

Women in Business and Technology

Transcript of Episode 034 - Shaping legacies with Tracie Group CEO Jill Tracie Nichols

Guest: Jill Tracie Nichols, Carlos Ruiz, Lester Moses, Pamela Soberman

Summary: Sonia recaps Dona Sarkar's latest book, *Spin Your Tale: The Fiction Writer's Guide to Your Personal Brand*. Colleen learns more about the Association of Latino Professionals For America (ALPFA) from local Seattle leaders Carlos Ruiz and Lester Moses. Guest host Pamela Soberman interviews CEO of the Tracie Group and former Microsoft Chief of Staff to the CEO, Jill Tracie Nichols. Our hosts wrap the show with a conversation about how Britain's Equal Pay Day highlighted the gender pay gap.

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Colleen O'Brien, Sonia Dara

(Music.)

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS (VOICEOVER): You just kind of go through with the people you love and the best you can. So, when I come into work and see what was perceived to be these giant problems, it would, inside, kind of almost make me laugh a little bit. Like, these are not big problems. Like, let me tell you what big problems are. Big problems are cancer. You know, big problems are drug addiction. These problems are doable.

VOICEOVER: You are listening to the *Women in Business and Technology* podcast from Microsoft. In each episode, you will hear from women in amazing and 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 Episode 34 of *Women in Business and Technology*. I'm Colleen O'Brien.

SONIA DARA: And I'm Sonia Dara.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: We're kicking off this show in our Community Connect segment with a deeper look at ALPFA -- the Association of Latino Professionals for America.

Carlos Ruiz and Lester Moses are two leaders of ALPFA Seattle, and they shared more with me about the organization's progress and ambitions here in the Pacific Northwest.

SONIA DARA: And then, audience, we're going to throw a little bit of a curve ball at you. The interview in this show will be conducted by our friend and Microsoft HR Manager Pamela Soberman. Pamela is an incredible supporter of the show and an amazing human in general. We're so grateful for her contribution to this episode, and thrilled for you to meet her interview guest, the CEO of The Tracie Group, Jill Tracie Nichols.

Jill was formerly Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella's chief of staff, and shares a lot of great guidance on driving radical change and visionary leadership.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Finally, we'll wrap things up in our Cutting Edge segment with a look at how Britain observed Equal Pay Day. But let's not get ahead of ourselves here. Sonia, what do you have over there?

SONIA DARA: I've been reading Dona Sarkar's new book, *Spin Your Tale: The Fiction Writer's Guide to Your Personal Brand*. Of course, Dona was the first guest on our show, and she's made quite a name for herself as a tech leader slash fashion designer slash author. In other words, she's someone who I continue to learn from.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah. Dona actually shared a little bit about that book at Microsoft Ignite back in September, and I attended that session. She talked about how people are talking about you behind your back -- not necessarily in a malicious way, really just because you can't be in every room at all times, so it's likely someone else who's going to be telling your story for you. And that, really, the only way that you can control how you show up in those conversations is by proactively managing your brand.

SONIA DARA: Yeah, exactly. The fiction writer's approach is to think about writing your brand story as your hero's journey. The book is broken up into five acts -- from Defining Your Ordinary World to Answering the Call of Adventure and, finally, Entering the Special World.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah, it's fun to think about yourself as a protagonist. When we kicked off this session at Ignite, Dona encouraged us to do a quick Internet search in private-browsing mode for our names to see what the results look like. That's essentially how the world sees you when they search for your name.

That's sort of your baseline for your brand today, the bar for what you have to improve on. Maybe those search results look really great and you've invested a lot of work into figuring out how you're going to show up online, but for many of us, there is work to be done.

SONIA DARA: Yeah. That's such a great idea. The book is filled with all these little milestone marker activities to walk you through the brand-building process.

It's a workbook of sorts, so I would encourage you to get a physical copy. For more information about *Spin Your Tale*, head to donasarkarbooks.com/books or order it on Amazon.com.

(Music.)

VOICEOVER: Community Connect, get involved and stay connected.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: The Association of Latino Professionals for American, or ALPFA, was the first Latino professional association in the United States. ALPFA's mission is to empower and develop Latino men and women as leaders of character for the nation and every sector of the global economy.

I had the opportunity to connect with Carlos Ruiz, the president of the Seattle ALPFA chapter, and Lester Moses, the executive vice president of operations. Ruiz shared more about the background of the organization and their specific goals here in Seattle.

CARLOS RUIZ: We've been in Seattle over 13 years. We mainly focus on the Latino community, but being in the diversity and inclusion space, we are open to all and both our board membership and event attendance reflect that.

So, really, it's about trying to get more Latino representation in the professional areas. There is not enough Latinos in particular at the executive levels of companies, especially here in Seattle, where the Latino market isn't as mature as other cities, so that's really our goal for the organization.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: ALPFA Seattle partners closely with other identity-based organizations in the community in their quest for greater diversity in the workplace. Moses provided more background on the organization's motivation for partnership.

LESTER MOSES: ALPFA, we started because there was something missing -- diversity, color, people in underserved communities were not getting opportunities to be a part of corporate America. In diversity and inclusion, we are all one family, we just made distinctions about how or why it should look. So, we are here to support women in tech and I know that they're here to support us.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Ruiz further explained ALPFA's tendency toward greater cooperation.

CARLOS RUIZ: We like to champion that we're stronger together than individually. In the past, I've heard that there's this fear that if we start to share or that there are too

many organizations in this space, there isn't going to be enough of the pie to go around. And we like to challenge that and say if there isn't enough of the pie, then they need to make a bigger pie.

We think it's important because there are a lot of different voices. There are a lot of different perspectives. And that's really what diversity and inclusion is about -- diversity of thought as well. So, we think that it's important to be able to support each other and give all of these individual voices their own platform.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Ruiz shared one pretty tactical way that ALPFA is working with allies and other organizations to promote access to opportunity.

CARLOS RUIZ: We love to network our events, so promotion is sometimes the easiest way to partner up with us, and we do the same. Our newsletter gets really great visibility, so do our social networks, and we dedicate a pretty large space to just promoting other events in the area. So, if there's partners out there that want to reach some of our members, please let us know. We would love the same in return.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: For more information about ALPFA Seattle, visit seattlealpfa.org. If you're not here in the Pacific Northwest, head to alpfa.org to find your closest chapter.

Moses shared a ringing endorsement about making that connection.

LESTER MOSES: You've got a national network. You'll find ALPFA all over the country. I actually moved from the Miami area to Seattle because of the ALPFA National Conference and it got me a job, so ALPFA is everywhere.

(Music.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And now, let's get on with the interview.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: I'm excited to welcome Jill Tracie Nichols to the studio today. Jill is the founder and CEO of The Tracie Group, a boutique communications firm.

Prior to becoming a CEO herself, Jill worked for two Microsoft CEOs. Jill, welcome to the show.

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: Thanks, Pamela, it's great to be here.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: Great. So, let's talk about your newest role as CEO of The Tracie Group. So, can you tell me a little bit more about The Tracie Group and what a day in the life looks like for you today?

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: Yeah. It's been an incredible journey to get to this point. It was interesting, getting ready for today, I just looked at a survey from one of the executive search firms, and the survey said that about 68 percent of CEOs say when they started their new role, they were unprepared. And 50 percent of CEOs said driving culture change is harder than they predicted.

And that is the reason why The Tracie Group exists. So, what we do is we go and partner with CEOs around the country in different industries and basically help them in these moments that matter most in their career and in their business.

So, when a CEO is taking on a new job or doing an acquisition or trying to launch a new culture change, I'll come alongside them and help them figure out and articulate like what is your big vision for coming into this role? What's your vision for the company? What's happening in the industry?

And it will help them not only articulate that, but then help them formulate the plan of how they're going to communicate that to all of their different constituents -- whether it's employees, customers, partners, shareholders. And then help get that off the ground. The best way to say it is to help them shape how people perceive them. What I find so often with CEOs is what they intend to say or what they intend to communicate to the world isn't often what breaks through, so help them try to call the shot on who do they want to be? Who do they want to be perceived as? And help implement all of the strategies, whether it's through communications traditionally, social media, or kind of informal systems within an organization to help get that authentic self out there and start creating this sense of followership and momentum with different people.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: So, you left Microsoft to start your own business, The Tracie Group, and you left Microsoft with the job title of chief of staff to the CEO. I'd love to hear more about what that means, what that title means, what a day in the life was like -- especially as you think about that you were Satya's chief of staff when he was first appointed CEO.

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: It was one of the best jobs I've ever had. So, chief of staff jobs are notoriously very different depending on who the principal leader is, the nature of the time of what's going on, and the person who is in the chief of staff role.

So, the way that Satya and I defined that role was really in three different parts. One was managing all of his communications internally and externally. The second was all around the efficiency of his leadership team, so how does that group come together and have the right conversations and the right topics to move the overall business forward? And then third was all about culture change.

So, for me, that made a ton of sense with Satya being a new CEO and given my background growing up in human resources and then working for Steve Ballmer as his

communications director to really bring those aspects together to help Satya really chart his course for what is he trying to achieve at this company, who is he, how do we showcase that to the world and start driving culture change.

So, for me, that's what my tenure as chief of staff looked like.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: And you were probably one of Satya's first hires when he was appointed CEO. So, can you explain how that came about?

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: It was really a funny story. So, I had, at the time, I was working for Ballmer, and was actually planning to leave the company.

Steve had announced his retirement, had asked me to stay through the transition, and I was managing the transition communications and exploring roles outside of the company. I had done this CEO thing for four years, traveled to dozens of countries. You know, I was tired, I was ready to do something different.

And my boss at the time called me into his office and said, "I've got some news for you, the new CEO is Satya Nadella, we're announcing him on Tuesday, and he wants you to be his chief of staff."

And I felt what I think the people in *The Hunger Games* might have felt like when they were chosen. I was done fighting. Like, I didn't want to do this anymore, and I was so mad because it's like, "Who put my name on this list? Like, I barely know the guy." And my first act to the CEO is to say, "No, thank you, I don't want to work for you." Like, seriously?

So, as my head was exploding on this news, my boss said, "Take a few days, get to know him before you make any decision." And the next day, I had a three-hour interview with Satya where I was interviewing him, getting him ready for launch. So, getting him ready for all the questions from the press and employees, getting the communications and his initial e-mail set and the like.

So, we sit down in the CEO conference room and I ask him questions for about three hours. Ranging everything from, like, "Hey, you were at the company when we missed this mobile thing, like, what was your point of view?" "Hey, like, you've been at the company, you've seen X, Y, and Z happen, what do you think? What do you want to happen in the future? What's your family like? What are you trying to accomplish as a person?"

And through that conversation, I really felt like I had the privilege to be employee number one re-recruited to the company. And I thought, "Yeah, I want to be a part of this."

And at the end, he shifted gears. Let's shift gears. He's, like, "I think you know I want you to be my chief of staff." And I started to do that thing I do where I list off all the reasons why I'm not qualified to be a chief of staff, reminding him of, like, hey, I don't have a product background, I'm not a marketer. Here's really what I focus on, I don't think I'm the right person.

And up until that point in time, I had only worked with Satya like cursory, like a few minutes here and there. I didn't even think he knew my name. And to his credit, he paused and he said, "Jill, I've seen the way you work and you treat people well and that's what I want my team to be about. It's not about power. Culture change at this company needs to start here." And he said, "I want to change the culture of this company, will you help?"

For me, it was such an authentic moment. Like, one, I felt very proud that he had noticed that. That's how I try to work, but more excited that if he's really going to change the company culture, it isn't a messaging campaign, it's something he's trying to do, and he wants to model it from his immediate team. So, of course, at that moment, I was all in and canceled my interviews outside the company.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: I love that story. It gives me chills as a Microsoft employee because it shows at the very top valuing the how and not just the what, but how you interact with people, how you treat people as a way of what we want to represent as a culture once we continue this culture transformation at Microsoft. So, love that story.

Was it difficult for you to make the leap to leave Microsoft? And how is your day-to-day now at The Tracie Group similar or different to the chief of staff role?

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: Starting my own company had been something I had wanted to do for a number of years at that point in time. And I felt like after the first three years of working with Satya, we'd gotten this culture change movement underway. And I thought, "Now's the right time to make a change," where he can bring in another chief of staff who, perhaps, can help him operationalize the changes and take it to a more mature place. So, I knew that change in the person he had in that role would be helpful for the next season, so I felt relief that I was okay to move on.

But I also was excited by what I had learned during Satya's launch and the overall culture change movement. And I thought, "These are lessons that can be applied in so many different areas." And at that time, we were finishing writing the book, *Hit Refresh*, that told this journey. And all the time, we're getting asks from customers and partners, like, "Hey, how did you do it? What's happening here?" So, I thought, "Okay, the time is right to make this leap." And corporate America is hungry to figure out how to do culture change, and CEOs, more and more, play this incredibly unique role, more and more looking from not just running the business, but taking stands on broader societal

issues and playing this bigger part in society. And I thought, "I can help. Now is the right time to go off and start The Tracie Group." So, that's when I left and founded it.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: It sounds like a really exciting new job for you as CEO and leading this new business and starting a new business from scratch. Did you dream about starting a new business ever? You know, when you were younger, did you see this in your future as being a boss and starting a new business from scratch?

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: I had never dreamed of starting a business when I was a little girl. You know, to be honest, my father started his own company. He was a kitchen and bath designer. And he decided, you know, in the '80s that he wanted to start this company in New Jersey and go off and design and build people's kitchens.

And I saw him live that dream with my mother and start a small business and basically grow it to a couple different shops and a couple dozen employees. And over the years, as the economy changed and different businesses took hold, I saw that dream die and I saw him close the doors to this business.

And after that happened, both he and my mother found jobs in big corporations. So, they each went to work for Fortune 100 companies and rebuilt their careers from there.

So, for me, I had always observed big companies as this safe haven. It was like this place that you can grow and have this rich career with a lot of benefits and support. And I, myself, fell into that after college, started working for these giant companies, and myself enjoyed that support. So, going off on my own and starting my own company was something I started thinking about probably about five to eight years ago. Frankly, it was like a fear I had of how do I leave this wonderful company called Microsoft with this job I absolutely love and try to find this different route of something that's even more exciting and that I can build something even better from and take that leap?

So, for me, it was a bit of a kind of building myself up to leave this safe haven and try something brand new.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: So, you just talked about leaving the safe haven, starting your own business, and a lot of your career was at these large companies. And right before you started The Tracie Group, you were at Microsoft for several years, and you worked for two CEOs. I'd love to know how that experience working for two Microsoft CEOs helped you take that risk, take that leap into entrepreneurship. What did you take from that experience to help you become a successful CEO yourself?

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: Yeah. I feel so fortunate to be able to have had those years working for Steve Ballmer. I worked with him for about four years, then working with Satya Nadella for another three years. And each one of those experiences taught me something very different.

I'd say working with Steve during that time, you know, I started with him right after we had launched Windows 7 and just a few months later, Apple came out with the iPad, it was the rise of mobile and technology, seeing going through the launch of Windows 8, the launch of Surface.

And the thing that I really learned from Steve during that time was the importance of seeing the entire playing field. He was this business leader who truly understood if we do something in one part of the ecosystem, how does it impact another? If we do something ourselves at Microsoft, what does that mean for our partners? If we do something for our shareholders, what does that mean for our employees and vice versa? And he really helped me understand when you're approaching any business problem, how do you think about all the different constituencies and what does that mean for addressing that problem? That has helped me immensely in my own leadership, but also coaching different CEOs.

The thing I learned from Satya, and they're very different people, but Satya has this curiosity that is almost contagious. And as he's CEO, he's father of three kids, one with special needs, he travels all the time, he has all these responsibilities, yet he finds time to learn. He finds time to invest in himself and understand what's happening in the industry. He's curious on a million topics.

When people come into his office, he seeks to listen first and to hear their perspective. And I think if somebody with that little time and that much perspective already on the company and the industry can take time to learn, can take time to listen and just has a sense of curiosity, why can't I? And it's really taught me to build that into my schedule, to build that into my conversations.

And when I approach any CEO or a new project now, it always starts with the depth learning first of who they are, what industry are they in, what are they trying to achieve in their business? And Satya really helped me to learn like that discipline as a leader.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: So, it's so interesting, your career at Microsoft, because your first job at Microsoft was in compensation, and then you ended up not working for one Microsoft CEO, but you ended up working for two Microsoft CEOs. And I think a lot of people come into large companies and they're learning how to manage their career. How do they rise? How do they get to that next step? And I think your career trajectory and path is so interesting.

So, I'd love to hear more about that. How did you go from someone in compensation to someone working for one CEO and then a second CEO?

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: I'd say I'm one of those people that you can really describe as having no career plan in life, but ending up okay.

See, I have always been motivated by jobs that are exciting to me and that are on the edge. Like, if I can't get fired from it, it wasn't interesting. When I was a little girl, my mom would tell this story over and over again, when I was probably two or three years old, she took me to this YMCA to first time learn how to swim.

And as she tells the story, I was standing on the pool deck and all the other kids are getting their swimmyies put on and getting ready to go in the pool for the very first time. And I took off without her knowing and jumped into the deep end of the pool.

And at that moment, you know, panic sets in for everybody who's watching it. And the lifeguard held her back and said, "Just watch, see what happens." And, obviously, I came to the surface, I treaded water, and it was okay.

And I'd say that is basically how I've approached every job I've ever had. So, when I got the first job at Lucent Technologies with stock plan administration, I got it because I had worked for the head of compensation over a summer, I was an intern, so basically his admin. And I was graduating from college, I had a creative writing degree, of all things, but I had \$70 in my bank account. I was, like, "Okay, I need to get a real job. I know this guy at Lucent Technologies." I called him up and I said, "Hey, Jack, I'm graduating. Do you have a job?" And he said, "Sure, you can be our stock option plan administrator." And I said, "Great, what's a stock option?" And he said, "Don't worry, we'll teach you."

And that basically started my career in corporate America. And I was so naive about everything, like it didn't occur to me to hold my tongue and not share big ideas. It didn't occur to me to like throw my coworkers under the bus because of the politics involved. I just wanted to have fun, I worked with great people. So, that's what led me to different types of roles.

When I ultimately came to Microsoft and started working in compensation and benefits, what was very clear to me is that this is an incredible company and that there was change happening. And when I was involved in the compensation programs, I got to see that business change at a very close level. How do you drive performance? How do you align pay to different business objectives? And I wanted to be part of something bigger.

So, I started to align myself with those bigger projects. So I knew if, hey, there's a pay part of a broader culture initiative, can I be the person on that project? Or, hey, I'm really interested in communications, so can I be part of the V team working on this communications initiative?

So, I always tried to associate myself and got onto these bigger types of projects, which always gave me exposure to more people, more teams, and then things just went from there.

I'd say kind of the upward mobility through those years really came from the spirit of taking on these bold challenges that were so outsized me for the role, but there was a crisis situation or a critical thing happening. And I just raised my hand and I said, "I'll give it a go, I want to try. Bring me along for this." So, I kept developing these skills that maybe wouldn't have happened if I'd taken a safer route.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: So, what I'm hearing is you're not someone who's risk averse in the workplace.

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: No.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: You're someone who's willing to raise your hand and also kind of speak out your dreams out loud. And, you know, we see a gap in the workplace with confidence with gender. I'd love to hear, were there points in your career where you had issues with your confidence? Or how did you build it up so that you were one of those individuals when you got those opportunities, you raised your hand, you spoke up, you felt like you could take on something new and risky and did it?

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: I think one of the key things is having people around you who can speak truth into your life and to build you up. So, the people in my personal life, starting from right when I was in college to today are women and close friends who see the best in me and can highlight that and pull it out. Or my husband, who can look at anyplace I'm shy about something and to say, "No, you've got this, you can do it."

So, I think first and foremost, surrounding yourself with people who maybe can see more in you than you can potentially see in yourself is one of the key pieces.

And then I think for me, I had gone through a variety of things in my personal life from adopting teenager girls to seeing both my parents pass away from terminal illness, to a brother who had struggled with an opioid addiction. And for me, I looked at a lot of problems in my personal life as things that couldn't be solved. There's no amount of confidence, those are impossible situations and those are things you just kind of go through with the people you love and the best you can.

So, when I'd come into work and see what was perceived to be these giant problems, it would, inside, kind of almost make me laugh a little bit, like, these are not big problems. Like, let me tell you what big problems are. Big problems are cancer, you know, big problems are drug addiction. These problems are doable. Like, if we come together, if we focus, we can get this done.

So, I didn't see these things at work as these Herculean things that can never be overcome, because it just was, you know, in the context of work and life, it's just not of the same magnitude, and I think that really emboldened me to look and say, "I can do it, I can take it on," and feeling helpless in other areas of my life, it also gave me something

to do at work. It gave me the super power to want to go and conquer these bigger things.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: Thank you for sharing that. I do think it's so important that the perspective that you bring to work and what's happening in your personal life can shape that perspective, and you can use that almost as a super power of, "I got this, because, you know, this is not that big a deal compared to what else is going on in my life." So, thank you for sharing that.

Now, you talked about having people to encourage you and support you, which I totally agree with. There are always going to have some people in your life who, along the way, try to discourage you -- that teacher, that coworker, that boss maybe. So, I know you had a situation in college where an advisor told you to drop out. I'd love to know how you took that situation and what you learn from that story.

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: One of the things about me is I have never been a great student in life. I graduated high school at the prestigious mark, I think I was 79th percentile or something like that. And literally got into this small, tiny college called Houghton College on probation.

And I started on probation. And not only was I on probation, I declared that I'm going to be a creative writing major. I'm going to emphasize in poetry, and then my minor was going to be communications with a focus on theater.

So, I had this very fine arts bend at that time. And college was not something my family had planned for. I was the first woman to go to college. And my parents could help a little bit, but most of it was covered in student loans. I, clearly, was not going to be eligible for any form of scholarship.

So, I started and I took out tens of thousands of student loans, as a lot of young people do today. And I remember my financial aid counselor pulled me into his office and said, "You know, we don't recommend you take out this many loans, what's your major at least?" Hoping I'd say pre-med, or hoping I'd say business. And I said, "Creative writing." And he said, "Just quit. Just drop out." He's, like, "It's not worth it. You are never going to get a job."

And the ironic thing is, since then, I've been invited back by the alumni organization to give talks about how to have a career, so it's all come around. But, you know, in that moment, I'd say for me, there needs to be an ability to block out noisy people in your life. And it's so hard. I think it's also so hard for women, especially young women, because people do throw grenades and they do judge. And I think that comes down to, you know, for me, I envision myself standing in a ring, like with sets of gates around me. And there are only people who get to be in that inner ring if they can pass through gates that have levels of trust that share the same values that are for me. And those people

that don't, they don't get to be part of that. They don't get to be part of the inner circle that impacts who I am.

That was just one of those people that I saw as noisy in the background and I didn't take seriously because I had those other people in my life who were saying, "You're the first woman to go to college, you're betting on yourself, and you're going to be fine." And, turns out, those people were right.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: You briefly touched on how Steve Ballmer and Satya Nadella are very different individuals, and they certainly have very different public personas. How did you adjust to their different styles? You know, I guess, what's the broader lesson for people who are trying to adjust to different working styles of their colleagues or their bosses?

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: Yeah, it's funny. When I first got the job working for Steve, at that time I was doing some change management work in the human resources organization and threw my hat in the ring to get the role to work for Steve.

And I remember in the last interview I had, when my future boss at the time was basically telling me I'd get the job, we were talking through it. I asked him why. And I remember saying -- I did the exact thing wrong that women shouldn't do. I was, like, "Let me tell you all the reasons why you shouldn't hire me." Like, "You and I both know I'm completely incompetent for this job. I have no professional communications experience."

And he said, "You have the right temperament." And at the time, I remember thinking, "That's how you buy a puppy, that's not how you hire somebody. What do you mean I have the right temperament?"

And over the course of working with Steve and Satya, I figured out what he meant. And, you know, basically, what I found during that time is in both of those roles, the goal is to be a trusted advisor. It's not to execute a certain amount of responsibility. There are a lot of people who are in trusted advisor relationships, whether they're a CFO to a CEO or an HR partner to a client and the like.

And as a trusted advisor, the real responsibility is to identify what that person is trying to accomplish. What impact are they trying to make? And what am I uniquely capable of helping them do?

And for Steve, he was at this place in life where there was no way I was going to give him any new insight on tech. I mean, he created the PC industry, he had been at the company for 20, 30 years at the time. But what I could offer him is insight into what his audiences were thinking. I could offer him insight into how to better shape the context in which he was communicating so he can be a better speaker. I could give him

unfettered feedback on how he was coming across and how he could be more impactful.

And it was that spirit of trying to figure out what does he need and what can I uniquely do that I also carried through with Satya. And, you know, I started working with Satya right when he became CEO and I managed his transition. And at that time, what Satya needed, he was brand new to the CEO office. Like, hey how does this CEO suite thing work? I had that perspective to be able to help. He also came with a million ideas on what he wanted to do for the company, the changes he wanted to see, the impact he wanted to have. And I was able to uniquely help him choreograph those changes.

So, I think the key is whenever you're in a trusted advisor relationship is to look at what is this person trying to accomplish and how am I uniquely able to help? And then you flex with the different situation as needed where it becomes less about one's own style and more about what you can contribute and how you can be a great partner to those individuals. So, it becomes a lot less about the individual's personal approach and more what you can do together.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: Since Satya has taken over as CEO, Microsoft's value has now tripled. And a lot of that is credited toward this culture change. He's often publicly talking about culture change. I know you were co-writer on his book about *Hit Refresh*. And you talked also about The Tracie Group focusing on culture change, too.

I'd kind of love to hear what was your role at Microsoft working for Satya when he has decided that culture change is going to be kind of one of his big tenets of creating positive market value? What was your role in helping Microsoft make that shift or continue to make that shift?

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: I'd start by saying there are a lot of heroes of the Microsoft culture change. I think Satya, rightly, gets a lot of credit for it, but there are a number of leaders and teams and people who are involved, and I think that's the spirit of culture change. It's not just about one person, it's about getting this momentum and this movement started.

From the very beginning, when Satya offered me the job to be his chief of staff, he said it was because he wanted help driving culture change. So, from the very beginning, we had that as a center of gravity for what we wanted to achieve together.

I'd say it started with helping Satya articulate, "What is the change we seek to make in our culture?" And we grounded on this idea of shifting the culture from a group of people who are know-it-alls to a group of people who want to learn-it-all. And once we had that grounding idea, then it became, "How do we breathe life into it?"

And my role was helping hold the schedule accountable for it, his communications accountable to that, and helping showcase him in a learning posture so people understood that this was real. So, what that looked like is, "Hey, if we're going to have the company move to being learn-it-all, Satya, what are you learning and how do we communicate that so you can model it?" Or what are the keynotes you're going to give during the year that inspired the employee base and get them excited about these changes? What are the practical changes we're going to make to how the senior leadership team operates. That shows them in more of a learning posture and helps them to learn new things about what's happening in their own businesses or in the industry.

So, it was really about taking that kind of pinnacle statement and then breathing life into it in every single way possible, and then also holding the teams accountable who are responsible for the downstream culture change, whether that's in the HR learning and development teams and helping those people get the resources and the perspective that they need to drive change. So, it was really about getting this major movement orchestrated and this flywheel going at the company. It was certainly an exciting three years to be a part of.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: Now that you've been out from Microsoft a few years, looking back, have you reflected on what is your proudest accomplishment at Microsoft, and also maybe like where is an opportunity that you learned something, or maybe even a failure that you've reflected on over the past few years?

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: There are so many moments I've been so proud to be a part of at the company. One thing that happened before I started working for either Satya or Steve is in 2009 when the company did its first major restructuring and layoff efforts, I was asked to lead that initiative. And it was so hard personally to be this person orchestrating this worldwide reduction in force.

And I remember friends coming to me and asking, "Is my husband on the list?" And people kind of knew I was part of it. Is it big? Is my team impacted? And carrying this personal toll.

And I remember as part of that work, standing for the people who were being impacted by losing their jobs and saying these people haven't done anything wrong. They've contributed nothing but great things to this company, and how do we treat them with the utmost dignity and respect that they deserve? And really fighting for that experience to be elevated and to treat people with the most respect possible during that time.

So, when I looked back, I think the measure of impact is always what have you done for people's lives? I look at that and I'm proud not necessarily of that work, but of being

part of holding the bar high to treat people who are going through really hard things well.

So, that's what stands out to me as the thing I'm personally most proud of. Certainly, orchestrating Satya's announcement and the CEO transition, I do think we called the shot that we wanted that to be a momentum changer for the company and build excitement and hope and that happened and I have a lot of pride around that.

Things that I'm learning, I think I kind of go back to maybe people management situations where I didn't treat the person with maybe the respect that I could have or heard somebody out in a broader way. And I think about as a manager and a leader, I believe our role is to send people home more energized, more fulfilled so they can be better dads, better moms, better friends. And I know there are certainly times I did not send people on my team home in that spirit and those other things I wish I had the do-over on.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: You know, you brought in a lot about your personal things you were going through while you were working at Microsoft. And a lot of big life moments. How did you manage all those changes in your personal life with your day-to-day work? And then, specifically, I know you adopted two teenage girls while working at Microsoft, and I'd love to know how maybe adoption has changed you as a leader.

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: Great question. So, we had this incredible experience of bringing two teenage girls -- they were, at the time, my sister-in-law's kids into our home. And it started as a temporary thing, and eventually became permanent. But, basically, overnight, went from my only responsibility at home was taking care of two dogs, to then having these two teenage girls. And the schedules and the school and the extracurricular activities and all the things that go with having teenagers.

I'd say the first and foremost, I got a steep lesson in empathy for every working parent in dealing with those challenges.

But during that time, I actually got some great advice from Carolyn Everson, who is the Facebook head of advertising. And Carolyn had shared, she had two younger children at the time. And she had shared that the key for her was to not listen to what other people were trying to tell her to do, but listen to the kids. And if the kids felt loved and the kids felt a part of her life, that was the only thing that mattered. And I really tried to take that on and say, "Do the girls feel loved? Do they feel supported? Do they have the resources they need? Do they know I'll be there at a moment's notice? Do they feel like I'm spending quality time with them?" If I could say yes to those things, I let my own judgment and everybody else's judgment pass away.

And I remember this one night really specifically where I was running late. I was at an event with Steve Ballmer, finishing up this event. And, you know, it's really hard to

sneak out of those things early. Like, "Hey, see you, Steve, I've kind of got this thing." So, I'm trying to move forward. And my daughter had a choir concert. So, I jump in the car, I'm scarfing down a protein bar for my dinner and racing towards this choir concert. And running through the rain, I walk into the lobby of her school, I'm soaking wet, I'm barely there, and who's there greeting me? It's the bake sale people. Did you bring your cupcakes to sell? Like, I haven't made cupcakes since I was six years old. Did you bring your coat to donate? It's, like, "No, I didn't." The only thing I have is me and I'm here to see my daughter sing and that's it.

You know, who knows if those people were really judging me. I felt so judged at that time, like so less than the other parents. Like I can't get my act together, what right do I have playing this role? But the only thing that mattered to my daughter was that I was there to hear her sing. And that's what she remembers. As long as I remember to hold myself to that bar, the rest of the noise can just fade away.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: Your bio says you've developed a passion for helping young women reach their full potential. I'm sure part of welcoming two teenage daughters to your world was part of that. How do you develop this passion and how do you help young women today?

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: Adopting the two teenage girls certainly put me on that path. I didn't realize until that moment how much a lot of love and a little bit of direction can really transform somebody's life. So, that experience certainly turned me onto it.

Personally, I have had a number of different mentors in my life both personally and professionally that I've gotten a lot of value from. So, for me, it's paying that forward and trying to find young women who are earlier in their career who are looking for a mentor both from a professional standpoint, how do they deal with the challenges at work or get to their goal, but also in a personal standpoint, what's it like going through your 20s and figuring out independence, what does that look like? So that's how I try to invest today.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: You're in a unique position working in technology, when there was this great push of diversity and inclusion, and I think the tech industry is on this journey. I think we're probably in year three when we think about where we've started and we've made some progress, but some would argue not enough. And so at your level, like when you saw this -- one of our cultural tenets was diversity and inclusion, what are your thoughts on the path forward for technology and for the workplace to become more inclusive so that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed and thrive at work?

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: It's such an interesting time to be a woman in the workplace and especially in technology. You know, I also think, to be honest, it's a dangerous time because it's one where people are finding their voice and men aren't quite sure what to

do with that yet, very well-meaning men, and they're trying to figure out what does it mean to look like to lead. And I think there's a lot of miscommunication and chaos in that process.

You know, my advice to women is to, first and foremost, really think about what you personally need, versus what the world or a broader movement would need. And start with that. Like, do you feel empowered? Do you feel welcome? Do you feel like there's anything holding you back? And try to identify what those things are personally and start having those conversations with your peers, with your manager, in ways that can unblock those things and enlighten people to things they might not even realize is happening or might not be aware of how their style is impacting you or how a decision might have been perceived.

So, you know, in the spirit of creating a more inclusive culture, I think it really is born from these honest conversations. And from the male leaders I know, they're eager to have these because they want to learn, they want to better understand, but they also don't know how to walk into this water and to deal with it.

So, I'd say kind of really start from a position of, "What do I need?" And if there are women who feel like they want to be more on the activist side and changing the system and trying to be part of this broader culture change, it isn't about them as a person, it's about this broader initiative. I'd say align yourself with the people who are a part of that.

What I see happening is sometimes these two things are getting confused in the workplace, where people are taking this activist stance and it's unclear if it's about them and their personal situation or it's about trying to change something bigger in the world. And I'd say get out of that murky middle and figure out what does it mean for you personally? And then align yourself with the other people and initiatives that are happening if you want to contribute to this broader movement.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: So, there are those personal needs at work, and then I think a lot of people are looking for what's their professional mission? What are they working towards? What lights them up?

When I went to your LinkedIn profile, your first sentence is, "I'm happiest when I'm helping someone I respect do something epic." And it seems like you have been able to go on a journey to figure out what your mission is and put it in a very simple sentence that everyone can understand. So, what was that process of figuring out that one sentence? And what advice would you give to others who are trying to figure out what that one sentence is for themselves?

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: It's funny, I got to that sentence as part of a senior leadership team meeting at Microsoft. Satya writes about this in *Hit Refresh*, where you can

imagine every member of the senior leadership team, all the direct reports of the CEO, so you have the heads of engineering, the head of HR, the CFO, COO, and we're all sitting on these sofas and the facilitator of the meeting gives us this opportunity to write down your personal philosophy.

And we have probably about 20 minutes or so to work on this personal philosophy. And during that time, I wrote something similar to what's now on my LinkedIn profile. And I had such harsh judgment for it because it's like, "This is so pathetic. Your dream is to help other people? Like, don't you have your own thing? You don't have your own mission you want to accomplish, your own product to develop?"

And so I start getting anxious. Like, "I don't know if this is a really good thing or not." And the facilitator has us go around the room and read our mission statements. And you can imagine from that group, there are people who share developing products used by a billion people, there's people in there talking about sustaining a legacy of education through their entire families.

And as they went through it, I got more and more comfortable with that statement because I felt like these are people I respect, and they're trying to do amazing things, and how can I be a part of helping it? And even now when I'm outside the company, I find this still to be true where I may not have my own entrepreneurial spirit to build a certain product, but man, am I excited to work with the head of Seattle Children's who's trying to cure cancer. Or, man, am I excited to work with a technologist who's trying to break through and set an ethical framework for how we develop artificial intelligence in the future.

I get excited by what other people are doing who I respect. And it's, like, "How do I come alongside that?" But I think the key to get there is really reflecting on what gives you energy and where are you the happiest?

There's a book by the professors who run the Stanford Design School, I think it's called *Designing Your Life*, and one of the things that book has you do is journal during a day. What gives you the most energy? I went to this meeting and I found it to be so boring, or I had this conference call and I got the opportunity to present and I felt this kind of energy. So, really diagramming your day and figuring out what gives you the most energy. And then look at that over the course of six months and see, "Where was that?"

And then I think the last step is giving yourself some freedom to let it be authentic to who you are, not who you think the world is telling you you should be. And that may mean that your goal may not have the biggest salary associated with it or a position of power, but letting that be okay because it's what you're trying to do. So, I think that's the key to finding it.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: Through our conversation, what I've heard from you is be authentic to yourself, give yourself time to reflect on what gives you energy and happiness, keep things in perspective, surround yourself with people who are going to be your supporters and advocates and be aware of who is in your closest gate. Be confident about opportunities and making sure your voice is heard.

Is there anything else you can think about as you reflect on your journey so far? Advice you would give to other young women who are pursuing big dreams?

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: My first piece of advice would be to dream even bigger. A lot of young women I meet, I think, "Wow, you could do double what you think you can." So, I'd say challenge yourself to first just dream even bigger and see if that fits.

The second piece I'd say is really get a plan for resiliency because the journey is long, so figure out who are those people who are going to come alongside you and encourage you, who are going to challenge you, who are going to speak truth into your life to make sure that you're staying on path and true to what you're trying to accomplish.

But I'd say, most of all, have fun. If it's not fun and you're not getting energized by what you're doing, change courses. Life is a bit too short. And if you're not having fun on a regular basis, of course everybody's going to have some bad days, but if you genuinely aren't enjoying what you're doing, then it's time to step back and reevaluate.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: I love that. Thank you for all that advice. Where can our listeners find you on the Internet?

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: www.traciegroup.com.

PAMELA SOBERMAN: Great, thank you.

JILL TRACIE NICHOLS: Thank you.

(Music.)

VOICEOVER: Cutting Edge, our take on stories in the business and technology world.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: In this Cutting Edge segment, we're taking a look at an article by Palko Karasz that was published on November 10th in the *New York Times* titled *Britain's Equal Pay Day Highlights Gender Gap*.

The article explains that the Fawcett Society, a group that campaigns for gender equality and women's rights, set November 10th as the date in Britain when women begin, effectively, working for free when compared to men based on the disparity in pay annually.

SONIA DARA: In Britain, the pay gap was 13.7 percent this year. In other words, women earn, on average, 86.3 percent of what men do for the same work. A quick bit of math brings us to the 314th day of the year, or November 10th, as the last day women are paid with this discrepancy in mind.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: The conversation about wage inequality is not new but we wanted to highlight this article because of a novel way that the campaign came to life. Women involved in the campaign sent out automated e-mail replies to mark Equal Pay Day in Britain.

Here's a sample out-of-office reply that the article cites: Quote, "Out of office for the rest of the year. Not really, I'm just making a point. Today is, effectively, the last day women in the U.K. are paid to work. Because of the gender pay gap, the average woman is working for free until the end of the year." End quote.

As we head into the holiday season, out-of-office replies will start ramping up and I really appreciated that the Fawcett Society figured out a pretty innovative way to make this office community norm more educational and thought provoking.

SONIA DARA: Fawcett Society also launched a social media campaign encouraging people to participate by sharing photos with equals signs drawn on their hands to call for change.

In my opinion, this arm of the campaign isn't as disruptive as those out-of-office messages, but for audiences more interested in selfies, this is a great way to get more people involved.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Karasz reminds readers that is illegal in most industrialized nations to pay women less than men for the same job, but if nothing is done, research in Britain has shown that it could take nearly a century to bridge the gap at the current rate of change.

SONIA DARA: So, listeners, keep an eye out for these milestone markers. There's different pay equality holidays that mark wage discrepancies for different populations, identified by their country, race, gender, role, et cetera. Amplify the voices of the underpaid, especially on those days. Raising broader awareness of the problem is an important step in ramping up the pace of change.

(Music.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Okay, podcast family. We're going to wrap up this episode, but before we do, I want to extend some sincere thanks to Carlos Ruiz and Lester Moses of

ALPFA Seattle. It was such a pleasure meeting you, and thank you for continuing to reach out and figure out ways that we can collaborate.

SONIA DARA: And a big thank you to Pamela Soberman, who has been such a great supporter of our show, and did a phenomenal job in her debut interview today. And, of course, thank you to Jill Tracie Nichols for sharing your experiences and for doing such epic work.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Please remember to rate, review, and share our show on Apple Podcasts or wherever fine podcasts can be found.

SONIA DARA: Listeners, if you have any feedback or questions, you can e-mail us at wibt@microsoft.com or tweet us @MicrosoftWomen.

All right, listeners, your mission for this episode, if you choose to accept it, is to use the mic every time. This mission was lifted from the Five Ally Actions newsletters produced by Better Allies. The newsletter explains, quote, "We've all been at Q&A sessions when someone in the audience shouts out their question -- impatient for the mic to make its way to them. When this happens, it can create a less inclusive event for others in the audience who might have trouble hearing them." End quote.

So, you can imagine you're in a big Q&A session, someone's thinking they're helping the flow of the Q&A go by faster by just shouting it out, but it's actually more troublesome for others who can't hear well.

Inclusive design expert Matt May elucidates, quote, "Hard-of-hearing attendees may be using an assisted listening device. Captioners may be working remotely, just take the freaking mic." End quote.

If you want more tips like this delivered right to your inbox, sign up for the Five Ally Actions newsletter at maleallies.com. And just take the frickin' mic. (Music.)

END