15 years now, starting with The Leadership Foundry in D.C., which I co-founded to try to get women matched to IT boards then. And now I'm part of the Athena Alliance, that several of my colleagues have also joined -- Gavriella Schuster and Allison Watson are leading up the effort to get more women on boards here in the Seattle area.

The piece of board service, I've always believed that your board service should look like your financial portfolio, meaning I have a combination of boards -- for profit, not for profit, public boards, private boards, boards you're paid for your service, boards where your service is not paid for directly, but you are in the service of your community. My goal is to have a blended portfolio.

I think it's important particularly to have women on some for-profit, paid boards. That is where we see numbers that are just over 10 percent in women of color, 3 percent on these boards on the Fortune 500. And so we're really pushing.

So I would ask, because sometimes community boards give you great board experience, but at the end of the day, getting on a for-profit board, getting on a private board is really critical, and some of that is going to take some sponsorship. And so I think people should have a plan to build their board service over time to match their sort of financial portfolio and to make sure it's diversified, and they get that range of experience.

SONIA DARA: So our listeners are always very interested in following up and finding where our guests are online. Where can our listeners find you on the Internet?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Well, it's a great question. I'm still looking for myself someday on the Internet. But, look, I blog frequently. I'm constantly blogging about issues of merit that I think are happening around the world, I'm traveling pretty much every month I'm in different countries. And so one of the best ways, obviously, through LinkedIn and other ways that I notice that people engage is they comment on and we're dialoging around the blogs that I'm hitting. And those tend to go seasonal to things that are occurring, major events that are occurring.

I'm heading to Worldwide Council for Sustainable Development in the next couple of months in Geneva to represent Microsoft and this conversation about sustainability is just phenomenal. So I look forward to that. I do a lot of public sector forums as well, and obviously just coming off of the National Retail Federation in New York, where we had a chance to do some TED-Talk-like activities around innovation.

So I would say probably following my blogs is the best way, and engaging in that way.

SONIA DARA: And then one last question: What does International Women's Day mean to you? How are you planning to mark the occasion?

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Yeah, so International Women's Day, I always really to mark. I have been at the U.N. sometimes participating in activities, sometimes I'm blogging about the activities, sometimes I'm meeting with women directly. I do have a couple of events that I'm going to be talking to women directly when I'm overseas as well as back here in the U.S.

I'm really concerned about that last gender gap report of 2017 from the World Economic Forum. I've seen such progress over time, and yet to be moving in the wrong direction is really concerning, particularly when the top two measures of where we are slipping back is on economic parity, and in political engagement.

And so I really want to beat the drum here on getting more women engaged politically with a voice and with economic parity. And I think as a woman of color, our statistics are abysmal, quite frankly, and this is something that I'm not willing to wait till 2050, not willing to wait till my daughters grow up for parity in this conversation.

We can start in the U.S., obviously that's where I'm located, on just getting to this conversation of parity in pay. And so I'm really happy to announce that Microsoft is also involved with Gender Fair, and I'll be participating in Vancouver with Kate Johnson on Gender Fair, which is the new label, if you will, it's the way to distinguish companies that are meeting criteria for equity for women, of which Microsoft does have a Gender Fair logo, which means we've met that criteria. We've still got a lot of work to do, but Gender Fair is sort of my new approach with Kate Johnson, who's really leading up that effort to really support those organizations, and as a consumer, support those organizations that support women.

And so that's sort of what I'll be probably doing for International Women's Day.

SONIA DARA: Thank you so much for joining us, we really appreciate it.

TONI TOWNES-WHITLEY: Thank you so much, I've had a great time.

(Music.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I've been following Toni's activity on Twitter, LinkedIn, and her blog for a while now. And I am so glad that we had the opportunity to get her wisdom in the studio and on this show. That was such a killer interview.

SONIA DARA: I know. I left the recording studio that day feeling so inspired. It was fantastic getting to interview her. And I knew that we had to bring this conversation to our audience, really especially on this day, on March 8th.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Listeners, if you're feeling inspired by this interview to really embrace International Women's Day today, we have a few different ways that you can truly mark the occasion. We've given you a little taste of the history behind the movement, but there's so much more out there.

Do some research on the background of IWD so that you really feel connected to the meaningfulness of this moment.

SONIA DARA: And while you have your Web browser open, do a quick search for International Women's Day and the name of your hometown. There are a ton of events happening around the globe to honor the importance of IWD.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Here in the Pacific Northwest, I will be heading to Be Bold Seattle, an International Women's Day event at Benaroya Hall. Tweet me @colleenobrien if you'll be there, too.

SONIA DARA: And whether you're tweeting at Colleen, or just scrolling through your feeds, you can participate in the broader IWD conversation on social media by using the hashtags #IWD2018 and #PressforProgress.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Listeners, as always, please remember to rate, review, and subscribe to the show. All of those actions help more people find us and get the word out about these really important messages.

If you haven't yet declared your appreciation of this show to a friend, International Women's Day is the perfect time to start building that habit.

SONIA DARA: As always, you can find us on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify, YouTube, SoundCloud, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Our website is wibt.com, and if you have any feedback or questions, please e-mail us at WIBT@microsoft.com, or tweet us @MicrosoftWomen.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Happy International Women's Day, everyone!

SONIA DARA: Keep up that press for progress!

(Music.)

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