

THE GLASS WAREHOUSE: **REMOVING BOUNDARIES FOR WOMEN IN SUPPLY CHAIN**

Will Heywood (00:09):

Welcome to “All Business. No Boundaries.”, a collection of supply chain stories by DHL supply chain, the North American leader in contract logistics. I’m your host, Will Heywood. This is a place for in-depth discussions on the supply chain challenges keeping you up at night. We’re breaking beyond the boundaries that are limiting your supply chain. Let’s dive in. Our theme today is the glass warehouse: breaking down boundaries for women in logistics. I’m pleased to welcome my guest Elaine Darr, Vice President of Operations, and Meredith Singletary, who is Senior Director of Human Resources. So Elaine, tell us a little bit about your career history and how you found your way to your current role.

Elaine Darr (00:46):

Oh, well, yes, of course. Thank you for having me on today. So, I actually had no intent of getting into supply chain. I’m an attorney, and was recruited by a DHL general counsel to join our legal team for DHL supply chain back in 2011. And shortly after joining the team, the general counsel promoted me to VP of legal services for one of the multiple service offerings in legal department, and one of which was managing our commercial contract management. And the important part about that is because, not only was I being an attorney for the business, but when I was running the commercial contract management side of the business, I got exposure to all of our business leaders at DHL, and was able to develop relationships with a lot of people on the business side of DHL supply chain. So, I got to work on all kinds of strategic initiatives with these business leaders and process improvement, technology ideas, and functional alignment. So, it was really great exposure for me that really took my career from being an individual contributor and attorney to more of a leadership function and working hand in hand with the business leaders. So, I maintain that role for about two years, and then I was approached by some of those key senior leaders in our organization about taking a lateral role into operations excellence, as the North American lead for health safety and business continuity management. So, this move was really a critical part of my career because, being an attorney by trade, the move into operations excellence was not really about having in depth knowledge for the subject matter, but was more about having the leadership attributes to run a portion of the organization. And this portion of our organization, at that time, was actually underperforming. So, it was a very interesting opportunity for me to come into a role and really look at what could we do differently and how could I get the team and the function to focus on the right things to support the business. So, it was really more about my leadership attributes and my experience with professional, not so much about understanding the ins and outs of the safety and business continuity profession. So, I did that for about a year and a half, and the turnaround, the restructure was really a success. The function was on its way to providing a lot of value for the business and really was performing from an overall KPI perspective. So about, I would say just under two years into doing that role, 10 key senior leaders then came to talk to me about whether I’d be interested in taking another leap and running a portion of our business and moving into operations. And I thought about it, I really considered it. And once again, kind of took that big leap and changed my role again, pretty materially, and I’m still in that role now. So now I actually have been a vice president of operations for about two and a half years. I’m currently a part of our retail sector, which means I have responsibility for about eight key customer accounts across our eCommerce, beauty, and professional care verticals. It’s about a \$200 million book of business. So now, with those changes and that progression within our organization, I’m proud to say, I truly am a supply chain professional. I’m loving my role, but, years ago, I never would have told you that this was what I would be doing.

Will Heywood (04:16):

Great. Thank you. I’m going to come back and touch on a couple of those things in a couple minutes, but first Meredith, tell us how you got to become senior director of human resources here.

Meredith Singletary (04:25):

Yeah. Thanks. Will, and thanks for having me. I'm so excited to get a chance to talk to you today and to partner with Elaine. It's interesting because I know Elaine, but I didn't know that entire back story about her and it's kind of similar to mine. You know, I also didn't intend to come into the supply chain world. And I often say that I don't think that little girls often dream about working in warehouses. It was certainly not something that I had ever really considered for myself as a career, but, I applied for a position in HR, and I was hired in to be an HR manager for four different sites in the area where I live in the Gulf Coast. So, I had about a hundred employees at the time. That was 13, almost 14 years ago now. And DHL has very quickly grown my career, and pushed me to do different things along the way. And they asked me to take on some additional sites, and I got a new business unit a year or two later, and had more employees added underneath me. Very quickly, my former boss left and they came to me and said, Hey, we think you're ready to take on the role of a charter. I heard, which I wasn't sure if I was really capable at the time and sort of asked the question, well, why should I take that role? it doesn't seem like I'm ready for that. They said, you know, Meredith, we really believe in you and think that you are ready for that, and we'll give you the right help and support to be successful. And so I moved into that role about 10 years ago and have really enjoyed the opportunity to lead the HR function for what we call our Southwest region. And did that, built a great team, and had an opportunity to work across all of our different business units across a wide geography. And ultimately have led that team. It's got about seven states that we cover. I've got about 54 different locations and now about 3,300 employees. And then most recently, a couple of years ago, I was approached by our Senior Vice President of HR. And he asked me to take on the responsibility for diversity and inclusion for North America, which again, I thought gosh, am I really the right person for that? I'm not sure. And I do think it's actually kind of common with a lot of women that I've talked to that, you know, when there's opportunity, we think, oh, I'm not sure if I'm really the right fit, but he really encouraged me and said we're looking for your leadership skills and, you know, we want to invest in you and heard that you have the right training in order to be successful, and he sort of pushed me along. And even though, initially, I tried to say, no, very clearly, I said, yes. I was promoted to the senior director of HR. So now I've got both the Southwest region, as well as diversity and inclusion for North America. And I got to say it's been some of the most exciting and engaging work that I've done. And just the fact that I've got the opportunity to be here talking to you today, shows me that DHL is going to keep pushing me to do new and interesting things. That's for sure.

Will Heywood (07:24):

Yeah. That's great. I mean, for both of you, what a diverse set of experiences you've had so far, and I can see how that resonates with each of you. Elaine, I want to talk about the nature of the supply chain business, and historically it's been pretty male dominated. I wonder what your thoughts are on kind of why that has been the case and what kind of barriers maybe have been in place for women to make a career in the field. And how you've seen that either stay the same or evolve in your time here at the company.

Elaine Darr (07:56):

So, when you look at supply chain and the barriers, I think, most women, that I find, especially in leadership roles are coming into supply chain because they're a profession in other disciplines, right? So, myself, a lawyer, Meredith in HR, we have a lot of senior leaders in finance, IT, safety, but not supply chain. So, when I started to develop my career in this organization and I was in that same bucket, I was a person that really didn't know what supply chain was as an organization. I stopped. And I think, well, why is that? Why in every meeting, am I the only female in the business meeting? And really, I think that comes down to two things. One of which you've touched, and I think Meredith has already touched is when most of us were coming out of school after, you know, out of college. So for myself, as an example of that would have been mid-nineties, we did not even know what this industry was. So if you're getting an education, when people aren't even talking to you about the opportunities in that industry, then that right there is going to be huge barrier to entry because if you don't get enough people at the entry level joining the industry, of course, then 20 years later, you're not going to have any executives that have that experience and have been in that field. So I think I know for myself and Meredith probably had the same experience that nobody in the nineties was talking to, I don't think anyone, about supply chain logistics and then certainly not females. So then I always break it down with my teams when we're having the same brainstorming sessions, but why, and you know, and then even if a female did, you know, in the last 15 or 20 years join, why'd they stay? Why'd they stay in the industry? And I think it comes down to the basics of 20 years ago, not a lot of females wanted to work in a warehouse or be involved with trucks. It just wasn't an industry that, when you're a young female and you're coming out of school, you're like, yeah, I want to sign up to do that. And I also think that 15, 20 years ago, traditional operational roles were very inflexible. So the industry has been traditionally very rigid. And what I mean by that, even when I joined back in 2011, I would hear leaders and operations saying things like, well, you know, here's the plan. If this person can't be at the site at X time during these hours, they just, unfortunately can't do the role or you hear somebody talking about, wow, if that person wants to lead the project or initiative,

they have to be here physically. Well, if you think about the consequences of those types of discussions, it wasn't on purpose, but right there is going to be a huge barrier for a female that is trying to have a career. And is also in a traditional family role because females typically in the last 20 years will sign up for professions or roles where they have flexibility. You know, they can call their boss and say, look, I have a kid's doctor's appointment. I'm going to be a couple hours late. And when you're in IT, HR finance, legal, you typically have that type of professional courtesy. So I think that was a big thing that was holding our industry back. Now, I am happy to report that it has changed materially. So I see people looking at much more creative ways to adjust our ways of working and a big part of that in the last 10 years, is of course, because of technology. So, you know, those examples that I gave, Will, you know, the person that's running a project has to be there physically. I don't hear those types of conversations as much anymore. I hear a lot of people saying this person's the right person for the job. Let's make sure we make it happen, cause we'll get the best results. And if they have to do some kind of hybrid schedule where they go to the site for a couple days and go back home for a couple days, we definitely are seeing that most parts of our organization are understanding that the best thing that we can do is support those types of flexible arrangements. Because frankly it's not just a female issue. I think it's a cross gender issue. And I think most people want to be in supply chain logistics, but they don't want to sign up for something that's extremely rigid.

Will Heywood (12:01):

The workplace has changed a lot in the 15 years that I've been here and it is beneficial not only for our female colleagues and associates, but also for the men. Elaine, you talked a little bit about kind of creating an industry awareness in the workforce and specifically with younger women and girls, Meredith, is DHL, have anything on the go in terms of improving that and showing A) what supply chain is? And B) what a career in it could look like.

Meredith Singletary (12:28):

Yeah. It's not an easy puzzle for us to solve. How do you get more women interested in supply chain? But you know, one of the things that we have been doing over the course of the last year or so, it's just something that I'm just so excited about. And that is that we've been working to partner with the girl scouts of America, and they have some goals that where, they are trying to increase female interest in different STEM work. And they actually are looking at putting a specific logistics arm into some of what they're doing. It makes a really good furniture for us because what we are trying to do is encourage young future female leaders into the supply chain world. And for us, when we think about the girl scouts, one of their biggest things that they do every year is they get those cookies out to the world, right? And in order to do that, guess what? It takes a lot of logistics and there's a lot of work that goes behind it that looks very similar to the work that we do every day, the way that they do it, they call it a cookie drop. At their cookie drop, they have a process where they get all of the cookies and an individual troop or troop leaders, or some of the troop volunteers will come and pick up all of the cookies, and they have to get the right boxes. You know, how many Thin Mints are you going to have, or how many peanut butter patties? And what does that order look like? And they actually have schematics where they have figured out how they can best cube out a suburban and how many different boxes you can actually fit in any different model of car so that they can plan for how a troop will pick up all of the cookies. And then when they actually come and bring those cars to pick up those cookies, they need volunteers in order to help make that process happen. We have been partnering with them and volunteering at some of their major cookie drops across the United States. And in fact, just recently, one of the things that happened that I just thought was really awesome was we got some volunteers, both men and women going out to assist at the cookie drop. And, you know, we had our supply chain hats on and we saw what their process looked like. And there was a couple of ideas that we had that we thought could actually make things run a little bit smoother. And we used our experience there to make a couple of recommendations to them and they implemented them. And it actually did go smoother so much so that one of the comments that was made was, you know, we got a lunch break for the first time at this cookie drop. We never get to break for lunch because we just work all day long and your process really helped us to make it smoother. But also our employees get an opportunity to give back to the community. In that effort, we're trying to show females that this is something that you have experience with. We get products out to people in the world. That's what the supply chain is about, is how to get that product out there. We show them that this is something that they could do as a career, and they can see in us that work and they can see the work that they are doing to get those boxes of cookies out to each of the people who has ordered it from them. So it's been a really fun thing for us to do, but I also think, gosh, it just has so much meaning in the, in the world to talk to these young girls and introduce them to an industry that, you know, Elaine and I didn't get anybody talking to us about, right? And we didn't really know or understand what it was. I know it's been really good to me. Right. So we are hopeful that that will help us with the pipeline of the future for women in supply chain.

Will Heywood (15:59):

Yeah. That's a great example, Meredith. I know I took my team out and we participated for an afternoon in the cookie drop. It is a massive scale distribution operation, and a great example of what we do in the main business day to day.

Meredith Singletary (16:12):

It's so fun, right? Something to do something different and give back in that way.

Speaker 2 (16:16):

It is, it is. Elaine, you've had a couple of senior leadership roles that you walked us through at the top. What's the environment like as a female leader in the business, both sort of with your peer group and then with the sites that you're working with every day, the customers you're working with, how would you describe that?

Elaine Darr (16:33):

So I think it's been a different experience as my career has progressed. So when I was in the legal department acting as legal counsel, or even in the operations excellence role, leading the health and safety function, it seemed like it was very natural to have a lot of diversity in meetings or in rooms and on projects and very natural for the business to have, you know, me in those roles. And I didn't really notice any difference whether it was DHL or interacting with customers. I think where the biggest difference came and where it was really eye opening, how much of a male dominated industry it is, is when I took the role that I'm in now. And I think that's why we're here talking about today is moving into actually owning a portion of the business and working with, you know, full PNL responsibility and multiple professionals that are in operations. Almost all of them are males. And many of my team meetings I have now at a very senior level with the operations resources are all males. So it's a very interesting experience for me. And I will say it's changing. So we've touched a little on it today that not only is DHL, you know, as an organization, we're doing a lot of things where we're bringing a lot of women in our organization from our college recruiting to just lateral moves into our organization. So you're starting to see some more females at more junior levels. And of course those women will advance. So this will eventually change. And then you're seeing a few other, you know, examples like myself, where someone takes a different role in our organization as now, you know, going to be attending those meetings that are primarily male dominated. So I do see it changing and with respect to our customers, you know, our customers', organizations that have supply chain divisions, I find them to be extremely diverse. So a lot of the large brands, I work with a lot of beauty and personal care organizations, apparel fashion, when you work with any of those large public companies, even their supply chain divisions are very diverse and there are a lot of females in leadership positions. So, you know, I think there's kind of, there's two good things about that. You know, DHL, as a third party service provider, is definitely doing the right things to bring more women up in leadership and into operational roles. And then that is a great thing for our customers because now we are starting to reflect a lot of our customers' organizations, which are, you more diverse and have a lot of women in their supply chain.

Will Heywood (19:11):

So I hope you don't mind me asking you kind of a personal direct question, but when you made the move into the VP of operations role, which, you know, I know we don't have many females in that role, what was it like? I mean, did you encounter any resistance? Did you find it to be easy? What was that transition process like? And what's it like today?

Elaine Darr (19:32):

To the face, I didn't really feel any different, right? So maybe that's more of my personality approach that just kind of gung ho get in there, take care of business and, you know, build high performing teams that execute. So in the beginning, I didn't even really focus on it, Will, or pay attention to, you know, in some rooms I'm the only female. And I didn't feel any type of pushback. I mean, I had a lot of support from the leadership or they wouldn't have asked me to do it. And then from a peer perspective, I really felt like everybody across all of our business units in DHL, were very excited. A lot of them reached out to me that weren't even in retail to say, this is so cool. I'm so glad you're doing this. You know, I think it'll be great for the organization. It's actually been a good experience for me. And then one of the interesting things that I wanted to share with you was I was a little bit worried about my direct teams, right? Because if people on my team have the level of experience of some of my peers, right? I mean, they've been in operations in supply chain for 15 plus years. They are experts. And, you know, next day they find out overnight that now they're reporting to this female leader and she doesn't really know a lot about their industry and she's not an expert.

Will (20:50):

She's a lawyer.

Elaine Darr (20:51):

Right! Like what is she doing and why am I reporting to her? So that was really where I thought, Oh boy, are these guys going to be supportive? And are they going to feel like I'm going to add value to what they're trying to accomplish? I really think it has gone extraordinarily well. And here's why, Will, I get comments from some of our young male leaders that when I ask them questions or the way I approach things, they have been around for 10, 15 years, but they've never even thought about some of the things that I bring up. And it may be just because I don't know any better. So when people bring a challenge or a project, or we got to solve for this with a customer, I naturally think of five or six things because of my experience that somebody that has only done operations doesn't think of, and it's not because either one is right or wrong, but I think the synergy there is really cool because they know operations. So they don't need me to repeat what they already know. So what some of them are saying is it's actually been better because I know operations inside and out and I understand the solution. But you asked me things that I never ever would have even thought of or considered. So if you can take those two perspectives together, I mean, that is a real perfect example of how you get the best out of everyone. And so I've had few of my directors kind of pull me aside, one on ones, and say, you know, at first I wasn't sure just, cause I didn't know why a lawyer would want to do this. But after working with you for some time, I'm so glad that we're doing this because you know how you challenge us and how you get us to look at things differently. Or sometimes I just want to go after something that they're like, why? And then once we do it, they're like, Oh my God, that was amazing. That was fun. So I think it's been pretty cool to see that evolution. And I'm sure in the beginning there were some that just didn't say anything, Will, that were hesitant and like, what is Elaine doing? But I feel like now, I have really highly performing teams that I'm working with, both up, you know, people I report to and of course the teams that work for me. So it's been a pretty cool ride in anything the same.

Will Heywood (23:03):

Yeah. So Meredith to build on the example of Elaine's experience there in her current role, I've heard you present on this a couple of times, but I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about, you know, strategically thinking what's diversity and inclusion mean for DHL supply chain? I mean, I know it's not just a numbers game for us, but why is it more than that? And sort of what's the motivation from an HR standpoint and what are we doing to create more experiences like the one that Elaine just shared?

Meredith (23:34):

Yeah, thanks for the question. And Elaine, I got to tell you I'm so glad that you just told that story, and I'm glad it's being recorded, because I feel like it's exactly the thing that I'm talking about all the time as it relates to diversity inclusion, right? So, I'm just going to play that for people because the whole idea is to look at things from different perspectives to get a better outcome, right? So there's all these different studies that would tell you that when you have a more diverse team looking at a problem, you know, you can get to a more accurate resolution. So just your example of, you know, you have people who have been kind of doing things in the same way for a long time, then you bring somebody in who has a different background and looks at things different, and then they ask the question in a different way and it gets you to a different conclusion.

Meredith (24:23):

That's the whole idea as to why for us diversity and inclusion is important because our customers and the challenges that they bring to us every day, guess what? They're not easy, right? And if we solve things the way that everybody has always solved things all the way along the world, then we're not going to always solve things with the best answer. And there are studies that prove it, but you're a great case study that shows that when you look at things in a different way, from a bit of a different background, when you intentionally bring teams together that, you know, don't all think the same, right? And they all kind of come at things in a different way. You are going to be more financially profitable. You're going to be more accurate. You're going to have better collaboration, right? There's a lot of really positive things that come from that. And ultimately you're going to have, you high performing teams that serve our customers in a better way. And that's absolutely what we're trying to drive to, but we believe diversity and inclusion is a business enabler and being more intentional about driving diversity and inclusion is something that's going to make us more successful. It's going to help our customers in a different way, and in a better way. It's going to help us to have more engaged employees. Right? All of the pieces that we are looking for, this is something that can kind of help push us in that direction.

Will Heywood (25:44):

Yeah, that's great. That's great. So, we are about to reap the rewards of our college recruiting process, which happens every year. And I know that we're just about to onboard just about a hundred female new young leaders in our intern and full time class coming out of college for each of you. I wonder what you would tell the women in those cohorts. Elaine, starting with you first.

Elaine (26:08):

Okay. What would I tell them? So, here's how I'd sum it up. This industry, as you've kind of heard already in the blog, and we say multiple times is truly one of the most dynamic. It is growing and changing at an extremely fast pace. And the opportunities are endless. And DHL supply chain is, I'm proud to say, the leader in the industry. So if you're coming out of college and you join our organization, not only are you a part of an industry that's extremely dynamic and fun and growing, but you are going to be trained by the best and the brightest because that's what we have here at DHL supply chain.

Will (26:46):

Thank you, Meredith?

Meredith Singletary (26:47):

Yeah. I mean, I do get an opportunity to talk to college recruits a lot and, you know, Elaine and I, as we articulated earlier, when we were college recruits, nobody was really talking to us about this industry. And I'm so glad that that has changed. And, you know, I would say, gosh, this may not be something that you dreamed about when you were a little girl and I certainly can understand and relate to that, but it is an industry that does really have so many opportunities. And at least for us, what we are looking for has shifted over time. So we're not just, you know, we don't typically just look for people who have an operational background. We really look for leaders and you may not have ever led in a supply chain world. Maybe you've led in a sorority or a sports team or some kind of club or in a class project. Right. And leading feels right to you and that's ultimately what we're looking for. And, you know, I think Elaine said it well, we're working for the leader in this space, but also, I mean, we're working for just a great company. It's been so good to me. It's clearly been good to you, Elaine. And, you know, I have the experience of, I've had a couple of different times in my life where, recently, I live and work in the Houston, Texas area, where we had a really devastating hurricane, where there was just massive flooding and both through that process, as well as just most recently, with our challenges around COVID-19 and everything that we're trying to do there. And I have to tell you that working for DHL in those really difficult times has made me just so proud of the work that we do, because we really are an employer who makes sure that our employees and what their needs are, is a part of the equation every day. We serve our customers well, we take care of our people. We serve our customers and hopefully along the way, we're also financially profitable. So, if I would say to anyone if you're looking for an industry that is exciting and dynamic and changing, and you have some leadership skills, and maybe you want to take it to chance to maybe do something different than what you might've thought your career path was. It's a great opportunity to come work with awesome people. I mean, the fact that somebody asked me to be on a podcast, right? Like that's not an opportunity I would have ever thought I was going to have. I'm just so excited about all the things that DHL continues to push me to do in my career. And I think it's a great place that I've seen a lot of people be very successful and have a fantastic opportunity to grow their career.

Will (29:24):

Thank you. I'm not sure I would have known about the podcast thing either, but my team is pushed to the line.

Meredith Singletary (29:28):

And it's so cool.

Will (29:30):

And again, diversity of input getting us to interesting spots. Well, I want to thank you both for the conversation today. I really enjoyed it. You both have very interesting careers and interesting things to say about the industry you work in and the company you work for. So thank you very much for taking the time.

Meredith Singletary (29:50):

Yeah. Thanks for having us, Will, it was really great.

Will Heywood (29:52):

So for our listeners, thanks for tuning in. If you enjoyed the conversation today, please share it with a friend. You can find us online at logistics.dhl.com. Follow us on LinkedIn and Twitter at, @DHLsupplychain. And if you'd like to continue the conversation or leave feedback about the episode, please do drop us a line. Thanks much.