

Women in Business and Technology

Transcript of Episode 011 - Engineering the team with Star Treknical Goddess

Laura Butler

Featuring: Laura Butler

Summary: Colleen sits down with Microsoft Vice President and Star Treknical Goddess, Laura Butler. Sonia visits the inaugural launch of Tech Ladies Seattle, and learns more about the value of bringing the community to the west coast. In the Cutting Edge segment, Sonia and Colleen discuss Ellen Pao's Medium post on the importance of measuring diversity and inclusion program data.

Find audio and more information at Microsoft.com/WIBT

INTRODUCTION: Honestly, I'm at an age where I think about civilization building. And what I'm proud of isn't great pyramids, I'm proud of groups I've been a part of, and efforts where there's a philosophy and a culture and a frame. And it's almost AI-like, and keeps engineering itself and gets better.

(Music.)

ADVERTISEMENT: 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.nrftbigshow.com.

(Music.)

NARRATION: You are listening to the *Women in Business and Technology* podcast from Microsoft. In each episode, you will hear from women in amazing tech and business roles as well as male allies who are helping make the industries more inclusive.

We are diving into programs that promote greater diversity in the pipeline, and bringing you tips on how to build a successful career in a supportive community.

Welcome to *Women in Business and Technology*. (Music.)

SONIA DARA: Welcome to Episode 11 of *Women in Business and Technology*. I'm Sonia Dara --

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And I'm Colleen O'Brien.

SONIA DARA: We're starting the show in our Community Connect segment with a conversation I had with Carolina Duclos, a Seattle City Organizer for the career-building and networking community, Tech Ladies.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And then we'll jump into an interview I had with Laura Butler, a corporate vice president here at Microsoft on the OneNote team, and self-proclaimed "Star-Treknical Goddess." She's known far and wide for her baking skills, and we were lucky enough to be gifted some of her cookies during that interview.

SONIA DARA: Finally, we'll wrap things up in our Cutting Edge segment with a discussion about Ellen Pao's recent *Medium* post on the importance of measuring performance indicators of diversity and inclusion initiatives.

(Music.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Happy new year, Sonia!

SONIA DARA: Happy new year, Colleen.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: How are you ringing in 2018? Do you have any resolutions that you want to share with our listeners?

SONIA DARA: Yeah. I'm planning to travel a bit this year, also have been meaning to work through a few books I have started, but not finished. And I plan to reinvest some time in some amazing mentorships that have helped me with some career planning. But, yeah, new year, new you, right?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right.

SONIA DARA: What about yourself? What's going on for 2018?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I'm going to commit more to meditation through the Calm app on my phone, and I'm re-upping some of my support for nonprofits that I care about. And I'm also exploring this newfound interest in journaling.

SONIA DARA: Hmm, newfound you say? Tell us a little bit more.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah. So leading up to the new year, I went to a few sessions of the Tap-In Journaling Club, which is led by my friend Wade Brill. She is a life coach who posts a ton of great resources on wadebrill.com, so be sure to check that out.

Anyway, at this Tap-In Journaling Club, our first prompt was to write about the parts of our life where we have room to breathe, and the parts that feel a little bit constricted. A group of five of us sat pretty much in silence for about 25 minutes exploring that prompt, and it was really relaxing to process through writing, to put, you know, into words, written words, the things that I appreciate and the things that I want to change.

SONIA DARA: Oh, sounds very Zen, very chill. Where are you finding your journaling prompts now?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Well, there are countless prompts that are just an Internet search away, literally just searching for journaling prompts --

SONIA DARA: Okay. (Laughter.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: -- will yield some good results. But I've actually been using the Lean In Connection Cards for topic ideas. They're essentially a stack of cards with prompts for personal stories.

They have questions like: A year from now, what will you wish you had done today? Or when have you felt most powerful?

SONIA DARA: Yeah, I'm flipping through the stack and checking some of them out now. One of them is, "How would your closest friend describe you?" or, "What are the three things you most value?" or, "How does your daily routine align with these values?"

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: As you can imagine, these Connection Cards are meant for "connection" for a more social activity.

SONIA DARA: Ding, ding, ding! (Laughter.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Where you get to know members of your Lean In Circle by answering the questions out loud, but the introvert in me loves exploring the questions with a little less social pressure.

So if you want to pick up your own pack of the Lean In Connection Cards for journaling or networking purposes, head to shop.leanin.org. You can also print out a deck for free and find recommended activity instructions at leanincircles.org.

(Music.)

NARRATION: Community Connect, get involved and stay connected.

SONIA DARA: On November 15th, I headed to the SoDo neighborhood in Seattle to check out the Tech Ladies Meetup.

Tech Ladies is a worldwide community with nearly 20,000 members. Their mission is to help these members land dream jobs in tech.

One of the primary perks of free membership is access to job listings via the Web and in e-mail newsletter. Companies like Warby Parker, TheSkimm, Slack, and BuzzFeed have all tapped the Tech Ladies community to find great job candidates.

I sat down with Carolina Duclos, Divisional Director of Strategic Accounts at Logic 20/20 -- where the event was held -- and a city organizer for Tech Ladies. She relayed to me why the event was so special.

CAROLINA DUCLOS: We are actually having our very first Seattle Tech Ladies event. The Seattle community has been asking to have a chapter in town. Tech Ladies has been very focused and very heavy on the east coast, so if you have noticed, when they released their jobs, most of them are on the east coast. We want to increase the presence of Tech Ladies community in the west -- in Seattle specifically.

SONIA DARA: While the Seattle chapter is young, Duclos has a clear vision for what success of this community looks like.

CAROLINA DUCLOS: To me, it's people making connections, people getting to advance their careers through networking and through support of other ladies in tech that maybe are able to share their successes, their failures, and some advice.

I want women to feel empowered in the workplace, and we can only do that through helping each other.

SONIA DARA: For more information about upcoming Tech Ladies events, and to sign up for access to their job postings, visit hiretechladies.com.

For all of you hiring managers, there's also a page on this site where you can post a job if you're looking for ways to conduct a more inclusive hiring practice.

And now, let's get on with the interview.
(Music.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I am thrilled to welcome to the show Corporate Vice President on the OneNote Team and "Star Treknical Goddess," Laura Butler. Laura, welcome to the show.

LAURA BUTLER: Thank you so much, Colleen. I am excited to be here because I feel like I know you, but I have not had a chance to hang out with you in person yet.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yes, we've communicated a lot via e-mail and a little bit of Twitter conversation as well, so I am really excited to meet you in person and to spend some time today.

LAURA BUTLER: Woo-hoo!

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: So to kick things off, can you please tell our listeners a little bit about your title? What is the story behind identifying yourself as "Star Treknical Goddess"?

LAURA BUTLER: First of all, let's clarify -- and there's some confusion on this -- what's "technical fellow"? Technical fellow is vice president. They are one in the same -- same level, you go to the same meetings, you get access to the same info, you're a member of the exec staff.

Technical fellow was created long ago in the sands of time when the dinosaurs walked the earth and the woolly mammoths and all that.

For people who -- to be individuals, because you don't want to have a company where scope and career growth are tied to being a manager. Not everybody on earth should manage other people, or it's not their superpower. Right?

But, then, as Microsoft grew, you know, you can imagine. Problems get bigger, I'll get two or three people to help, and it became very muddy.

When I became a technical fellow, I was the first woman technical fellow, and now we have Jennifer Chayes.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Woo-hoo! Exciting!

LAURA BUTLER: Honestly, it bothered me -- nothing like getting a gift and a compliment and having it upset you. And I had to think about why. And I had this epiphany moment. I heard this woman, fabulous speaker, Carla Harris. She really talked about branding in a way that was meaningful to me instead of sounding like some marketing evil car sales things.

It was about telling people who you are. First of all, so then they don't just make stuff up. And, second, because it also helps them to work with you. And I realized, I hate "technical fellow." I had everything about that name. First of all, "technical." Let's be

honest, there's a whole lot of use of that word that's in a pejorative sense. "Oh, your clothes match, you must not be the technical person in the room." (Laughter.)

Everybody at Microsoft is "technical." We engineer stuff. Everybody at this company is involved in making things for other people. Whether you write code or you write a document, you're making things.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right.

LAURA BUTLER: And so I don't like that. It's not an inclusive word to me. Also the fact that no one's really clear on what the difference between technical fellow and CVP is. As far as we know, a bunch of dudes get in a room with some skulls and maybe some feathers and some chickens and some Tarot cards.

Here's an example: Sumit Chauhan, fabulous vice president, runs all of the engineering for Word and PowerPoint, Sway, and Canvas. She actually is the biggest engineering woman leader in the company. Pure engineer.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Wow.

LAURA BUTLER: She's a vice president. There are people who run businesses who have "technical fellow" in their title. So it's not even consistent.

We also don't have it for other disciplines. We don't have technical design fellow.

Second thing, I'm not a fellow. Okay, I'm not a dude, right? Right? So it didn't fit me.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah.

LAURA BUTLER: And I thought about, "Well, who am I?" Well, first of all, I was thinking about the word "fellow." Like, what's a female equivalent. And we've got to be honest, a lot of the female powerful, in English, versions of powerful male nouns don't really have the same connotation.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah, you're right.

LAURA BUTLER: Master of the universe?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Mistress --

LAURA BUTLER: Mistress of the universe. (Laughter.) He dominates that meeting, oh, she's the "dominatrix" of that meeting. I mean, it was actually, like, "Wow, these all suck."

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah.

LAURA BUTLER: And I also thought animals. Like, I could be "technical cougar." Well, "cougar" when you're a middle-aged lady is not okay. (Laughter.)

"Goddess" was the one that I thought -- actually, goddesses are better than gods. They dress well, maybe I can get a budget with this. They're loved and respected at the same time instead of just some arbitrary dude in a toga that's like shooting down thunder bolts.

Okay, so I was, like, "technical goddess," I like that. But then I love *Star Trek*. Everything about *Star Trek*, the possibilities of it, it gets to the human part of science and sci-fi.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right.

LAURA BUTLER: I love *Star Trek*, so "Star Treknical Goddess" it was.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I love it. I love that you were positioned with this relatively, it sounds like, arbitrary title. And you figured out a way to make it your own. I think that's a beautiful practice in self-branding.

LAURA BUTLER: And also, like, there's no rule that says it's forbidden, right?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right.

LAURA BUTLER: Someone will complain, I'll deal with it, I'll ask for forgiveness later.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah.

LAURA BUTLER: Yeah, and that's not to insult in any way the technical fellows. They're actually a great group of people.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yes.

LAURA BUTLER: It just did not fit me.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Your new title is corporate vice president working on OneNote. Can you tell us a little bit about that title change and what your day-to-day looks like?

LAURA BUTLER: Sure. Well, I'll start with the title change because that will help tell you how my job's different.

When I ran Windows Fundamentals engineering, which is the Insider Program feedback, performance, power, deployment, reliability -- you know, all that unimportant stuff -- it was all just engineering. And so "technical fellow" at least fit that.

When it came to OneNote, I mean, I came to be basically a general manager. And so that means I have business responsibilities. Like what are my costs every month of my services and am I doing things to reduce cost? How am I affecting the Office overall objectives? Office the product.

I have design dotted lined to me, I have program management, which really looks outward and thinks about customers and outcomes. Right? And then engineering, of course, as well, which is the implementation. And having the separation between the two is helpful, it's why we proofread things, why we do code reviews, it's to try to not have the implementation take over the thing, the intent.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right.

LAURA BUTLER: And having some balance there among these things.

So when I moved, I thought it was really important to make the title actually reflect the responsibilities that I have since I just kind of vented a little bit about nobody knows what the heck a technical fellow is. (Laughter.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yes. And with design and program management and engineering reporting to you, I imagine that your day-to-day looks a little bit different depending on the day.

LAURA BUTLER: Yes, it does. I mean, there's a lot of seasonality, partly because OneNote is a foundational tool an platform that a lot of other things -- Classroom -- are built on top of.

We're trying to get into a normal -- I'd say this group is super scrappy, young, "start-uppy." You have to get to a new level of sort of maturity, not lose the playfulness and the can-do attitude, and get some more predictability. If you really want to go long, long distance, right?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right.

LAURA BUTLER: If you're a long-distance runner or bicyclist, there's this beautiful cadence that just eats up the miles. So we're working on that.

I mean, we spend a lot of time trying to find our center. Like not -- it's not about OneNote, it's about, "Why do people take notes? What are they really trying to do? How can we help them achieve more?" The value proposition, and how does it fit in the

pantheon of the other Office applications? How do we make Office better? What things can we connect to and also all across Microsoft?

So really spending a lot of time, I want to say, on engineering the team and the culture lately. How do we communicate? How do we coordinate it? How do we act like the one space notes group?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And managing so many people, I imagine that you feel a lot of the responsibility that our leadership is speaking to right now around diversity and inclusion. How do you think about building a very inclusive environment for so many people in different types of roles to feel like they can bring their whole selves to work?

LAURA BUTLER: That is a really good question because my team, 40 percent is not in Redmond.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Wow.

LAURA BUTLER: I have folks in Hyderabad, India; I have folks in Berlin; I have folks in Vancouver; I have a person in the U.K. And that adds to the challenge of it.

I'm going to ignore the words "diversity and inclusion" for a second. I think about when I felt like a misfit. And, by the way, misfits make fabulous innovators because you're outside the box, you're not thinking the way everybody else is.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Absolutely.

LAURA BUTLER: And how it feels to not feel wanted. And I think about sense of purpose and mission. People decide to come to work every day. We're in the tech industry, there's other things people could do. We spend the majority of our waking hours thinking about work or doing work with other people, what makes you want to be there? Do people feel like we're up to something that matters to the world?

And not to some -- we solve some niche problem for like first-world problem, to make rich people's lives a little bit more convenient, right? That matters. But also that people are wanted, like they belong, right? And it's okay, hey, you have a bad day, you're still part of the family.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Absolutely.

LAURA BUTLER: You know? I think that really great teams are good families, among other things. I don't mean like dysfunction, and of course emotion comes into it. People that don't care, you've got teams that have no conflict because they don't care. Right? That's not going to lead to greatness.

So I think about can you get all the energy that everybody has towards propulsion instead of explosion and conflict. And that you're accepted, you're not a stock price, right? Oh, you screwed up one day, you're fired. Feeling like you're four hours away from -- that's a stressful place to be, it's not where creative flow comes from, you don't take risk. And in that kind of environment, who's going to want to be the person to raise the hand saying, "I think this is in trouble."

I try to put myself in when I felt like I was an outsider or tolerated. It's not about tolerance, that's such a weak word. It's not even acceptance, it's like mutual appreciation. And it's hard. I've got to walk the walk.

I also try to relax my team by, like, "Oh, yeah, I'm the first person to say when I was wrong. You know what? I said this, and I was wrong." Move on.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I think that's so powerful. It reminds me of when Satya wrote that note to the engineers who worked on Zo and said, "Great work, great job failing fast, can't wait to see what we learned here so we don't make the same mistake next time."

That acknowledgment from leadership demonstrating, "Hey, it was okay to fail here." And congratulating that we've made a mistake, we've made some progress here. I think that's very powerful.

LAURA BUTLER: Also, when you're the leader of a thing, all failure is yours. You're responsible for it -- by the way, that's what compensation is supposed to tie to, it's about risk and reward and it's gotten screwed up I think in C suites -- maybe not Satya, but some other ones in the industry. Because you signed off on it. You built the systems or didn't build the systems or the team, and that caused I mean, like a big mistake, right?

All success is the team's, but you get to reflect in the glory of being the person that the most amazing, awesome, smartest humans want to work for.

Another thing that helps us to realize, like, if I'm the smartest person in the room a lot of the time, yeah, maybe I get a little secret glow for about two seconds, like, "Yeah, damn." And then I panic. I don't need to be the smartest person in the room on any one thing. It's not the sport I'm playing, anyway. I'm not even playing the sport. I'm like the owner of the team and the coach.

I must be truly amazing if I can get the smartest, best person who knows the most about a thing to want to be a part of our group.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right.

LAURA BUTLER: This is ethical order, right? In order of priority, and this gets into doing the right thing, you as a human being, you at Microsoft, and you on my team. And it's in that order. If it's not working out, this isn't the thing for you. Start with the fact it's not the thing for you, what is the right thing for you? Dignity. Right?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah.

LAURA BUTLER: And what I need or want may not be what you need or want at the moment, and we can have a conversation about it that's not personal. And I don't own the people on my team. Everybody's going to move on and do different things, right? The real measure is, do we stay in touch? Did they take something away from it? So civilization building.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I think that's a great indicator of inclusion on your team is how excited are they to reach out to you after they've left.

LAURA BUTLER: Right. And also another sign that's hard to measure is: Are they telling their friends, "You should come work." Like, how much do I get pinged about open positions?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And "pinged" is?

LAURA BUTLER: Just contacted about something, a lightweight contact.

Also "poachability." So if other groups are trying to recruit the people out of my team, I know we're onto something because we have a good rep on the street, right?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah.

LAURA BUTLER: And everyone knows this is a great source of great engineering -- I take pride in that. And I'm, like, "May the best woman win, have at it."

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Excellent. Laura, you're now managing many different functions in your role as a corporate vice president, but you've had a very tenured and impressive career in engineering here at the company. Did your background, your upbringing, influence your decision to pursue computer science at all?

LAURA BUTLER: Yes, but in completely the opposite way of what most people are going to assume.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Tell me more.

LAURA BUTLER: Well, when I was in high school, I think I had the chance -- so I'm going to date myself. I was class of 1987 high school, and I was two years younger than everybody else. I was born in 1970.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Meaning that you skipped two grades?

LAURA BUTLER: Yeah. Well, I skipped one grade, and I think I just was one year ahead just one day before the cutoff or whatever.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Got it.

LAURA BUTLER: I had the opportunity to take computer science I think senior year of high school. And I went, but that's going to impact my, like, social life and my ability to take, like, advanced math, so like this computer thing, like, who cares?

I did take touch typing over the summer because it got me ahead in line, in theory, to get my driver's license, which I didn't actually get, but who knew that that was going to come I handy?

But I was going to be an astronaut sci-fi writer, international spy, science person on the side, dabble in some glass blowing, art, and waiting until I could command the mission to Mars.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Wow.

LAURA BUTLER: I knew exactly what I was going to do.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Oh, yeah.

LAURA BUTLER: And throw some historical fiction in there and archaeologist. (Laughter.) Okay, because who doesn't love like ancient Egypt relics?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yes. Those are great ambitions.

LAURA BUTLER: They are. And I got to Harvard, and I was always the good kid. Because I got great grades and everyone knew me, I could get away with a lot of crap, to be honest, and in retrospect, I relied on it. I wasn't worried if I got found out in the hallway without a hall pass, I was going to get in trouble.

Anyway, so I got to Harvard and I didn't read the 1,000-page manual they sent me. I wasn't going to read a 1,000-page manual on conduct -- are you kidding me? Stuffy, whatever. The sun shines, it's the last sunshine I'll have in my life.

And buried in there was two things I didn't really pay attention to: One was you have to declare your major, your concentration, freshman year. So that really gets you on a track very fast. Not a buffet, someone who likes to graze at a buffet kind of a system.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right.

LAURA BUTLER: Second was that you had to pass this thing called Quantitative Reasoning requirement, which was one part math and one part computers. You had to show you could check your e-mail, which is on a VAC system, so again, dating myself. And I failed this thing when I got there.

And the third thing I really glossed over was that every change you made and every problem you have, you had to pay money for. And I was very broke, so like I gave a lot of blood and I took psych tests and you name it, I did it to make money.

So I failed this requirement and I couldn't afford some of the ways to pass it. The only thing that fit my schedule and wasn't a waste of money was to take the real computer programming class, which everyone tried to convince me to do.

And being a contrarian, and a rebel and a stubborn person, of course that's what I signed up for. It was freaking hard, but I couldn't afford to fail it, and I stuck it out. And that's what led to being an intern at Microsoft.

And it was a scrappy time. And it was a different time in the software industry. I mean, we have to really talk about this. \$10-trillion industry was built by people that were more diverse, interesting, and creative than the stereotype today. Okay? You couldn't get a computer science degree worth getting at the time, and bachelor of arts in computer science that can deal with Turing machines and have infinite memory, okay, we're like 64K RAM, you know?

So Microsoft was looking -- you could get hardware engineering, but that wasn't what Microsoft was looking for. They looked for creative problem-solvers. They went to history departments, physicists, MacGyver, "hey, can you get yourself out of a closet with some dental floss and duct tape?" kind of people. Because we don't know what problems we're solving.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right.

LAURA BUTLER: It's not a book, like, "Oh, you can just pass a test." We don't even know what the test subject is. So it was great. It's like I went from Kansas to Oz. It was just such an eye-opener that I had more in common with an intern from Bangladesh than I did in my Connecticut hometown.

I got paid to do things I liked that were fun. And it turned out, all of the life-hacking things, because I was a scrappy kid, a weirdo, and we moved a lot. And I was always probably like Bugs Bunny, like two steps away from getting beat up or in trouble. Turned out to be incredibly helpful in problem solving and my wide range of knowledge.

So, yes, but no, to answer your question.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: So to go back to that moment in 1989, you wrapped up your sophomore year of studying computer science at Harvard alongside Microsoft Chief Marketing Officer Chris Capossela, and Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg. You started this internship at Microsoft and then you never went back to Harvard.

LAURA BUTLER: Yes. Oh, boy, yeah. So I knew of Chris Capossela when I was in school, because there are 1600 people in the class, because his parents owned an Italian restaurant in Boston.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: In the North End, yeah.

LAURA BUTLER: Yeah. And so everybody was, like, "Oh, my God, he'd be a really good person to be friends with because you might get to eat for free." (Laughter.) You know, when you're a poor student, food takes up a lot of your mind. But I never actually met him.

Sheryl, I didn't even know of. I only found that out when I was going to go back for my 25th reunion and I looked at who was the speaker and it was Sheryl Sandberg. And I was, like, patting myself on my back, like, yeah, I'm doing all right for myself. And I'm like, "Oh, forget it, like I give up, I fold." (Laughter.)

Yeah, I came out here and I had such a good time over the summer, and I was stressed out at school, I felt like I didn't fit. I did very well academically, but I didn't feel like I was wanted, and I didn't like being project-managed. And what had happened is I'd turned into a rebel. Before, I was like the best test-taker, I would make it work, I'd do all the extra credit, get an A-plus. Follow the rules, and I'll be fine.

And there, no matter what rules I followed, it was just not working. And so I took a year off. I tried to go back, and this was very tough for my mom, who had also dropped out of college and had really sacrificed a lot of her life and worked her fingers to the bone to get me into school. And to her credit, she supported this, but it was very hard. I mean, I felt like I was letting her down.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Has she come around since then?

LAURA BUTLER: Oh, yeah. Yeah. (Laughter.) But, I mean, I did not actually understand the degree to which she freed me up and also some good life skills as a leader there. She was borderline going to lose the only asset that she had. She had really taken out a second mortgage on her condo to put me into school.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Wow.

LAURA BUTLER: And so you can imagine, right? It was a time when the industry was really easy, by the way. You learned on the job. And I tried to go back, and I just could not do it. I'm, like, "No, wait, I'm paying you guys." It was almost like I had found out I had rights.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Interesting.

LAURA BUTLER: I'm paying you guys to educate me. It's your freaking job to be here, and if you're going to be my advisor, like you need to sign my study card, and if you can't, then you're going to write me a note so that I don't have to go pay \$55 in the study center. They were, like, "What are you doing?" I was, like, "Screw you guys."

And then I got the call from Microsoft, "Hey, Laura, come back." It was Brad Silverberg. He used to run Windows. And I'm, like, "Hell, yeah." Like, I kind of grew up a bit. I think I thought if I did everything right, it would all work out. And that was educational.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: You've spent nearly your entire career at Microsoft, save three and a half years as chief architect at Overcast Media. But then the other time you had taken off, you were having these big adventures like traveling to Zanzibar or summiting mountains. I read that you took improv classes to improve your public speaking.

How do you think about your personal and professional development and charting those experiences that you want to have outside of this context of structured, academic learning?

LAURA BUTLER: Oh, wow. I think what kind of learner or "understander" you are helps. You know, there's episteme, which is sort of theoretical knowledge, and as a mathematician background person, I love it, I love the order of math, but I don't really understand something if it's not tangible, so "techne." Also the root of the word "technical." It's kind of changed in connotation a little bit. It was really about hand knowledge, that was "techne."

I need to understand something, I need to kind of like wade in. I'm kind of a contrarian, and partly I've had so much success as a contrarian, I am super skeptical.

Here's the thing: I have seen this with people who are, like, "I must be a doctor, and I will graduate on this schedule" and all that. And it's a very rigid plan, and then

something goes wrong, as it always does, and it all falls over like a brick building in an earthquake. And then you miss out if you're that rigid when you travel or in your career, you miss out on something amazing.

It's like, well, I decided I'm going to Budapest on the 5:14 train and the president of the Czech Republic wants me to come over to dinner, but I can't go because I have my train ticket. Right? That's no fun.

So I do what I like. I mean, I kind of know what my mission is. And I would say some of this is from hindsight. You can make anything sound awesome. By the way, "chief architect" of a startup means it was a three-and-a-half-person company. Well, no, it was a four-person company, but half was a part-time person, and half was the dog, who was our CFO. Okay, sounds more glamorous than it was.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Got it. (Laughter.)

LAURA BUTLER: I would say on the travel thing, I needed to remember what -- like grow as a human being, and it was fun. And I had a lot of pent-up stuff I wanted to do. I didn't know how useful it would be to making more well-rounded as a leader at the time. So I talk about it now because I can reflect.

Maybe a better way to put it is -- my first tour of duty at Microsoft, so '89 to 2000, I was narcissistic and insecure at the same time. It was like, "I'm really awesome, and oh my God, like, the world's going to fail if I look stupid, and everyone's looking at me, and it's all about me. And why are they promoting that person, who's a total moron?" I don't think I was very fun to be around. I think I did not relax people. Even when I became a lead, because I was the smartest person in the area, and I did feel responsibility, but I didn't really think about, "Why am I here?"

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right.

LAURA BUTLER: Life was this thing that was going to happen later, I think. And I didn't have a philosophy. I left angry because I was on the opposite side of a reorg than I wanted to be. And I was, like, "Watch me walk. I need to get out of this place." I was just mad, that's why I left.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah.

LAURA BUTLER: It wasn't that I was moving towards something, it was like I was pissed off.

I kind of just reminded myself, "What is this really all about?" I went into tech and engineering and math and second to get away from people, because people are hard.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: People are hard.

LAURA BUTLER: They can be mean, they can hurt you, they can think you're weird. And math is just -- even engineering, it's so beautiful, you can do this thing by yourself and you make squares and perpendicular lines.

But that's so not what it's really about. It's really the people problems are the hardest engineering problems, and engineering is by people, for people, for people problems.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: So what brought you back, and what has kept you here?

LAURA BUTLER: Well, I'd say leaving was the best thing I could have ever done, and coming back was the best thing I could have ever done. And Microsoft is incredibly intelligent on the whole recruit -- I mean, we invented recruiting basically, right?

They keep an eye on you, and not in a creepy way. But literally, I swear like the day after -- we had been talking to Joe Belfiore, who was running Windows Media Center at the time. And he was, like, "Oh, we've done this Windows Phone reset." They're like, "You should come back."

And, honestly, it was the worst recruiting pitch I've had in my life. Like I was expecting to be sold. Like, "Hey, Laura, international glamorous traveler, mountaineer, chef, improv comedian, acrobat." It was, "Oh, my gosh, we have no idea what the heck we're doing, we're trying to do a thing that we know is mathematically impossible." I was, like, "Oh, my God, these guys need me." Like, it was almost a Mary Poppins, Nanny McPhee feeling. So that's why I came back. It was really almost partly it was like staging a human rights intervention is a little bit how I felt.

And I knew some of the people on the team. I'm, like, "Oh, my God, these people deserve better than we're to write a 3D driver from scratch with two people in six months, when we know it's a 20-man-year thing with no help." Even at the woman-to-man-year conversion, that's still ten man years. We're not going to get it done with two and a half people in six months.

And Microsoft needs me, that's why. And it doesn't always know it needs me, that's why I'm here.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: It has needed you, and it still continues today to need you.

LAURA BUTLER: Oh, thank you! That's obviously like an exaggerated, grandiose --

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Well, I mean, to cite a couple of your great achievements here, you've contributed to the development of the Windows 95 user interface.

LAURA BUTLER: I fixed the very last bug on Windows 95, yes.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Thank you. (Laughter.) Multi-monitor support, and --

LAURA BUTLER: And it has never been as good as when I owned it. I just feel like I need to say that. It's only decayed in the past 20 years, okay. Back to you. (Laughter.) Also a contrarian and also curmudgeon at this point, yes.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And it sounds like the experience that brought you back to Windows, Windows Phone 7, home screen user interface work? Is that what you were talking about with Joe Belfiore when you decided to come back?

LAURA BUTLER: Yeah, I ended up owning the shell, which was touch, keyboard, input, the graphics stack, the beautiful 60-frames-a-second -- and also on hardware that was not very powerful in start. Yeah, that turned out all right. I'd say a lot of -- by the way, a lot of people whose names are impossible to mention really made that happen, but yes, I was a part of that.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: What are you most proud of when it comes to the impact that you've had at this company?

LAURA BUTLER: I am, honestly, the most proud of people I have worked with or have worked for me who I see succeeding and who I think -- or hope -- took something away. Like, did I help make them better? We created tools together that most of the people I have worked with, we keep in touch -- not always. And that we, hey, like, "Oh, I miss you, or it would be great to work together again down the road." People reach out. I mean, it's the civilization. Honestly, I'm at an age where I think about civilization building. And what I'm proud of isn't great pyramids, I'm proud of groups I've been a part of and efforts where there's a philosophy and a culture and a frame. And it's almost AI-like and keeps engineering itself and gets better.

In fact, the measure, to some degree is, if I leave, does the thing stay healthy and does it evolve?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Your energy for people management is very palpable, which is why it pains me right now to try to turn back to technology. (Laughter.)

But I really want to talk about the fact that you have more than ten patents to your name for ideas such as scalable, multi-party conferencing and collaboration, to repositioning and displaying an object in a multiple-monitor environment. And these ten patents, it's an incredible achievement considering the stats from the Institute for Women's Policy Research, which demonstrates that more than 81 percent of patents include no women inventors, and women are not expected to reach parity in patenting until 2092. How can we move the needle on that number more quickly?

LAURA BUTLER: Okay, that's like so unacceptable, it's not even funny. Well, I would say, first of all, I was fortunate. If I have any superpower, it's that like I am great at identifying areas of opportunity, many of which could look like derelict buildings or not be glamorous. I ended up in Windows because Windows was a joke. That's how I ended up on Windows 95. Oh, Windows, that's the thing that's just going to take bullets until OS2 succeeds. They were like under the stairs in a building. Like, OS2 got its own building at Microsoft, Building 1. Networking got its own building at Microsoft, that was Building 2. Building 3 was apps, and Building 4 was everything else. And I believe Windows was kind of stuffed in a closet.

Okay, the requirement to work on the Windows team back in, like, 19 -- I'm exaggerating, but the sentiment behind it is true -- was, do you have a pulse? And if you don't have a pulse, are you okay working at night? Okay? And do we need to cover the mirrors or anything? Okay. (Laughter.)

That turned out to be -- well, it didn't go the way that it was supposed to go, so I had more room, okay? So I had room to innovate.

I was also important to our business. You have Xerox PARC, you have Apple, we had competition.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right.

LAURA BUTLER: You can't file an infinite number of patents when you're at a company, right? You have to be intentional and thoughtful about it, and a lot of engineers don't want to deal with the time to explain it. So I like to talk, as you've already figured out. I'm not a patent machine. I mean, I stopped having patents when I stopped being an individual contributor. I actually had to fight this a bit.

When I was running a Windows Phone group, people would add my name. And I'm, like, "I had nothing to do with this, that's just not right." You're not going to get credit, that's just intellectually dishonest, right?

So the ones I have are really only from my time when I was kind of an IC to a lead, which is where the majority of my time was spent engineering.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And is it that space and time to innovate that you think is most critical in getting more women to file these patents?

LAURA BUTLER: Well, I mean, there's patents in all kinds of different areas, right? Do you mean particularly software? I don't think it's that. I think it's changing what you think innovation is.

I think a lot of people have this idea in their head that it's like some huge Einstein relativity thing, it's some huge revolution. Innovation is not like that. I mean, it's small improvements that add up, right? It's looking at things in a different way. Like women are innovators. Just because we're not the mainstream in the industry, but there are more women than men, the men will be more likely to be innovative. I think a lot of women just rule themselves out and think, "Oh, this is --"

Yeah, so I came up with a cool algorithm and I fixed some bugs, whatever. Certainly working for managers that value that and appreciate -- and also will let you have time. The stuff happens -- it's happens out of like love. If you're a woman and particularly you have a family and your family responsibilities, right? Let's say you're a new mom and you're an engineering lead. Your ability to tolerate chaos is sometimes goes off the charts and you go crazy because everything seems less difficult than a screaming child.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Sure.

LAURA BUTLER: But the also, it's predictability really matters of schedule, like if you have to pick up your kids. And this affects men, too, but let's just talk about women.

A lot of this stuff ends up, "Oh, in your spare time, can you take the time to do a write-up?" You've got your day job, and then let's say you're a woman and you're trying to help diversity in the industry. So you're actually doing ten hours, 20 hours of volunteer, unpaid work even for the company. Like, "Oh, we want to have diverse interview loops, will you spend two hours a week to be on diverse interview loops? For which, if your work suffers, your career will suffer. But your career went great, and that's why we're asking you." Right? We put a lot of load --

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: That's such a critical call-out.

LAURA BUTLER: We put such a load on folks. Now, think African American, people of color, it's ludicrous, right? There's got to be time for it. Your management has to make this time and make it part of the job.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right.

LAURA BUTLER: So I think when it's also, "Oh, we really value it, but it's this thing you do in your spare time and you have other responsibilities." And you can't deal with the risk and the uncertainty, then it won't happen either. But I think it starts with recognizing that innovation is small things.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I think that's a great description and a great call to action for our listeners to start to change that mindset. A patent doesn't necessarily need to be this thing that you're dedicating all of your time and energy to, but shifting your mindset to small innovation is the way that you might be able to (inaudible) --

(Crosstalk.)

LAURA BUTLER: Right now, it might not be worth the filing. That's a separate thing, right? And also, like, is it strategic? I also think a lot of the room of problems and fires are opportunities. We all want stability to some degree, and certainly my radar of, like, that person's a kookaburra or like something's wrong. Like, why do people keep leaving that area? You know, like I'd say I have a higher radar for that.

Looking for safety is probably not going to lead you to places that are going to be patent or innovative centers past a certain point.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Got it.

LAURA BUTLER: Just something to keep in mind, too, that sometimes going in the places where it looks weird or it sounds like a total mess can be also the spots where you find the nuggets of gold. Because everyone else is mining over in one little part of the river.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah, you're right. Laura, during my time in Microsoft Philanthropies, which I moved from my full-time role to work on last year, the Giving Campaign, I learned that you personally matched the donations of many of the college hires on your team. And at the end of the campaign season, you made time to film a testimonial about the importance and the magic of the Giving Campaign here at Microsoft.

What does philanthropy mean to you? And what has prompted you to such an amazing commitment of giving?

LAURA BUTLER: Well, just because I'm an engineer, I don't want to take credit for stuff I haven't done, but I also want to take credit for things I did do.

I didn't match the donations to new hires on my team. I matched for all of the new hires to the Windows Division. I only got 52 -- I think it ended up being 452 people. Okay.

I matched donations for everybody on my team as a separate thing because it was my goodbye present since I was leaving Windows to come to Office and OneNote, so those were two separate things.

And, yes, if you were a new hire and on my team, you got a double donation.

What does philanthropy mean to me? You know, when I was younger, I think -- I was intimidated. And I hear about these, like what Bill Gates has given \$50 billion away, and

I'm like, you hear about the problems in the world and you just despair. I mean, there's just no reason why children are starving to death in Syria. It's just -- like I just refuse to accept the universe has to be that way because there's just no reason.

But you read the stuff in the news, and it's like these problems are just so -- like you can't tackle them.

Two things: Doing something small and concrete gives you control and makes you feel better. Right?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I agree.

LAURA BUTLER: Okay. It's easier to imagine the personal impact of a small thing than a big thing in some ways, because there's one person who's getting it. You know, like the giving tree that we have.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right.

LAURA BUTLER: Like, you're buying a bicycle for a child or a gift card to a grocery store for an older person on a fixed income who's trying to feed their family, right? Like that's a person, it has meaning. It's not some ethereal thing.

Also, I believe in voting with your dollars. It's a vote. This is what economics is supposed to be. So that's kind of how I think about philanthropy. It makes me feel better, it's about me. I feel like I am influencing the world. I think about another person on the other side of it. I have personally benefited from philanthropy. I would not have been able to go to college if I hadn't gotten a scholarship from my own hometown that came from people who donated \$5, \$10. It wasn't just one rich person, right? I think about that.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: In this work on Microsoft Philanthropies, I became very familiar with your signature move of baking cookies for people in your life. I was wondering if you could share a little bit more information about why you've dedicated yourself to that sugary act of service?

LAURA BUTLER: The cookies thing. I think I tried to hide the fact I was a woman when I was here the first time. I don't know how I thought I was going to hide. I mean, I'm five-foot-zero inches tall on a good day, and there aren't usually a lot of women around. So it's not like, you know -- so I was like a better dude than the dudes. Oh, the dudes did this? I fixed two more bugs and bring home the bacon and code it up in a pan, and spray myself with some Enjoli, right?

And I also, honestly, was not involved at all with any women groups or networks because I was a real programmer. Okay, I know. Like, I'm embarrassed. Like, this is not

something I'm proud of, but I think that's what I thought. I'm, like, somehow it's a zero-sum game, and there can only be one sheriff in town. Like, I wouldn't think twice about hanging out with like Seahawks fans, especially if I got to go like talk to Richard Sherman, right? Why would I think twice about hanging out with anybody and talking about anything I have in common with. Okay? So I was trying not to have anything in common.

So I also fought all stereotypes. Like, I'm not going to bake or anything like that. I love entertaining. I like the social part of it. I like to plan and make things, I'm an engineer. I absolutely -- I hate cleaning up, I do. I just hate it. Sometimes it's midnight. Like last night wasn't too bad, baking cookies for you guys. I think it was about 10:00 p.m., so that was all right.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: The cookies are delicious, by the way.

LAURA BUTLER: Oh, thanks. I do it, honestly, because it works. It is evil in so many fantastically awesome ways. I started it when I needed to recruit. I kind of referred to this earlier, to a team that was kind of like not an easy, at all, sell. And I needed to grow a lot just at the time that a bunch of really glamorous, really awesome projects were unveiled and were hiring like crazy.

So I kind of approached like the funnel problem. I didn't know it was a funnel at the time, but like, okay, I knew I couldn't hire anybody that I didn't talk to. And I thought, "If I can get people to talk to me, I've got some persuasion and charisma."

So how do I get people to talk to me when HoloLens is recruiting like crazy and there's this AI stuff going on?

Well, in the Windows Division, we were having catered dinners every night, and they were in the cafeteria. It was pizza. Everybody was sick of pizza. Pizza every night.

Everybody would go to the cafeteria. I'm, like, okay, I'm going to set up a little stand. And I had Lucy's lemonade stand in my mind. Right by the door. How am I going to get people to stop? Well, I just -- cookies. To get a cookie, you had to tell us who you were and give us your e-mail and hear a spiel for about a minute. And then if you decided you really were interested, you got more cookies. And then if you interviewed, you got even more cookies. And if you joined the team, you got even more cookies. Okay? So it was like maybe one part drug-dealer approach. (Laughter.)

And it worked. And I've stuck with it ever since because it works. I mean, the return on investment on \$3 of ingredients? There are thousands of people in the company at this point, over five years now, who have had cookies, seen a note, tasted a cookie, gotten cookies. It works.

Sometimes I'm saying thank you for something you've done, I've had people say, "But I haven't done anything yet." And I'm, like, "Well, yeah, not yet, but you will."

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Your brand has totally trickled throughout the company because of those cookies.

LAURA BUTLER: I can't stop now. Like, I have burned out one of my two convection ovens. It's hurting my throughput. It's like having one of the co-processors on your computer die. Yeah, I can't stop if I wanted to.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Laura, where can our listeners find you on the Internet?

LAURA BUTLER: Twitter is the best place @LauraCatPJs, but that's the best place to find me.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Excellent. Thank you so much for being here today, for sharing your stories, and for dispensing such great advice.

LAURA BUTLER: Okay, take care.

(Music.)

NARRATION: Cutting Edge are technical stories in the business and technology world.

SONIA DARA: In this edition of Cutting Edge, we're digging into a recent *Medium* post by Ellen Pao, the author of *Reset*, the co-founder and CEO of Project Include, the chief diversity and inclusion officer at Kapor Center, and a venture partner at Kapor Capital. Whoo!

I relay all of Pao's titles here to demonstrate the experience and critical perspective she's bringing to the conversation about diversity and inclusion.

Her post is co-authored by Sonja Gittens Ottley, the head of diversity and inclusion at Asana, with the title *Inclusion in Tech: You Can't Manage What You Don't Measure*.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: The hypothesis of this piece is that when it comes to diversity and inclusion, quote, "Firms are not yet measuring key performance indicators with the same rigor that they do their financial, customer, or growth data." End quote.

Pao and Gittens Ottley point out three discrete blind spots in diversity and inclusion measurement plans: Number one, intersectionality and the impact of compounding identity factors like race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Number two, sharing data and empowering leadership with an understanding of what is working and what isn't.

And number three, inclusion. According to the article, very few companies are measuring the concept of inclusion at all.

SONIA DARA: Project Include, a nonprofit that Pao co-founded and is currently leading, aims to accelerate diversity and inclusion in the tech industry. Through their Startup Include program, they're working with startups, including Asana, to make progress against these three opportunity areas that Colleen had mentioned. One, considering intersectionality; two, sharing data; and three, measuring inclusion.

Project Include's baseline approach is to measure three things: Number one, employee and individual demographics, including gender, race and ethnicity, immigrant status, education, and more. And number two, employee sentiment, including company satisfaction, job satisfaction, belonging and inclusion, among other things. And number three and finally, company benefits and actions, including things like parental leave, compensation, and offer negotiation.

So there are a lot more proposed measurements than I have read off here. But if this is a particular area of interest to our listeners, I recommend checking out the post in full detail.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah. In this piece, Asana really serves as the case study. They're one of the startups working with Project Include to support a thriving workplace for their employees, and they work with a third-party provider to develop a survey with tech industry benchmarks that measures inclusion and tracks progress over time.

Asana, then, shares these survey results internally as an act of, you know, both transparency and accountability. These numbers really empower managers to develop action plans that are rooted in team-specific data.

SONIA DARA: Collecting data on diversity and inclusion may seem awkward, murky, or, hey, even risky, but in an industry that thrives on a data-driven obsession, it's critical to measure progress against all core business priorities, right? So data and transparent access to it will not only provide the proper foundation for diversity and inclusion action plans, but also this means we can hold leaders who can make a difference more accountable.

(Music.)

SONIA DARA: I think this was a great episode to kick off the new year.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Woo!

SONIA DARA: You know? The inaugural meeting of Tech Ladies in Seattle was definitely worth celebrating, and Ellen Pao's take on measuring diversity and inclusion programs is such a constructive framework for how to really continue to make these issues a priority.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I agree. And I am still on a high from my energizing interview with Laura Butler.

SONIA DARA: And the sugar from the cookies.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yes. That as well.

SONIA DARA: Yeah, of course.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Her work and the way she's exercising her values in real time are incredibly inspiring to me as we head into 2018.

Listeners, if you want to keep that inspiration momentum going, we could really use your help to make our show more discoverable. Please remember to rate, review, and of course, subscribe to the show. And if you know someone who might love the *Women in Business and Technology* podcast, let that person know. We would really appreciate your recommendation.

SONIA DARA: And as always, you can find us on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts.

And now, you can actually listen on YouTube.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yay!

LAURA BUTLER: Yay! Just head to youtube.com/Microsoft, click on playlists, and select the *Women in Business and Technology* podcast playlist. We're very excited.

If you have any feedback or questions, please e-mail us at WIBT@Microsoft.com or tweet us @microsoftwomen.

(Music.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Your mission for this episode, if you choose to accept it, is to see a movie directed by a woman. Most of the holiday blockbusters were directed by men, save for *Pitch Perfect 3*.

SONIA DARA: I'm so excited!

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Me too! (Laughter.) Which was directed by Trish Sie. But all you have to do is a quick Internet search for some less-recent films that were directed by women, literally just search for "woman-directed films" and you'll find some great classics including *Big, Lost in Translation*, and of course a local favorite, "*Sleepless in Seattle*."

SONIA DARA: Oh, I love that movie.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Me too. Keep us posted on your watch list.
(Music.)

END