

The Future of Work podcast is a weekly show where Jacob has in-depth conversations with senior level executives, business leaders, and bestselling authors around the world on the future of work and the future in general. Topics cover everything from AI and automation to the gig economy to big data to the future of learning and everything in between. Each episode explores a new topic and features a special guest.

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Jacob 00:02

Hello, everyone. Welcome to another episode of the future of work with Jacob Morgan. My guest today is Kathy Mazzarella. Chairman, President and CEO of Graybar. Kathy, thank you for joining me.

Kathy 00:14

Well, thank you for inviting me to visit with you today.

Jacob 00:18

Of course, and for those of you listening who are not familiar, Kathy is one of the CEOs that I interviewed for my book, the future leader. So if you read the book, chances are you saw some of Kathy's insights from there.

Jacob 00:32

So Kathy, before we get started, I always love to ask guests a little bit about themselves, You actually have a very fascinating story that I learned about as far as how you even started at Graybar. So can you share just a little bit about your background and how you actually ended up at the company?

Kathy 00:49

Sure. So I've been with Graybar for almost 41 years now. And I've finished, I'm in my ninth year as President. So I've had a very long career. I actually started at the age of 19, I had decided to drop out of college, I had a scholarship, a full scholarship to the University of Rochester, in science and math, and I decided I didn't want to be a doctor, so called my parents and said, I'm going to drop out of school, I need to come home.

Kathy 01:17

That did not go over well, as you can imagine. So my parents had moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. And I had not grown up there. So I flew to San Francisco moved in with them. And about three days after I got there, we mutually decided that I needed to get a job and get out of the house. So I went on a job interview and got lost on my way to the interview, went in to ask for directions. And the woman at the front desk asked me if I was looking for a job. I said, Yeah. She said, we're hiring. Do you want to take the test? I said, Sure.

Kathy 01:51

And then three days later, I started at Graybar in an entry level job making \$5 an hour as a customer service rep. And fast forward, you know, 40 years later, and I have the privilege to serve as the president, which is remarkable. absolutely remarkable.

Jacob 02:08

Do you remember the company that you were on the way to interview for before you got lost?

Kathy 02:14

Yeah, it was a company called Genentech, which was at the time a startup, it was no longer it's no longer a startup, it's pretty big company. Because I thought I was going to do research of some type since my background really was in science. And it literally was around the corner from the Graybar office. You know, several years later, I went in search of it, and it was around the block. So it was just a very weird situation, how life throws you for loop. And it turns out to be a good thing.

Jacob 02:45

It's kind of funny, what would have happened if you didn't get lost? And you actually ended up at that other company?

Kathy 02:50

I don't know. I would say, most likely I wouldn't have the wonderful life I have it would be different, you know, may still be great. But I've had a an outstanding career. I've had a great personal life. I have good friends. So you know, overall, this is probably a blessing.

Jacob 03:13

And so I'm actually in the Bay Area as well. So glad to hear that. You were you were in San Francisco for a while. And now you are in St. Louis. Right?

Kathy 03:24

Yep. Our headquarters are in St. Louis. We moved from New York City. We were in Manhattan. We moved to St. Louis in 1982.

Jacob 03:34

Very cool. And I always have to remind people that St. Louis is the chess capital of the United States. And

Kathy 03:39

Yes, it is. Yeah. That is very good. Yes. We have the museum.

Jacob 03:44

Yeah. Yeah. The Chess Hall of Fame. You have the the St. Louis chess club. I actually take lessons with a chess grandmaster who goes to St. Louis University and as a part of their chess team there. So I'm, I'm like a little bit of a chess nerd.

Kathy 03:58

Wow.

Jacob 03:59

Yeah. But I digress. I mean, who are those people who are interested in, in chess, we can always talk about that later. But I love that you started off making \$5 an hour and eventually worked your way up. And I was looking at your LinkedIn profile. And I saw that you actually started. So you did sales, you did product management, you did HR, you did marketing, you did strategic planning, customer service and support and operations. So you worked in pretty much every aspect of the Graybar business, and I probably even missed one or two.

Kathy 04:34

Yeah, I was very fortunate that I had a lot of opportunities. People ask me all the time, how could you stay at a company that long? Because in today's world, that is really, people would call me a dinosaur because you know, people bounce around a lot.

Kathy 04:49

Well if you think about it, I've had like 15 positions. And so the fact that every couple years, they gave me a new opportunity to learn a new part of the business is probably one of the biggest reasons I stayed. Plus when I was hired. I told him I wanted to be president someday. And the guy that hired me, I still see him once a year at a retiree reunion, he laughed. And when I became president, he came up to me and he said, Hey, if I would have known what you were really like, you know, I might have been scared off from you. I thought you were the sweet little thing. Wow, did I have that one wrong.

Kathy 05:27

So it's, you know, it was pretty fortuitous for me to that I moved to St. Louis, where the headquarters had moved to, to get married my husband to be was getting his PhD at St. Louis University. So I requested a transfer and Graybar moved me here. And then I was very fortunate to get promoted in our field operation, and then move to headquarters when I was 34 years old. So yeah, I've been very, very fortunate.

Jacob 05:54

I love that you told me telling this to the existing president, that you wanted to be president or the or the hiring manager.

Kathy 06:03

It was my hiring manager. And, and at the time, there weren't that many women in the business. There still isn't. But there back then 40 years ago, was a different world, different work world too. And so I was 19, I was a college dropout, there were maybe three or four women in the office. And most of them were in accounting or in a secretarial support administrative support.

Kathy 06:27

And so for somebody telling them that I'm going to become president of the company someday, you know, I was probably pretty surprising. He humored me, you know, he didn't chuckle to my face or

anything, you might have done it behind my back. But he gave me a chance. And that's all you can ask for.

Jacob 06:43

Yeah. And I really want to talk about what that journey was like. But first, before we jump into that, I'm curious, do you think the fact that you worked in all these different aspects of the business, did that contribute or shape your leadership approach? In other words, let's just say you were an HR at the company for 30 years, and then eventually ended up becoming the CEO after only being in one role? Would your perspective have been different as far as being the leader of that company?

Kathy 07:14

Yes, I think the best leaders have the broadest experience, because you gain an appreciation of how interconnected your business is, and also the roles and responsibilities in the different elements of the business, you know, it's very, very easy to look at somebody's role in a company and say, Well, I would do it differently, right. And I remember coming up in the ranks, I would look at people in different functions. And I would say, that job looks so much easier than whatever job I was doing at the time. And you know, if I was in that job, I would do it like this, or why don't they do that?

Kathy 07:51

Well, then I get into the job. And all of a sudden, I realize it's a lot more complex than what it looked like from the outside. So it allowed me to gain a much better appreciation for the roles and responsibilities within the organization. And it really shaped me, in my view, when I took over HR,

Kathy 08:11

I was probably one of the least likely people to run HR, because I'm a pretty direct, very hard charging, very sales focused, very numbers focused type of person, when they put me into HR, a position that the gentleman was the president of the time offered me the job. And I turned it down four times. Because I kept thinking, I don't want to go into HR, you know, I'm a, I'm a hardcore business person, what would I want to go into HR for, you know, that's going to derail my career opportunities, I'm going to be pushed over to the side. That was the best job I had for changing my perspective on the value of people in an organization. And I would not be the leader I am today if I had not had that time in HR.

Jacob 08:58

Hmm, that's fascinating. So for a lot of people who are listening to this, they are in leadership in some capacity. I mean, they might be mid level leaders, entry level leaders, would you say that a fair piece of advice for them would be to try to find other avenues in their company to lead other teams, other departments or to kind of stay in their current role and kind of ascend the ranks that way.

Kathy 09:24

You could do either. For me, personally, I recommend and I recommend this to my daughters is to take the assignments that make you uncomfortable. You learn the most about yourself, and you develop the most skills. When you're thrown into an environment where you're not the expert.

Kathy 09:42

When you're the expert, you tend to get into autopilot mode, you're very comfortable in your lane, you stay in your lane, and it's really fun to be the expert that everybody comes to you to ask your opinion on a particular topic. It's very uncomfortable to go into a position where you have no grounding. But you also really challenge yourself.

Kathy 10:07

I've told people in the past, take the job that you're least qualified for. Because you're going to learn the most, you're going to work harder than you've ever worked, you're going to challenge yourself, you're going to have to lean and depend on your team more, if you don't know the topic, right? I mean, if you're the expert, why do you have to ask other people for their input? If you have no idea what's going on, but you're a quick learner and you learn and you know how to listen and get the best out of your team? I think those are the assignments that you want to take.

Jacob 10:44

Do you have any stories or examples that come into mind of how you maybe the first couple of jobs that you took that made you uncomfortable? And what that was like and what you did?

Kathy 10:57

Yeah, I, I was at our headquarters at the time. And there was a very large customer proposal that came in huge, huge, probably the biggest one in the company. And my boss at the time came to me, and I was doing product management. He came to me and he said, Hey, we need somebody to work on this proposal. And it's never been done before. Who do you think should do it?

Kathy 11:22

And I looked at it and I said, Well, you need somebody really experienced, you need somebody that understands IT, accounting, finance, financing, personnel stuff, logistics, you need a really experienced person. And this particular proposal was fraught with challenges. And I kept thinking, man, I don't want to be this person, I do not want to do this, because the chances of failing are pretty high. And if this doesn't work, it's gonna it's a very visible opportunity.

Kathy 11:56

So he kept where I throw names out, and he kept saying, No, no, no. And all of a sudden, I saw his eyes light up, and I thought, Oh, no, he's gonna ask me. And he did. He said, What about you? I said, No, I said, look at the chances of failing are high this has never been done before in the history of the company. I don't want to do this. Because if I fail, man, there's no recovering from this.

Kathy 12:22

And he said, No, no, you got to trust me on this. You got to trust me on this. If this doesn't work out, I have your back. And I said, Yeah, that's easy for you to say, but what about everybody else in the company? And he said, just go home and you think about it.

Kathy 12:36

So went home, talked to my husband and he said, has your boss ever let you down? And I said, No. And he said, then what do you have to lose? And I said, My reputation? You know, right now I'm doing a really good job and the role I'm in, there's a lot of visibility, there's very low risk. Why would I put that on the line? And my husband looked at me and he said, When have you ever backed down from a challenge? And he said, worst case is it doesn't work.

Kathy 13:05

So I went back to the office on Monday, and I said, I'll take it, and he gave it to me. Well, the chances of us winning this proposal, and it was hundreds of millions of dollars. So it's very slim.

Jacob 13:16

Wow, hundreds of millions, so this is a huge...

Kathy 13:17

Hundreds of millions of dollars. No, no, this was huge. absolutely huge. The and so I went to work, and I had no team, it was me. So I'm meeting with different department heads. I'm working with all the executive teams, I'm asking for a lot of help. Literally, people would come in on Saturdays to try to walk me through stuff to teach me about different aspects of the business. So we wrote the proposal, we went in, we got it. We actually won the project.

Kathy 13:27

Then I was scared because I thought, Man, the customers giving us only 90 days to get this thing implemented. There is no way this is going to work. So once again, my boss came to me and said, We have your back. And he said, Let's go see the presidents. We went to the president of the company's office, and he said, What do you need to make this work? And I told him, I said, You know, I need IT systems. I need to hire 50 people in a matter of two weeks. We needed to get a building. I mean, it was a big project.

Kathy 14:20

And he said, You got it. So he called his executive team and he said, You need to give her anything she needs to get this done. They diverted resources. They sent people in from all over the United States. And we actually had the project up and running in 90 days.

Jacob 14:35

Wow, that's crazy. I love that story. It actually reminds me I interviewed Shelly Archambault on my podcast yesterday or day before yesterday, and she used to be the CEO of a company called metric stream here in the Bay Area. And she was also telling me a similar story of how one of the things that helped her grow the most as a leader is she would take on the projects nobody else wanted to do they were scared of them. And I love that because I think a lot of people shy away from that, right? Because you said your reputation was on the line, everything was on the line. Have you ever thought about what would have happened if you didn't get that customer proposal? Like, what was the risk for you there?

Kathy 15:20

The risk there, that well, looking back on it now, there probably wasn't as much risk as what I thought there was, right? I mean, they probably would have put me into another role, probably a lateral move, I still would have been working for the guy I was reporting to who eventually became the president of the company, by the way, and I replaced him. So you know, when I look back, I don't know if it would have been so disastrous, Right.

Kathy 15:55

But I never really at the time, who knew? Right? It's easy to look backwards and say, Wow, Why was I so scared. But at the time, you know, my husband and I were not making a lot of money. I mean, we were doing okay, but we had two children, we were raising, I was going to school at night to finish my degrees. He was a researcher. So he was on doing past postdoctoral work. So we were, you know, wasn't in a situation where if I lost my job, it would have been easy. And I kept thinking, if I lose my job, how am I going to support my family? So I think, yeah, looking back, I probably shouldn't have been scared. But I was,

Kathy 15:58

It's funny. You know, whenever we look back on things, we already always realize that it wouldn't have been as bad. You know, we're kind of scared in the moment. But when you think about it, the consequences, the repercussions are never as bad as you think they are. And I think that's a great lesson for for leaders, is sometimes you do need to step out on that limb. And then you'll realize that if you do fail, and you do make a mistake, the usually sounds a lot worse in your own head, then it really is.

Kathy 17:06

Absolutely. The other thing you learn, and I learned very early in my career, is plan, whatever you plan for, plan on it not going the way you think. And if you go into anything, whether it's a project or proposal, even in your job, in some cases, be prepared to be agile and to shift, because you will not make all the correct decisions, whatever those are. And the key is to recognize when you've made a mistake, or need to make an adjustment and be willing to step up and say, okay, we need to change, and then lead toward whatever that new change is.

Jacob 17:44

Yeah, I love the quote from Mike Tyson. He says everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth. You can prepare as much as you want. But when things actually start happening, you realize that a lot of the plans don't go the way the way you thought. I also realized I didn't actually ask you to introduce Graybar. So can you give people a little bit of context about the company? How many employees do you guys have for people who are not familiar with it?

Kathy 18:10

Sure. Graybar is a wholesale distributor. And we're 151 years old. We were founded as part of Gray and Barton founded gray bar back in the late 1800s. In 1869, Graybar became 100%, owned by its active and retired employees in 1929. So we've been employee owned for 91 years, we are a fortune

500 company. Last year, we had about seven and a half billion dollars in revenue, about 8700 employees throughout just shy of 300 locations in North America.

Jacob 18:47

So massive company. And the other thing is, you're you're one of the very few female CEOs of a fortune 500 company. I think the last number I heard, there was 37 or 38 female CEOs on the fortune 500 list. And one of the questions I always get from listeners, you know, they're always really interested in getting you know, they always say, Jacob, you should have more diverse CEOs, you know, you should have more female CEOs on there. And I always say it's not for lack of trying, but there are not as many female CEOs out there. So I'm curious to hear your perspective. Being one of the very, very few female CEOs out there for Fortune 500. What What does that feel like? Do you feel extra pressure? Have there been some unique challenges that you've had to overcome that other people have not?

Kathy 19:38

I don't think of myself as a female CEO, when when I became CEO, there was actually 18 on the list. So we've made tremendous progress. I mean, we still will have more progress to make but but we've made tremendous strides since then. It's great to see more and more women moving into senior leadership roles. Part of it is time. And this is you can't replace experience in many cases.

Kathy 20:09

So women didn't become really influential in the workplace until the 1980s, and 1990s. That's when you started seeing more and more women getting into the workplace. So if you think about it, and you look at the women that are running big corporations today, they're in a certain age category. And they usually have about 15 to 25 years of experience. And that takes time. Right, that takes time. So I was very fortunate that when I became president, I had already had 30 something years, 32 years with the company.

Kathy 20:43

So I had been around a long time. And at that point, I never really thought about the fact that I couldn't become president. It wasn't until people asked me about it that I realized, wow, that was a lot more unusual than I expected. Because as I went through my career, yeah, people kind of dismissed it. You know, people said to me, you'll never be the president. Because in our industry, we'll never have a woman president

Jacob 21:13

Wow so people actually said that to you.

Kathy 21:15

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I had people tell me, I didn't fit. I didn't fit the company. You know, we're primarily in electrical distribution and communications distribution, which is a very male dominated industry, we deal with a lot of construction companies, which again, is a very male dominated industry.

Kathy 21:37

But I've really never even thought about that. I just thought I had to do a good job and work hard. And, you know, meet people. And when I said I was going to do something, I would make sure I did it. And I never really thought about the fact that being a woman, I couldn't be president. Some of that could have been because I was raised that way to my father was a very big influence on my life. And he taught me that the only limitations I had in life were those that were self imposed. And that I should never let anybody in my life put me in a box.

Jacob 22:12

Hmm. Yeah. I love that advice. And it's funny, because from all of the female CEOs I interviewed, they all say the same thing. We don't think of ourselves as a female CEO. Yet all the people who emailed me always on me to ask, they say, ask them, What is it like to be a female CEO? So I kind of wonder, is there maybe like a misperception that a lot of the public might have about female CEOs, because none of the female CEOs I talked to say anything about being a female CEO, they answered the same way that you said. So I don't know why that is? I don't know if you've any thoughts on that?

Kathy 22:52

It could be just because you don't see as many. When when we sit around when executives get together and CEOs get together and talk. It's interesting, because we use the same language, whether we're male or female. Yeah, I mean, we talk about, you know, strategy, we'll talk about human capital issues, we'll talk about ESG issues, or whatever it is. And we speak the same way.

Kathy 23:22

So if I was a younger woman, I would probably ask the same thing, just because there's not a whole lot of them out there to look at. I remember coming up in the ranks, there were no women ahead of me. And so I didn't have a whole lot of role models, to try to figure out, you know, how I should behave in a certain situation, I would just watch leaders in general, and try to figure out what kind of things I thought were effective, different styles that were effective, different approaches that were effective.

Kathy 23:56

But you still get treated differently in some situations. For example, in my own company, the other day, we do a lot of home renovations for hobbies, my husband and I. So I ordered some materials. And you know, I was buying some materials from our operation. And there was a young man, my husband said, I'll go pick up the materials because he has a jeep.

Kathy 24:20

So he went in to pick up the material. And there was a young employee of ours. Now this is ironic, a young employee of ours, who was new, and he said, Oh, I understand you're the president of the company to my husband. And he said, No, no, no, you mean my wife? And he said, Yeah, Mazzarella. And he goes, No, no, no, that's my wife. So even in my own company, sometimes, yes, I tried to be visible. All right. You know, you have employee meetings, and you have your picture out there and stuff. But it's still assumed in some cases, that it's the male. That would be the executive role.

Kathy 24:55

I've had customers go up to my husband and events where we've entertained customers and thank him for the opportunity to go like to baseball game. And he always chuckled and said, well, you can thank my wife, she's the president. And you can see some of the faces and expressions when they realize, oops, I just stepped in it

Jacob 25:14

That's hilarious. You know, that's happened actually, a handful of times, because my wife's name is Blake, and that is sort of a unisex name. And Blake could be a guy or girl. And that's happened a few times where, you know, Blake and I are in events together, people will come up to me, and they'll start talking to me, and they'll assume that, you know, I was the speaker or that I, you know, did XYZ. And Blake is just standing next to me. And she's like, I man, it happened again. So it's, it's funny the assumptions that a lot of people can make in different environments.

Jacob 25:48

One of the things that you mentioned earlier is the fact that you were going to school getting your degrees you were working at the company. I mean, it sounds like you were working like crazy. I mean, you were working really, really hard. Can you talk about just the importance of hard work, because it sounds like there's no substitute for hard work. Regardless of how much you focus on these other aspects, you know, emotional intelligence, or, you know, taking training, there is no substitute for hard work and really mastering your craft.

Kathy 26:23

I would agree. You know, we talk about, you know, things like EQ. And that becomes much more important at different part times in your career, different roles that you have. And I remember when I was coming up the ranks, you're right, I was traveling, so I started traveling in 1984. When that was the time when a lot of women did not travel. And we didn't have wheels on our suitcases back then even so you had these big heavy suitcases, you dressed in formal business attire, I remember running through the airports quite often. And sometimes, and we had children right away.

Kathy 26:59

So I was traveling, my husband was in school, getting his PhD. And when I wasn't traveling, I would be going to school at night or on weekends trying to do homework, and then you know, laundry and doing all the family stuff. We had children right away. So my husband, I would like race between childcare and the kid off to each other at the airport sometimes and it was looking back, I try to figure out how we did it. You know, when you're in the situation, you just keep moving forward.

Kathy 27:30

But I remember people you say you're stressed all the time? Well, yeah, you know, I was working full time I was going to school, I had a family, I was trying to, you know, I had a marriage, I was trying to figure out my career. And I just kept working harder and harder and harder. I just knew that, you know, I may not be the smartest person or the most talented, but I knew I could outwork people. You know, I mean, I knew that, you know, if I made a mistake, I would go back and learn and move forward and keep adjusting.

Kathy 28:04

So I was in, I worked weekends, I worked evenings, my kids, when they were little would come into the office on Saturday and help me, you know, put together binders and proposals and, you know, they would leave little notes on people's desks and color on their whiteboards. And I'd come in that on Monday. And people would say, Oh, you were in with your girls for the weekend? And I'd be like, yeah, how do you know, while your daughter left me a little note, I'd be like, ah, but there is nothing that can replace experience absolutely nothing.

Kathy 28:37

You know, we talked about that during this COVID period of some of the blessings that are going to come out of this. And one of them is we're going to have a very strong, experienced leadership team with our younger leaders. Now you really wish that you didn't have them have to go through this. But nothing teaches people like experience nothing. And the experiences that our young leaders have had to go through and the decisions they've had to make will make them stronger leaders in the future.

Jacob 29:06

Yeah, couldn't agree more. How did you not get burned out? So some people listening to this might be thinking, how did how did Kathy possibly do that and not get burned out? Or not? You know, have a you know, a break down? What was your secret to being able to balance all that to keep working harder and not having it all fall apart?

Kathy 29:27

Well, it you know, keeping the balls in the air. Some of the balls fell, you know, I mean, you can't be perfect. That was a lesson that I learned in my mid 30s. I remember coming in from traveling in the house was a mess. And because my husband was doing the best he could I had two little kids running all over the place. And I remember falling just to the floor in the hallway and I said I can't do this anymore. I have I can't be perfect. I can't have the perfect house. I can't have my straight A's. I can't be number one at work. I can't have my kids being perfect, I just can't.

Kathy 30:02

So I gave myself permission not to be perfect anymore, and to be human. And my daughter at the time, my youngest daughter saw me, I was crying. And she came down and she put her arms around me. And she said she was little really little. And she said, Mommy, don't cry, I'll take care of you and help. And I, I know.

Kathy 30:21

And I realized at the time that I was being selfish, that, you know, in my quest to be perfect, I was actually hung up on stuff. I was worried about what other people thought, because perfection isn't about you. Perfection is about what other people think of you or what you think they think of you. And it's this artificial, like character, that isn't real.

Kathy 30:50

And so once you give yourself permission, not to be perfect. To be a human being, it takes a lot of that pressure off of you. Now, did I get burned out at times? Yes. Was I irritable? Yes. Was I the best mom, I could have been? I'm not going to be the judge of that. But I could say I probably could have been better. Could have been a better worker, probably could have been a better student. Probably, you know, so. But it's okay. It's okay, that I wasn't the best at everything. And it's also okay to make choices.

Kathy 31:28

People always say, how do you balance everything? How do you have it all? Well, you don't balance it. You basically learn how to make choices. And at different times in your life, you put more emphasis on your job, and then at a different time, your life, something will happen. And you may have to focus more on your family, right? Or on a relationship. It's about making life choices, and understanding that it's going to be okay, in the long run.

Jacob 31:59

I think that's fantastic advice, because I think you touched on something important. A lot of people, especially leaders try to always be perfect, and it's just, it's not possible. So I think that's something a lot of people should take away. Do you have any regular rituals or practices or things that you do on a regular basis that you think really help you become either a better leader or help you start your day or help you kind of stay in the zone? Is there any anything that you do?

Kathy 32:33

Well, my husband tells me that he can tell when I get into my work mode. Apparently in the morning, he sees the evolution, he always laughs because he says as you get dressed up in your business attire, I can see your head is focused, you start focusing on work. I have a pretty basic routine. I get up at four o'clock every morning. I have several cups of coffee I read...

Jacob 33:00

Did you say 4am? Basic 4am. You know, the usual?

Kathy 33:06

Yeah, well, and I used to, I used to be even better where I used to go and work out regularly. Bla Bla, bla, bla, bla, I don't do as much of that anymore. I get up, I read, I watch half hour news, I've limited myself, especially during the pandemic to just a half an hour, because it's not pleasant stuff. Usually you're seeing. And then I do a lot of reading for about an hour, then I get ready and start doing emails. Usually I start doing emails because my reports come in about four o'clock. So about 430 or five, I'll start sending off notes, which I'm very exhausting to work for. Because I send notes starting at four o'clock in the morning.

Kathy 33:47

I don't expect people to respond at four o'clock. It's just that this way, I have my routine. Okay, I have my certain questions I want to ask. And then I start, again, usually now conference calls, video calls,

different meetings. But you know, by seven o'clock, it's full on work. You know, it's usually by six, I'm usually in the office or on some kind of video chat. And then seven, it's full on work.

Kathy 34:16

Usually I would travel except of course this year's different. And I would travel and you'd have lunch with a customer, you'd meet with all the employees during the day, you travel around, visit more customers, and then we have a client dinner, usually go to bed about 10 o'clock at night and then you'd start all over again. I used to be a competitive martial artist. So I was a state champion at one point. So I used to work out, you know, four to five days a week with that. I don't do as much of that now, but I do try to walk you know, five to six miles at least five times a week. And then when I can I'll try to go hiking because I do like to hike and get outdoors. Just To get movement, because it clears my mind. So I don't really have a defined routine other than I do get up at four o'clock in the morning, bless the people's hearts that work with me.

Jacob 35:15

Yeah, that's pretty early. What keeps you going? Because I mean, it seems like I mean, it's hard work. It's early hours, it's traveling. You know, there's, there's a lot that as a leader of such a big company you're responsible for? Do you ever wake up in the morning and just be like, I am exhausted? I don't want to do this, like, how do you? How do you find the energy, the motivation, the drive to keep leading your company and your team every single day?

Kathy 35:45

You know, being the CEO of one of the largest and oldest employee owned companies in the United States, there's a tremendous responsibility or sense of responsibility for all the families that are counting on you, right? I mean, these people are counting on you to make the big decisions. And they get up every day and do their best to take care of their customers and them and each other, and the communities and stuff like this.

Kathy 36:13

And I need to work harder than them. Because they depend on me to take care of the big stuff. So they don't have to worry about it. And I can't let these people down. I just can't let these people down. The people that work for Graybar, and our customers are amazing human beings. That became even more evident during this pandemic. And the way they gave back to the communities the way they took care of each other.

Kathy 36:38

But the way they tried to take care of me, I mean, the notes that I received from employees during this time period, saying, Kathy, you know, take care of yourself, don't forget to take care of yourself, when you're taking care of us. You know, we're praying for you and your family. My dad passed away earlier this year, right before the COVID shut down. And I talked about my father a lot and always have in the company and people found out and the outreach to me, and the kindness, people donated money in my dad's name to various charitable foundations. You know, they sent me notes of encouragement.

Kathy 37:14

And then my oldest daughter got COVID, early on. And so people found out about that, and the outreach and outpouring saying, you know, we got this, Kathy, you take care of yourself and your family was tremendous during this time period. That's the reason I get up. And anytime I feel sorry for myself or get tired or get exhausted, or get frustrated or burned out, I think about that person that's counting on me. And the fact that these people care so much, that they even care about me, I can't let them down.

Jacob 37:48

Seems like it's, at some point, you really have the realization, it's not about you. It's about them.

Kathy 37:53

Absolutely.

Jacob 37:54

And, and I think that especially for you, and correct me if I'm wrong. And you've probably seen this during the course of your career, that a lot of leaders, especially younger leaders forget that and they think it's about them, you know, they want to grow, they want to ascend the ranks, how do they become more successful? And a lot of leaders forget that the more successful you become, the more it becomes about other people and less about you.

Kathy 38:18

Absolutely.

Jacob 38:19

And that, did something happened to give you that realization? Because you've been at the company for a while. I mean, did you always think like that? Or was there a point in time where you were just kind of like, I'm gonna crush everybody, I'm gonna get to the top like, I'm gonna, I'm gonna rock it. Like, when did it become about others for you?

Kathy 38:37

I always knew that you weren't going to succeed on your own, right? But it hit me really hard again, when I took over HR. Because what ended up happening is, I saw the humanity, the true, wonderful humanity in our people, because I was responsible for helping out when there was a tragedy, for example, a hurricane, or if, you know, there was some kind of loss in somebody's family.

Kathy 39:09

And what I started seeing it or actually, I probably already knew it, but I didn't open my eyes to it. Let's put it that way. And really look around me to observe people's behavior. And what I saw was there was some hurricanes down in the Gulf, for example. And it hit, you know, the Gulf Coast and a lot of our employees lost everything, lost their homes and all that. And all our other employees stepped in, people offered their homes to take people into their homes. People started donating cars, started donating bikes, started donating clothes, people started, you know, covering them for them at work so they could focus on their families.

Kathy 39:54

And when I started seeing that is when I realized that that's what really was important. At the end of the day, business is really about taking care of each other, taking care of each other at work, taking care of our customers, so that we can all live the life that we want to live. It's about really recognizing that our goal is to provide a standard of living and a place where people feel valued. So that they can, again, live the life they choose.

Kathy 40:27

And if we help each other out and focus on what we can do to take care of each other, or to help each other recognize our potential, then we all win. Right? And and that was a real sobering time for me, because I realized, you know, it doesn't matter what I do, at all, what matters is how we can move everybody forward, to have a better life.

Jacob 40:52

Yeah, no, that's, I love that. That's a fantastic. And it kind of also makes me wonder if, if all leaders at some point, shouldn't have experience, in HR in in seeing the humanity of the business, right, because so many different roles, you may be feel isolated from that, and you and you don't see that people coming together, how they help each other how they support each other. So I think that that is a really, really important piece of advice for all leaders who want to become better at what they do.

Kathy 41:21

Mm hmm.

Jacob 41:23

How would your employees a Graybar describe you?

Kathy 41:28

They'll describe me as driven. Several describe me as intense. They'll describe me as exhausting. Because my and my husband will describe me as that because my mind doesn't shut down. That is something that I've realized is that my head just doesn't shut off. You know, I'm always thinking about something. And my mind jumps a lot.

Kathy 41:57

They would probably describe me as hard working. very committed to the company. I mean, I am Graybar through and through, they would probably describe me as loyal. fiercely protective of my family, the company, our employees, but yet hard charging, always expecting more people will say I'm never satisfied, and they're probably very correct, because I always think that we can do more, do better, accomplish more.

Jacob 42:39

Those are good descriptors. I like those. You touched on something, which I think is interesting. And that some your brain doesn't shut off. And you know, the I get this, my wife gets this sometimes. And I'm sure a lot of leaders out there, especially now in this kind of crazy world that we're all a part of experience that. But can I mean, one of the I guess repercussions of this, I guess can be around sleep,

right? How do you because if your brain doesn't shut off, it's hard to sleep, it's maybe hard to focus. So how do you make your brain shut off? How do you how do you relax? How do you shut down? disconnect if you need to.

Kathy 43:16

I don't do that. Well, I am not a good person to do that. Because even on vacation, I don't stop. And the one thing about this pandemic, my husband says, you know, you'll never be able to retire ever, ever. Because you will drive all of us crazy. He says you just can't stop because I've always got to be in motion. I know that sounds weird. But there's always something to get done.

Kathy 43:43

That's why we started renovating homes. So I'm all over that, you know, I'm like all over these poor contractors. Okay, how come you're not on schedule? And he's like, let me handle that. I'm like, No, no, no, we got to stay on schedules. So I'm not a good one around that. I try to do physical exercise because I figure if it tires me out, at least my body will be tired. So there's a better chance of sleep. I used to read fiction, you know, but then the fiction I read are like spy novels. Well, that doesn't help

Jacob 44:19

Yah, you won't be sleeping with that.

Kathy 44:21

No, no. So I'm a very bad person to give advice on sleeping or shutting down.

Jacob 44:31

What do you do when you have a bad day?

Kathy 44:35

What do I do when I have a bad day?

Jacob 44:38

How do you I mean, how do you recover? How do you get over? Something bad that might happen?

Kathy 44:48

Well, sometimes it depends on of course what you're dealing with. I tend to be this is going to sound very strange, but I am really good in a crisis. I'm not good when things are going well, because then I poked my nose into things I shouldn't be poking my nose into because I need some kind of I need energy.

Kathy 45:11

And so when COVID hit, it was very challenging. But I knew there was a goal, right? So so all of a sudden, I was like, there, here we go, action, pull everybody together, let's make sure everybody's safe, you know, so. So it gave me a sense of purpose and moving forward. When things go rough, I'm a fixer kind of person. I'm a problem solver. So when there's a challenge, I'm Typically they're going okay, what are we going to do about it to move forward?

Kathy 45:41

Now when there's a setback, or if I make a mistake, or if you know, I've let somebody down or, you know, something goes wrong. Like when my father passed away, my father was my idol. And it really made me sit back and start, you know, reevaluating a lot of things in my life, the amount of time I spent with people and, you know, conversations I should have had, but I was too busy to have. But what I did when my dad passed away is I gave myself permission to cry, for example, right? There's a stigma that women leaders need to be strong. And I'm not saying you cry all over the place. But it was okay for me to have emotion. And so I allowed myself that pain. And, and people could see that I, it hurt me.

Kathy 46:34

Now, again, I didn't break down crazy all the time. But, you know, if somebody started talking to about my dad, and I, you know, it hurt, then I gave myself permission to be a human being and show my feelings. If it's a bad day, I try to go for a long walk. If it's a bad day, what sometimes what I'll do is, you know, I'll talk to my family, and they usually tell funny stories about me and I laugh. What I find for me is if I can laugh at myself, that's the best medicine of all, because I am pretty goofy at times. I'm pretty weird at times, I get forgetful at times, I can never find my phone, for example, I swear, I need my cell phone permanently attached to my hand, I can never find it. And sometimes it's in my back pocket, I still can't find it.

Kathy 47:21

So I mean, you know, I, I try to, again, give myself permission to not be perfect. And I don't always do a good job at that. Sometimes I beat myself up pretty bad and say, why did you do that? That was dumb. Or, you know, that was a bad mistake. And then I give myself a couple days and regroup and say time to move forward. Right? Life is all about overcoming adversity or, or setbacks. And the way you come back, and the way that you demonstrate resilience, to me, is the key to success.

Jacob 47:58

Yeah, I love that. I think it's Yeah, the way that you come back and demonstrate resilience, I think is a very, very important, especially now, right? I mean, there's so much madness that's going on in the world. Resilience is a very, very important skill to have. But I think also with resilience, there's this notion of being a perpetual learner, almost like how do you how do you keep up with what's going on? Because it seems like there's so much change in the world with technology, with employees that are that are, you know, working at the company? How do you stay on top of everything that's going on?

Kathy 48:36

Well, I read a lot. And I speak to a lot of people I try, especially when the pandemic first started, I realized that I needed to proactively reach out to people, customers and things to see what they were, you know, seeing, see if we could help them. So I do a lot of communications. And and I try to share with our teams as much as possible.

Kathy 49:05

You know, being in the role I'm in I'm very fortunate, I have access to a lot of information. I'm a member of the Business Council where there's a lot of CEOs and you know, there's a network where you can

pick up the phone and call, whether it's, you know, on health care issues, whether it's, you know, technical issues, whatever it may be, I get access to a lot of the political leaders, right. And so I get to join on a lot of calls where you get information about, you know, what's going on in the communities, what's going on from a regulatory that type of thing.

Kathy 49:38

So I try to make sure I keep my networks up and communicate frequently with people to find out what's on their mind, what's changing, what may be new, and then I try to share that as much as possible with our employees and our teams to make sure that they know where we're all heading. Part of what the challenge with this whole COVID thing has been Fear, right? People are afraid, people don't know when this is going to end, they don't see how they're going to come out of this, they don't have access to the information that I have.

Kathy 50:11

So the role I can play in the company is to give our people hope to give them that vision of how we're going to get out of this, and when we're going to get out of this, and that we're going to be okay. So, you know, the CEO role is a very fortunate role to have because you do have access to information. It's what you do with that information, which will really determine how effective you are

Jacob 50:37

Yah, well said, um, when you look over the course of your career, are there a couple moments? Or is there a moment that you can point to that most shaped your approach to leadership, or to who you are as a person?

Kathy 50:57

Yeah, it was when I was passed over for a big promotion. I was a vice president in the company, and there was a senior role that was open. And it was between myself and this other gentleman. And it was a board position. It was a big deal. And I didn't get the job. And I was told that I wasn't ready for the job that they didn't see me in that role. And I was devastated.

Kathy 51:23

I had worked so hard, I had sacrificed my family and sacrificed a lot, right. They may work on weekends, and traveling and things. So my family had also gone on this journey with me. And we we gave up a lot. And I thought I'm done. You know, this is it. And I called my dad. And my dad said, stop feeling sorry for yourself. Everybody's going to watch how you recover. This will determine your future and leadership. So make that call now. And step up.

Kathy 52:00

So I sat there and I said, Dad, it doesn't matter because no, no people are watching you. Right? Not everybody gets the job they want or the roles they have. It's how you recover. And my dad said one of the biggest mistakes he ever made in his career is when he didn't get a promotion, he left the organization. And that was the biggest mistake he ever made. He said don't do the same thing. So I picked up the phone, and called the guy that got the job and congratulate and said, you know, let me

know what I can do to help you because I was reporting to them now. And I said, You know, I want to make sure that you're successful in this new role.

Kathy 52:34

Well, fast forward, several years later, when we had the CEO, you know, succession planning. And one of the gentlemen who was voting commented that prior that he saw how I handled this at setback, and it changed it entire opinion of me. Because prior to that, he thought that I was all about myself, right? It was always about the next goal, the next, you know, career change, whatever it may be. So it was about me as he always thought it was about me, and you know, me advancing.

Kathy 53:07

And when he saw that I had the setback and I stepped up, he realized that I was all about the company that I had made that shift from my career been about me to my career being about what was the best for the company? And he said it totally changed his perspective of me. Boy, my dad, my dad was a very wise man.

Jacob 53:31

I love love that story. And I'm trying to think of I mean, how do you I suppose the the big lesson there for a lot of leaders? It will there are a few. One it sounds like when something doesn't go your way. Don't Don't run away, right? I mean, you need to kind of Face Face the circumstance face the situation and not not cower. Not think you need to leave the company or abandon it.

Jacob 54:00

And second, and I'm trying to think exactly how to phrase this lesson, but when somebody else gets promoted, and I don't know what you would call it, but like you said, you could have been upset, you could have been like, I'm gonna sabotage this person, I'm gonna, I'm gonna go for this person, I'm gonna I'm gonna take their job. But instead, you said, How am I going to help you? And I'm trying to figure out exactly how to how to phrase that. I don't know if you have any suggestions for that. But it sounds like it's taking ego out of the equation, taking yourself out of the equation and just doing doing what's best.

Kathy 54:34

Part of it is what are your values, right. And for me, I really respect the company and realize that at the end of the day, we need to move the company forward. Right? And so when you move from I to We, that makes a huge difference. When you move from me to a team. That makes a huge difference. And you realize that it's a collective effort.

Kathy 55:00

Is it always easy? Absolutely not. But I was very fortunate that I worked for a company where we share the same values. And for me, it was always important that like my family succeed, right? So it was a natural for me that my team needed to succeed, the company needed to succeed. And they needed me to step into this role to support this new leader. It's ironic, because the gentleman who got that job now reports to me.

Jacob 55:32

The one who was promoted over you who you helped now reports to you.

Kathy 55:36

Correct. And he's probably my one of my strongest, you know, partners. He He leads our field operations, and he and I lot get along great.

Jacob 55:45

Wow.

Kathy 55:46

Yeah.

Jacob 55:47

I love that. I mean, you have so many fascinating stories. And I know, we're almost out of time. But maybe I can wrap up with one, maybe two questions. And that is when you think, over the course of your career, and everything that you've learned in experience, what do you think the best leadership lessons are that you would like to share with listeners?

Kathy 56:09

The first is never settle. For status quo, right? Whatever you want to be. And you don't have to be the CEO, you can be the best leader of the division, you can be the best community leader, whatever it is you want to do, is aim high, don't settle, right, because if you settle, then you're never going to recognize your full potential. And you're never going to develop the gifts that we all have. We all have special gifts. And our gifts are to be developed so that we can share it with others to help others become better, right to move everybody forward.

Kathy 56:41

You need to be true to who you are, and stand up for what you believe in. Regardless, if you're in a situation in a business environment, and it doesn't feel right, walk away. I tell our young leaders all the time, if it doesn't feel right, and you walk from a business transaction, you will never lose your job. I have your back. But if it doesn't feel right, and you take that contract, or whatever it may be, and it's bad, you will lose your job. Because you got to stand up for it. There's a level of integrity and you know what's right, and you know what's wrong, never, never sacrifice it. Once you lose your integrity, you lose everything, you lose everything. And, and no career and no business environment, or whatever it is you're trying to do is worth losing your soul. It's not.

Kathy 57:33

Use the setbacks to build strength and resilience, of course. And then the final thing about leadership. And this is something that I think about a lot working for a company that has the tenure that our company has, is my objective as the leader is to try to leave things better than it was when I took over. So that the next generation that's coming behind me can build upon that.

Jacob 57:59

Yeah, and I think that's those are fantastic leadership lessons. It's funny, because, you know, people who are listening don't know this. But before we started the recording, you said, Well, you know, I, this might be kind of boring. I don't know if I have anything to share. And this was honestly probably one of my favorite interviews that I've done in the 500 plus interviews that I've done. So I mean, the stories, the insights, just being so honest, I really, really love that. So thank you for taking time out of your day to, to share your perspectives with me. Where can people go to learn more about you, I don't know if you have a blog, if you if you tweet if you share any of your insights, anywhere out there in the world, but anything that you want to mention for people to check out, please feel free to do so.

Kathy 58:47

Well, I put a lot out on LinkedIn, I love LinkedIn. I absolutely love LinkedIn. I think what I like about it is it's a very professional venue, right? You can also find out about the company, which would be great if you just go to www.graybar.com. You know, there's stuff out there on me.

Kathy 59:05

My daughter is my youngest daughter. She's adorable. She's an adult, I shouldn't say she's adorable, should matter me. But she's she wants to do this whole series on me. So she's recording me. She's going to be putting a blog out there on various things. And so once that gets out there, I'll probably put it out on LinkedIn. But to me, it's more about the company. And if you learn more about Graybar, I think you'll understand why I love the organization that I get to serve in this role. Why I love Graybar so much. It's just an amazing organization with amazing people.

Jacob 59:44

Well, kudos to your daughter for doing this project. I'm excited to see it because I mean, I think she's right. You have a lot of really interesting insights and perspectives and things that you have seen and done. I mean, even just the story of how when you were traveling in the airport, And you know, you didn't have wheels on the suitcase and there weren't very many women traveling just, you know, a lot of people forget because we're we're so obsessed with what's happening now and you know the instant stuff that's going on that we we forget about the history of what it took to kind of get to where we are now. So your stories are amazing. I'm very, very excited to see what your daughter puts together.

Kathy 1:00:23

Oh, you're very kind Jacob.

Jacob 1:00:25

Well, again, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to speak with me. And thank you, everyone for tuning in. My guest again has been Kathy Mazzarella. If you want to find her on LinkedIn, her last name is M-a-z-z-a-r-e-l-l-a pretty easy to find. And again, please check out the company page at Graybar. So thank you everyone for tuning in. And I will see you next week.