

Transcript of “Leadership With Shelley Drake” Podcast

- Shelley Drake: The first principle I have is volunteer, but volunteer for something for which you love, for something that pulls on your heartstrings. Don't volunteer because it's the thing to do and it pads your resume.
- Nate Benson: Good morning, good afternoon and good evening whenever you may be listening. And welcome to Latitude the 43North podcast. I'm Nate Benson, director of media and public relations at 43North and this is a very special episode of the podcast. It's brought to you by CLOE, the UB School of Management Center for Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness. They're a group of researchers, scholars, and experts who work to create more effective leaders and organizations. CLOE offers programs, trainings, to speakers and conferences to help people lead at all levels at their organizations and around the world.
- Nate Benson: Joining me this week on the podcast is my cohost, Professor Darren Treadway, a faculty expert in leadership at the University of Buffalo. And our very special guest this week on Latitude is Shelley Drake, western New York regional president at M&T Bank and president of the M&T charitable foundation. Darren and I talked with Shelley about her 40 plus year career at M&T Bank, how it got started, how she's grown into several different roles and the importance of mentorship in the workplace. Let's jump into this week's episode of Latitude with Shelley Drake and my cohost Darren Treadway.
- Nate Benson: Darren, how are you today?
- Darren Treadway: I'm peachy, how are you?
- Nate Benson: Fantastic. Summer is kicking. Just got back from two days of vacation, which I need another day and a half to decompress from kids.
- Darren Treadway: Fair enough.
- Nate Benson: I never understood that until I became a parent. Oh, I need a vacation from my kids.
- Darren Treadway: I have four, so yeah.
- Nate Benson: Here I am back at work.
- Darren Treadway: Yeah, it's fun.
- Nate Benson: We're joined on the podcast today by the remarkable Shelley Drake, M&T Bank. Shelley, how are you today?
- Shelley Drake: I'm very well, thank you.
- Nate Benson: For those who don't know you, which is very few, but give us a quick rundown of who you are.

Shelley Drake: I am Shelly Drake. I am the regional president of the western New York region of M&T Bank and I am also president of the M&T charitable foundation. And I am proud to say that I've been with the bank for 47 years.

Nate Benson: Lifelong western New Yorker.

Shelley Drake: Lifelong western New Yorker. I basically have never had another job other than working at M&T Bank and I should add then I met my husband there many, many years ago. He doesn't work there anymore, but our son does work there. We are...

Nate Benson: Family business.

Shelley Drake: We are an M&T family.

Darren Treadway: That's awesome.

Nate Benson: Let's get into kind of life before M&T. What was life like in Buffalo? Where'd you grow up? Where'd you go to school? Kind of give us, paint us the picture of prior to M&T life.

Shelley Drake: I grew up in North Buffalo. I was a city girl and started out early on at school 64, public school 64. Did a little stint at the campus school and eventually went onto the Buffalo Seminary. And from there I went to UB where I was a psychology major.

Darren Treadway: So how did you end up in banking?

Shelley Drake: That's a really good question. When I completed my four years at UB, one of my uncles who was sort of the, I would say, the most successful uncle in my family, and my dad came from a family of eight, called me in one day. And he said, "Now that you've finished college, what are you going to do?" And I said, "Boy, I have no idea." And with a degree in psychology, you needed to either go on and get something beyond just that initial bachelor's degree and he said, "You know, I bank at M&T Bank, it's a great bank. Why don't you go down and see if they're hiring?" I said, "Great." I went down to the head office and it was called personnel at the time. They didn't call it human resources. And I walked in and I said, "I'd like to apply for a job."

Shelley Drake: And I was asked if I had a college degree. I said yes. And I was asked if I had a car. I said yes. And they said, "You're hired." True Story. True Story.

Nate Benson: Nice and easy. Quick.

Shelley Drake: Very easy.

Nate Benson: Did they ask specifically what degree?

Shelley Drake: No.

Nate Benson: Or it didn't matter. It was a blanket.

Shelley Drake: No, it did not matter. It did not mater. Nor did they ask what kind of a car?

Nate Benson: When would this have been?

Shelley Drake: That would have been in 1971.

Nate Benson: Awesome. Like you said, 47 years. Worked your way up the whole chain of command so to speak.

Shelley Drake: Just had come through UB, and it was during the Vietnam War and times were quite different in the late sixties. It was very different for me to be at UB, coming from the Buffalo Seminary and I was ready to be a banker.

Darren Treadway: That's an amazing story. As someone who teaches human resources and we talk about selection and how you got to be reliable instruments. And we have one of the most successful women in Buffalo who just went, "Yeah, I got a car." Maybe we should, we should go back to that. Maybe that, that was better.

Shelley Drake: I didn't mention that my father was a car dealer.

Nate Benson: Oh perfect.

Darren Treadway: You didn't have a choice but to have a car. I guess when you look at that selection and your success over 47 years here, and you had mentioned things had changed a lot. In 2017, you were named Woman of Influence, lifetime achievement award about Business First and like you said, you'd been at M&T your whole life. One of the things that I would like to ask you about, is being a woman in business, not just in Buffalo but around the world, how have things changed? Or have you seen them change in the 47 years that you have, you've been involved in business?

Shelley Drake: When I started at the bank, we always had lots of women. There were lots of women that worked at the bank, but they were not necessarily in management positions. And I think back then it was very much a man's world and especially in the area that I eventually sort of grew up in. And that is commercial, the commercial bank side. And back then, there weren't any women in the commercial bank to speak of and I actually was considered, I would say, a bit of an experiment. And I was placed in, one day I was asked to become a commercial lender, which is the name that we used to use before we used relationship manager. And they did it while the manager of the area was on vacation and they placed me there and he came in and he saw me and he said, "What are you, what are you doing here, Shelley?"

Shelley Drake: And I said, "Oh, I'm your new commercial lender." And there was a look of shock, a big gulp and oh. He had no idea. I had to get trained internally because I hadn't, with my psychology degree, I didn't really have a lot of, I had no accounting, finance. I didn't have any of those things necessary to go into commercial lending. I was trained internally and I was off and running. And I even ran into a bit of an obstacle. The same manager sent out letters to many customers of the bank introducing me. And one of them called up and said, "Shelley Drake. Sounds like that could be a girl." And he said, "Well, as a matter of fact, she is." And the customer said, "I don't want a girl."

Darren Treadway: Wow.

Shelley Drake: And he said, to my dismay, he said, "Oh no problem. I'll switch you over to a man." And I never forgot that. And it's a story that I've told many times because why didn't he say, "Could you meet her? Could you get to know her for a month, two months, three months? And then if things aren't going well, we'll make a switch." But he didn't do that. And so it's something I've always remembered and it's been something that's made me a different type of manager leader going forward.

Nate Benson: A lot of the difficulties for women in business have kind of come to light. Now, because of social media and people are able to express, tell their stories in an enlightened fashion. What has changed? Aside from the technology. A lot of these problems aren't new in terms of what women had to deal with.

Shelley Drake: The problems aren't new but there are so many changes. And if I think of M&T alone, we now have resource groups and we have one of them in particular it's called the Women's Interest Network. We call it WIN, W-I-N. We have 11 chapters throughout the bank and we have over 2,500 women in this group.

Nate Benson: Wow.

Shelley Drake: And these resource groups are wonderful because it's a way to get people together. They choose to be in them. We're not asking people to be in them. They choose to elect to be in them and it's so that they are people with like interests who are joining these groups and they find everything from help within their business careers to, social functions to, whatever they choose to do, charitable functions.

Shelley Drake: And they put all, we put all of this together and we have, I think we've about 49 groups all together. This one is the largest. And with the 11 chapters. And we've, so we've got 49 groups and right now we have over 7,000 members bank wide. Now the bank only has 17,000 people. This has really been...

Darren Treadway: Tremendous.

Shelley Drake: And it's just a wonderful way to help people help each other.

Darren Treadway: You had mentioned that that experience with that customer, and I'm going to circle back around, I apologize. Had changed the way, made you a different leader, was I believe your words. Can you reflect on what kind of trajectory that took in your leadership style after experiencing that?

Shelley Drake: Well, I guess that I remember that. I remember it as though it happened yesterday.

Darren Treadway: I can tell when you're speaking about it.

Shelley Drake: That's how profound, it was a profound occurrence in my life. And so what I've done is I have made sure that any time I have been faced with a situation like that as a manager, that I reflect upon that and I make sure that, we have customers for instance, will say, "Oh, I had a disagreement with my relationship manager. I want to change." I will work through those. Or, even internally, people who want to change within the department. I will work through those with that story in mind that, that reflection that I had. And so I, and I bring it up.

Shelley Drake: I let people also, I think I've mentored people and I've talked about it so that other people remember that because that was just me being a woman. But a similar thing happened to my husband when he was at the bank and somebody looked at him and said, "Oh, I don't want him. He looks so young." And he had an MBA. But, kind of a similar story. And so he told me to get over it. He said, "Well, not a big deal." And I thought it was a big deal for me.

Darren Treadway: When you talk about, it's amazing, not just that you created this network to assist females in the workplace at M&T, but the participation rate is amazing.

Nate Benson: Through the roof.

Darren Treadway: For any organization that's a win. That's an amazing success story. You also talk about mentoring individuals based on your experience. With minorities and females, mentoring in the workplace is critically important and you speak about your mentors. Can you perhaps reflect on some of the takeaways you took from your mentors and things that have affected your career? And maybe some things you try and pass on to your proteges?

Nate Benson: I think maybe, put into context. Who some of your mentors have been throughout your career.

Shelley Drake: Probably the mentor that stands out the most to me is Bob Wilmers. And I'm not even sure if he knew that he was my mentor, but he was my mentor and I'm going to cry. He was a huge influence and it was the way he did things and it was the way he approached things. And it was the way he asked questions. And everybody's heard how many questions he would ask. And we would bring our customers to lunch with him. And I would have to say, you might leave hungry, but he will ask you more questions than you can ever imagine. And it is his way to get to know you and your business very quickly and he will remember and he will know exactly what he's asked you and he will remember that and the next time he sees you he will be able to bring that up.

Shelley Drake: And he had a wonderful approach. He had a wonderful approach to running the bank and into life. And frankly on the charitable side, and I've been involved as the head of the charitable foundation for so long, that all came from him. And I understood his thoughts and when we would, when a new organization pops up in Buffalo, we look at it and we say, "Does Buffalo really need yet another organization when there are two or three others, or even maybe just one other doing exactly the same thing? Do we have room to do that? Couldn't they bond together and be a stronger organization?"

Shelley Drake: Bob for me was just a mentor. He was a mentor to tons and tons of people. I mean throughout the community, throughout the bank for certain. And he was tough but he had a heart. And so he was my mentor. I would say my greatest mentor.

Shelley Drake: And I have been a mentor to many people, many women, more women, young women, older women, minority women, but also to some men. And I think it's about networking. Some of the women that I've mentored have been referred to me by others. My son, in fact, my son introduced me to a couple of women. He said they were in his training class at the bank. Gee, I think this would be someone you'd like to know. And I would start, I would start a relationship with that person that would go on and on and on and help

these people move along in their positions. And they're both in the bank as well as outside the bank. And it's something that I feel I can share and I can give back. And I don't think there's anything more important than being able to, to be a mentor. Not everyone is fortunate enough in life to have a mentor and sometimes you have to develop your own. If they, mentors just don't fall out of the sky. But it's good. It's all good.

- Nate Benson: You mentioned Mr. Wilmers was a mentor of yours obviously. He might not even have known it. Was there something he said throughout your career that has just always resonated with you? I know you kind of broke down his, the way his personality was, always asking questions like that. Was there ever that piece of personal advice that just you wake up every morning, you think about something he's told you?
- Shelley Drake: Not specifically that he's told, that he told me, but he was a great question asker, but he was also a great listener and I think I just learned from him and I watched the way he did things. Many of us watched the way he did things and we gleaned invaluable information and I think that shaped our lives. Shaped my life, I'll say that.
- Darren Treadway: Well shifting kind of the community if I can, I like to talk a lot about institutions as like symbols of the community. In particular, M&T is a source of pride for, I think for all of us in Buffalo. And it's the largest retail bank in Buffalo, western New York. It's also rated one of the top 60 banks in America by Forbes. I didn't know the Forbes part and it's even more reason to be proud of it. Being at M&T so long, are there certain values or or core ideas that you think help M&T be that kind of, for lack of a better term, beacon of hope for our community?
- Shelley Drake: I will tie that question into the question of how could you be at one place for so long? How could you spend 47 years at one place? And I would say that for me, it's incredibly important to wake up every day and be proud of where I work and proud of the culture and the ethics of the organization. And I have to be able to think that everyday when I go into work and I contribute whatever I am trying to contribute, I am proud of that place. And I can honestly say that that's what M&T is. I have never picked up the paper, I've never heard of a story that has made me grimace or have just a moment of oh terrible. That's just not how it is. And so that's an important part of why I'm there. It's something that I end up seeing every time I interview someone because I often get asked, "Why have you been there that long?"
- Shelley Drake: And that's a piece that I say all the time. It's a thread through all of my conversations. I think the bank has very high morals, very high standards. It's the people. It's all about the people that work there and the people that want to work there for those reasons, I think. And that's what M&T is and we believe in giving back to the communities and we want to give back into the communities that are in our footprint. The charitable foundation, our mission is to give back into the communities where we have banking. Where we bank, where we bank, people, we have our customers, our employees work there, our not for profit institutions are there. That's what we support.
- Darren Treadway: Speaking about the community, you're heavily involved in the community. You said you've been president of charitable foundation for quite some time. You were raised here in Buffalo, you've been here. It's unheard of to be in one place for 47 years in the workplace and however long your whole life, in your life. I told you this is the coolest

thing I read, correct me if I'm wrong, but you're receiving a show from Road Less Traveled productions in 2019 about your life as part of the Buffalo stories. That's super cool. That they're making a play about your life. What is it about growing up here in Buffalo that you think has made you, has formed your leadership style? Made you such a contributor here? Not just at M&T but in the broader community here in Buffalo?

Shelley Drake: I think because of my being here, as long as I've been here and my family is here. I was raised here and my friends and my business colleagues, my colleagues at the bank and then our customers. I'm all about Buffalo. And I think because of the size of Buffalo, I think it's easy to really become a part of the fabric of the community.

Shelley Drake: And so that's, and I do mean easy. That's what I've been able to do. I love networking. And I think it started with my first board position, my own first board position, which was on the board of the Buffalo Seminary. And I love putting things together. I love connecting people to people and I've continued to do that through my job at the bank. And so I guess that might be a piece of why Road Less Traveled has, wants to do this play, which when they called me, I have to say, I said, "What? About me? It's boring. Mine is a boring life. It's been a wonderful life, but it's..." We'll have to see how that comes out.

Darren Treadway: I'm sure we'll find something surprising to you in their play.

Nate Benson: Well plus, a play's a great opportunity to maybe put in some elements of life that may or may not be fiction.

Shelley Drake: We shall see.

Darren Treadway: The charitable foundation also allows you to network with folks who are in the not for profit industry. And we spoke a little bit before the interview about about leadership in the not for profit arena and how it may differ slightly from what we see in the traditional for profit realm. Would you mind kind of reflecting on that and and what the differences might be?

Shelley Drake: Sure. I think that leadership in a not for profit is basically there are two types of leadership. There's the day to day executive director who is, leads the organization and then there is the volunteer board. And you could say, "Well gee, that's the same as in a for profit because you've got the executive team and you have a board perhaps."

Shelley Drake: But I think in a not for profit, there is more reliance on the board and the skillset of the board. And so I think, and I say that because let's take a not for profit that's in an agency type of not for profit. If they're going to build a new building, for instance, it's unlikely that the executive director is going to have the skillset to do a big construction project. That means there's heavy reliance on the board and other volunteers to get that done, to raise the money to do it and get it done. I think it's very important for these not for profits, for the executive management team to have a very strong board, a committed board and one that has a variety of skillsets to be able to keep that organization afloat.

Darren Treadway: Excellent.

- Nate Benson: How can some of the management between the day to day team, who's chugging along in the trenches, they see what's happening in real time versus sometimes that volunteer board who's always sometimes thinking big picture. There might be sometimes that disconnect there, right?
- Shelley Drake: I think the way that gets connected is that the, you have a combination of the board doing, going to board meetings, but then you have committees. And so hopefully the committees have self selected so that the individuals have self selected to be on committees for which they have strength. Whether it's the finance committee, whether it's the marketing committee, and so they are having separate committee meetings and they are helping those individuals within the organization. That's the way I think a not for profit should run. It's not necessarily the whole board being strong in every single area that is needed to run a not for profit.
- Nate Benson: We're bringing through 43North, a lot of startups coming through, establishing roots here in western New York. Part of that is getting them connected to the community. How can organizations like 43North institutions, like M&T Bank, encourage these entrepreneurs, especially women entrepreneurs to further engage with their community so that these roots are even stronger throughout the region?
- Shelley Drake: The first principle I have is, volunteer but volunteer for something for which you love, for something that pulls on your heartstrings. Don't volunteer because it's the thing to do and it pads your resume. The first thing is to volunteer and I think from volunteering, and you can ask people to help you get into volunteer situation. There are many not for profits that have volunteer situations. It's harder to get on a board because a board is not probably going to, an organization can't really take a chance on someone who has absolutely no experience whatsoever in the not for profit world, in the volunteer world. Volunteer there. And we always are helping people start by volunteering.
- Shelley Drake: And then we do at M&T, we do a board matching for people that are moving up a little bit in the organization to the higher levels and we try to make sure that it's a good match so that the people going on the board, first of all of course you have an interest which is what I just said, in the mission of that not for profit and are going to do a good job and are going to put in the time. It takes time. It takes energy, it takes resources. If you're on a board, you have to be able to financially commit to it. They need a 100% participation. Even if the bank is supporting a not for profit, individuals have to support too. The board members all have to step up and financially support, sell tables, do whatever's necessary. Raise money, you've got to raise money. If you can't ask others to, that's what the not for profits need.
- Darren Treadway: I guess, and kind of wrapping up my line of questioning, last night I taught a class on career management at the school and I was giving advice about, they were asking for advice about what should they do next? College juniors and seniors, many of them in finance. I'm positive that I gave them the wrong advice. I guess my question is, if next time I could channel you, what should I have said to them about what they should do, advice wise?
- Shelley Drake: I want to know what you said.
- Nate Benson: Yeah, what did you say Darren?

Darren Treadway: You don't want to know.

Shelley Drake: I do.

Darren Treadway: No. I avoid being recorded anywhere but here.

Nate Benson: Fair enough.

Shelley Drake: Well I'm trying. That's a really hard question. I'm not sure that I know the answer other than I guess I would say, at that age you might make a mistake. You might do what you think you've set out to, you've learned and you think you should go in a certain direction and hopefully you'll find that ideal job and hopefully it will work out. But it might not. And if you're in a big organization like M&T, there are lots and lots of different types of jobs and types of, different types of opportunities. I guess if you get into a training program, I'm all about training programs and I think that if you can get into, if one can get into a training program after college, I think that's wonderful. That's invaluable. And whatever training you will get is transferrable to basically to life. I think a training program is key. If one can do that and there are other people that are probably more entrepreneurial or would just want to get on the ground and just start running a 1,000 miles a minute. I don't know what you said.

Darren Treadway: You mentioned values a couple of times and I may be paraphrasing, but as you've appreciated your time and developed pride in M&T because they seem to share your values and the things they express. And you brought up values again with matching boards, that you need to have the values. Do you think that's an important, I know as a 19, 20 year old asking yourself about, what do I value? And how do I match that with a company? Do you think that's an important thing to consider? Or do you think it's something that you obviously will evolve but you should develop over time?

Shelley Drake: I guess I think that it's an important thing to consider. And I'm saying that because almost all of the people that I interview for jobs, they've all read about M&T and they tend to bring it up to me. Now, maybe they bring it up to me because they know of my, of the charitable work that, part of my job. Or maybe they just are well read and know that I've been on boards. I don't know. But they do bring it up to me. I have to think that the people I'm seeing, it matters. It's something that they care about, but maybe I'm not seeing the ones that don't care about it.

Darren Treadway: Fair enough.

Nate Benson: And I think kind of thinking back on the advice you were mentioning to Darren, looking back at your story, you took a chance. Coming out of college with a psych degree, looking for a job, try a bank. To a lot of kids coming out of college, no, I have to, I'm a psych major. I'm an engineer. I have to get that engineering job. You turned something that wasn't even your field into 47 year career, now one of the most influential women in the region. I think that in itself is the advice.

Darren Treadway: Maybe the takeaway is have a degree and have a car.

Nate Benson: Have a degree and have a car. All right, well Shelley, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast. For those who want to learn more about the M&T charitable foundation, how can they do that?

Shelley Drake: They can just, they can give us a call, they can read about us. Certainly we're in the news periodically.

Nate Benson: Always making the news.

Shelley Drake: We're in the news for sure. But certainly can give us a call. I think everyone pretty much knows our story.

Nate Benson: Thanks so much. And thanks again my cohost Darren.

Darren Treadway: Thank you.

Nate Benson: How's the semester going over there at UB?

Darren Treadway: Summer's winding down. Fall's starting up so kids everywhere.

Nate Benson: Summer semester's finishing up and ready for fall. Looking forward to it, we'll see you soon.

Darren Treadway: Thank you.

Nate Benson: I want to thank Shelley Drake for joining me on the podcast this week and also Darren Treadway for co-hosting this very special episode.

Nate Benson: Do you want to be a better leader? Visit mgt.buffalo.edu/cloe to learn more about upcoming programs. Make sure you head on over to Apple podcast, leave a review of this episode and all of our episodes of Latitude and head on into our archive to listen to over 70 episodes of Latitude. There's no better way to learn about the business and entrepreneurship scene in western New York than listening to Latitude, the 43North podcast. Thank you again to Shelley Drake and Darren. From 43North in the UB School of Management, I am Nate Benson and we'll see you at the next one.