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Recorded Message: The Hennessy Report from Keystone Partners. A free flowing conversation with leaders in the HR community talking about themselves, the industry, and their work. Brought to you in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association.

Sara Frank: We're excited to welcome you all to our first HR Live of NEHRA 2020. We have Dave Hennessy, host of the Keystone Partners podcast, The Hennessy Report and Kelly Primus, CEO and President of Leading Women with us today

Dave Hennessy: Thank you so much Sara. Welcome to HR Live. We've been doing this for the last few years. We've also done a few of these live recorded Hennessy Report podcasts by Keystone Partners in cooperation with NEHRA. And our guest today is Kelly Primus, the CEO of Leading Women.

Welcome Kelly to the podcast.

Kelly Primus: Thank you, Dave. Really happy to be here today.

Dave: Well, as our listeners know anybody that's followed the podcast, we never jump right into business. We like to find out a little bit about our guests. And is there something early in your life that you're willing to share that informs your work today?

Kelly: I do have a great story for you. So I was the youngest daughter of the chief of police. I grew up in New York state. And as you can imagine, he was a rather intimidating person and rather strict. And there was a time when I was, I don't know, about 16 or 17 years old, and I'd gone to the movies with my girlfriends and it was an evening show. It was a 7:00 movie and I had an 11:00 curfew, but the movie theater happened to be like a block from the police station. And apparently he decided he was going to check up on us. So as we were leaving the movie theater, the faster way to go home would have been to turn left. The longer way to go home would have been to turn right, which of course is what we did because traffic was the way it was.

So about a block away from the movie theater, I notice that we're being tailed by my father all the way to my mom and dad's house. And realized that I was probably going to be in a lot of trouble because we went through the center of town and all that kind of stuff. Anyways, some minutes after I walk in the front door, my father comes storming in the back door and says, "Young lady, what do you think you're doing cruising through Mount Kisco, New York, with your girlfriends after the movie? You should come right home." And I looked at him and I said, "Hey, dad, I picked you up at like South Moger and Main Street and you tailed us the whole way home." And he just stopped. He didn't know what to say to that. He burst out laughing, and then he just walked away. And IO thought, "Finally, I stood up to my dad." And I've never been intimidated by a man since. So that's the good news. And it's really informed sort of my career throughout.

Dave: It was survival at home, that you developed some skills that really...

Kelly: And he wasn't an abusive guy or anything like that. He was just really firm. I tell this story because at one point I was interviewing for a role. I was going to join an executive team and the CEO says to me,



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"Our board is made up of all men. Our executive team is all men. Are you going to have any issues standing up in front of them and talking, and sharing and contributing to the meetings?" I looked at him and I said, "Well, let me tell you a story about my dad." I got the job, but I will tell you it's made it a lot easier for me not to feel intimidated when you walk into a room throughout my whole career. So even when I was much younger and working my way up in corporate America, it was a lot easier to walk in the room, kind of stand tall and proud and go, at least it's not dad, but you're...

Dave: Everything was easy after that.

Kelly: Exactly, right.

Dave: Well, that's a great story. Can you share a little bit about Leading Women? What's the mission of your organization? What is it that you do in your organization?

Kelly: Thank you. So we focus very specifically on helping companies reach their gender diversity goals, whether that be through analyzing the work that they do, their HR systems, talent performance management. Make sure all of the gender bias that's inherently included has been removed. We're founded on research that was done by Susan Collins, our founder, all around the leadership competencies that are how future leaders are measured by corporate executives and what those competencies are. And what we found was women are not coached on the most important ones.

Dave: Really?

Kelly: Yeah. So in a way we call it the missing 33% of our leadership definition, and it focuses very specifically on business, strategic, and financial acumen. Women tend to get mentored very heavily on supportive skills and how to show up in the room versus men who are typically mentored on how the business runs or how decisions are made or how to get things done. The challenge becomes, especially as you move through middle management, if you don't have the skills and you're not demonstrating that you understand how the business runs, then you're not seen as a potential candidate.

So women are consistently overlooked. So we created women's leadership development programs to help women recognize these. Few years in, we did some research around cultures of organizations to make sure that once you have these women who are demonstrating that they understand how the business runs and so forth, that they actually are in a culture within an organization that is looking to bring more women into leadership. So we identified 10 different gender dynamics that create barriers for women. And so between company systems, women's leadership development, and then working on the culture of an organization, those are the three areas that we focus.

Dave: What do you notice that is changing, say in the last five or 10 years, with regard to women advancing into leadership? And what's not changing as fast as you want?

Kelly: So there's a couple of things that have changed, which is thank God, right? One is you are seeing leaders of organizations signing pledges, recognizing that, prior to COVID, there was a significant challenge to bring great people into your organization because the unemployment rate was so low. So



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recognizing that you had to focus on developing the women within your organization in order to bring them up to leadership was something that was becoming much more prevalent. The challenge with that is that many of the CEOs or senior leaders would sign the pledge and then give it a toss over to whoever's in HR.

Dave: Assigned it, right? Signed it and assigned it.

Kelly: Elevate it to somebody else. And the challenge is that if it's not seen as a business initiative for the organization, then it kind of dies a very sad death over here. The second thing that's changed though, that's really important is that so much of the research and so much of what leaders are saying is necessary now are the traits of a leader that describe women much more than men. More compassionate, more collaborative. And so that is also making an impact on how women are viewed and all of those things are good things. The challenge and what hasn't changed is that cultures tend to have some significant legacy leaders, companies who've had a similar method of operation for 15, 20 years.

They've got leaders in roles who aren't recognizing that there are things might need to change a little bit, not necessarily embracing the new ideas. For that, the work we do around gender dynamics really helps change some mindsets and to help people recognize that they make decisions for their talent, for their people that often create barriers for women's success and results in losing talent.

Dave: Kelly, can you give us a little example of maybe a technique or an exercise or an approach that you use to start to change people's minds?

Kelly: Thank you. One of the things that we've been doing a lot of lately is called reverse mentoring programs. They are a lot of fun. They're very structured. They tend to have a very small group of people, but you bring together senior leaders and you pair them with high potential women managers. And we put them through a very structured program that has them having conversations based on research and articles and videos that are provided on a specific topic like mansplaining or performance management. It really depends on the company and what their challenges are. And so they go through the six month program. And what we've learned is the ability to focus on data and research and articles that are not personal. And it's not about your personal performance as a leader really allows people to feel very comfortable to have the conversation.

Because it's in a very structured way no one feels threatened by the outcomes of the conversation that the payer has. And because the high potential woman is not reporting to this senior leader either it enables them to have conversations where it doesn't impact either one's performance, measurement or self-worth.

Dave: So it's a safer dialogue because there's not a reporting relationship. Why do you call it reverse mentoring?

Kelly: Well, so the reverse part is that the high potential women are educating the senior leaders on what it's like in their world and what they see and how they experience the office work responsibilities,



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challenges. That is coming from a completely different perspective than these senior leaders who may not have been in that role for 25 years. And the world certainly changed in 25 years. So the fun part about it is we piloted this program with a company in Connecticut a couple of years back. And the first cohort was just 10 senior leaders, 10 high potential women. But what happened at the end was that the male leaders were so encouraged by what they learned and recognize that they had some mindsets that got in their way, that they ended up telling their peers, other senior leaders within the company, why this was so important and how educational it was.

And now they actually have people fighting for seats in that next reverse mentoring team.

Dave: In both pools it sounds like.

Kelly: In both pools, absolutely.

Dave: Are ever women in their leader role in that program? Is it always men and women?

Kelly: In other companies there is, but in this particular one, it's a heavily focused engineering and technology company, so they don't have any women in the senior level of that organization. Yet!

Dave: Yeah. Unfortunately it's much easier for you to structure them that way, it seems, right?

Kelly: Yeah. There seems to be a plethora of those to choose from.

Dave: Yeah. In fact, there's different industries that seem to have more problems than others with getting women into senior leadership. And I was wondering what you say to those organizations that say, "We just don't have enough women in the talent pool."

The eye roll.

I'm sure you hear it, so it sounds like you've heard that before.

Kelly: Major eye roll. The challenge is that it's so easy to go to the instant reaction where, "Oh, well, we just don't recruit enough women into the company." And the reality of it is there are a lot of women joining your organization, but what they're finding is it's not really the place that they want to be, and they are not enjoying working there because your culture may not be inclusive enough. And so you're losing them. Instead of retaining them, engaging them and moving them up, you're losing them. And so you have sort of a churn and burn happening at your lower levels. So you think there is no talent; yet you're hiring anywhere from 30 to 45% of your employees out of college are women. But somehow by the time you get to early management, they're like, "I'm out of here."

Dave: Right. So the talent pool is evaporating as it's being replenished. It's just... Yeah.

Kelly: Exactly.



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Dave: What are some of the cultural behaviors that do repel women from organizations? I think a lot of people know, but what are some of the things you're seeing now in the last few years that are still really pushing women away from positions and leadership inside organizations?

Kelly: So COVID aside, something that we're going to see that happens out of this year is going to be an enormous boon and an enormous problem for women. So prior to COVID, I would have answered this question differently, but given where we are today, the fact that organizations had to move to a remote working model, happened more rapidly than it would ever have happened otherwise. And it's actually been something that has in the past, been something women have asked for, "Can I work remotely? My schedule needs to be a little more flexible. Would you mind if my hours shifted a little here or there?" And today you see a lot of employers saying, "You know what? Whatever works for you, just get the job done." And, "As long as you're performing, we don't have an issue with how you choose to work. Zoom, interact, so forth."

The challenge that's also happening now, however, is that this sort of dual role that women are playing, there's all kinds of demands on their time with remote learning for their children, whether they're caring for elderly people. It's causing... And we just put a post on LinkedIn about it. We just read an article, 865,000 women have opted out of the workforce last month [September 2020] because of this. So now...

Dave: Wow. And I noticed it was just school started, right?

Kelly: Yeah. So we've got two people on our team who have very young children, women. And the conversations that we've been having since March with both of them are, "What can we do to make this more flexible for you?" Dealing with a shutdown schools without any warning kind of thing versus, okay, now we're going back to school in the fall. What does that look like? So you've got some kids on remote and live and it's incredibly stressful for the women workers to try to deal with. So companies have got to figure that out and have got to recognize flexibility is the best thing that could happen.

Dave: It sounds like your work is going to be changing quite a bit here, post-COVID. I mean, it seems like you have a whole new problem to tackle for women. Short-term, long-term what do you predict that will be needed? Or what do you predict some of the changes will be to help women through this and to stay on the leadership track or stay in leadership positions?

Kelly: There's a couple of things that are already kind of coming out in research, that are upsetting to women in general. One, it was challenging enough in a culture when you worked in an organization and you were in a meeting live with people to have your voices heard, have your ideas heard, be the person people would stop and listen to in a meeting. Imagine how much more challenging that is on a Zoom when trying to break into nonstop conversation. Results of working remotely is already showing a distinct disadvantage to women. They're getting less promotions, they're getting less raises, they're getting less opportunities. So first we've already got impact that's happening. Second, you're seeing women who because they are perhaps the lower earner in the couple are opting out of work because they just can't cope with all of it at the same time. Children, household, life, work and so forth.



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And the last thing is, so 865,000 women in the United States left the job last month. I can't even imagine how many more that's going to be. So, now you are seeing women who opt out who when they do decide to come back to work are going to struggle to come back at a lateral. They're going to come back at a lower end job. You've got women who are not getting the raises, so the gender pay gap is getting bigger, which is another problem. And then the promotions that are happening again are sort of reiterating the challenge of not having enough women in leadership. So for those who can stay in and somehow manage all of this and have organizations that are being incredibly flexible, stay with your organization if you can. And for those who aren't, trust me, there will be plenty of positions that are available.

Some of our clients, you go on their website, they've got thousands of roles they're trying to hire for. And the challenge becomes for organizations who recognize that they are much more profitable when they have gender diversity in their leadership, they're going to struggle with their profitability coming back from COVID. So a lot of impact.

Dave: Absolutely. Yeah. If people that are listening, want to get more access to your research or your information that can help their organization, what's the best way?

Kelly: Head over to our website, leadingwomen.biz and everything you need, there's a whole tab on research. You can download all of it.

Dave: That's great. Well, we produce The Hennessy Report by Keystone Partners in cooperation with NEHRA, and we always have the NEHRA question of the podcast. And I see that some questions are bubbling up and Sara Frank has alerted me. She has a question for you.

Sara: We have a couple of questions.

Dave: Go ahead.

Sara: So we did have one about what do you think about all the articles on women jumping out of the workforce because of COVID, which I think you just addressed. And then where could I find the ten components of culture that you identified as barriers for women's success?

Kelly: You can actually go to our website. There is a research tab in the navigation, and you can download an infographic on gender dynamics.

Sara: Awesome. One big barrier that women have faced at least historically is time away outside of COVID time, time away from work due to childbearing responsibilities, which has also created missed development opportunities and huge huge income gaps. Do you feel like that's still an issue today? And how is it being addressed today versus in the past?

Kelly: The challenge is that we are not in normal times right now. The world is upside down and I have no idea when it's going to right itself and what it's going to look like when that happens. But the challenge that organizations have is if it's important enough for them to retain their talent, then they



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need to learn how to be flexible with it. And a lot of the research and the work that I've been reading is all about the fact that organizations in this decade will succeed based on their talent. And recognizing that flexibility is probably the most important key for women, that it is something that you're seeing the leading companies, those who are sort of the trend makers have all figured it out.

A lot of other organizations have started to figure it out during COVID. I've been reading a lot of articles about financial organizations and what they're doing in order to support childcare and to create crisis response, basically, for women who have challenges. So I think when all of this is said and done, my hope is that organizations recognize that if they don't, then they're going to be behind the curve. And if they do, then they'll start to be market leaders. And so the question becomes is how can you as an HR person, help them recognize how important these things are. And we do by the way, on our LinkedIn group, share everything that we see, learn and understand around women in leadership.

Dave: Great. There's more questions coming in.

Sara: Yes. I'll read one more from the Q&A, and then we can head to the chat. So how do you feel about any opinions on Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* book, if you've read it? Her perspectives of women in the workplace and her proposed solutions.

Dave: Kelly, somebody is really trying to get you going here.

Kelly: It's okay. You know what? It's been like four or five years since that book came out. If you haven't read her second book, I think there's a large mea culpa in it. And perhaps I am not representative of the reality for most women. Her husband, who passed was a huge supporter of her career and really helped manage the home life as an equal partner. And that's a very unique situation for so many reasons. Sheryl had a very different career trajectory than most women. I believe she came out of Harvard and went almost directly to work for Facebook at its infant stages. When you're the second person hired or the fifth person hired in a company that ends up being as big as Facebook is, your career is very different than what most women experience.

So, the idea of just *lean in* and sort of keep your mouth shut and work hard isn't reality. May have been for her and that's great. She's one of the lucky ones. For the rest of us, you have to work very hard, but you also have to learn how to self-promote without looking like you're boasting and bragging. You need to learn how to understand how your business runs so that you can speak to it when you're making points or ideas or offering suggestions.

Sara: And then the last one we have, how can women bring up the gender gaps at a time when racial injustice in the workplace is a major issue?

Kelly: Well, I think it's important to recognize that women make up 50% of the population and not all of them are white women. So when you're looking at your organization and the population within your organization, the reality of it is women are entering the workforce at the same clip as men. So 50% of the measured workforce is women. Women are gathering and gaining more degrees than men at all levels. Bachelors, Masters, and PhDs. But the reality of it is as soon as you get to middle management,



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the 50-50 goes to 75-25. And then when you get out of middle management and you get into senior leadership, it goes to 90-10, forget the CEO right now where it's 7% in the Fortune 500 women CEOs, which is the largest number we've ever had, but still quite pathetic. But if you go back here to entry-level and career start, into early middle management, you're at 50-50.

So if you don't have 50% of women in all of the areas of your organization, then you're not representing the population in general. And the last thing I'll say to that is a lot of the research that we've done translates beyond gender and moves into minority cultures or minority races, and those who are considered diverse talent. And a lot of the solutions that we provide for women have an equal success rate for people of diverse populations. We've found ourselves being asked by many of our current clients to roll the work we do beyond gender. No disrespect to anyone who is struggling with diversity within their organization, but if you start with women, you're already addressing 50% of your population.

So start somewhere, start there because I guarantee you a specific percentage of those women will be of diverse population as well.

Dave: Take some action. Right.

Kelly: Exactly.

Dave: Well, thank you all the NEHRA questions of the podcast. We appreciate it. Great questions and great answers. But we usually end the podcast on a little bit lighter notes. And so we have two questions for you, if you could write a letter of advice to your 25 year old self, Dear Kelly, what would you write?

Kelly: Wow. Okay. So interestingly enough, up until my junior year in college, I was going to be a lawyer. My entire focus was be a lawyer, your career is already set and you know what you're going to be. And then I took my first two pre-law classes at school and I was the only person in the room whose brain was over here and everybody else was over here and I'm like, "I don't get it. What is it? I'm a smart person. I do well in school." Worst grades I ever got were these. Pre-law classes life...came home at break, thankfully had already gotten over being terrified of my father and said to him, "Yeah, I'm not going to be a lawyer because this is not working out." But I didn't know what to do. You're a junior in college and now you've got to like pivot away from what you were doing.

So the good news is when I was 25, I found my niche, marketing and communications was what my career became. It took a few stumbles and a few trials to get there. But what I would say is try not to worry so much about where you're going, because it will eventually work itself out. Enjoy what you're doing, learn from the people around you, identify a leader that impresses you and have conversations with them because eventually it'll sort itself out and you'll find something that you really like to do.

Dave: It's funny, we had a speaker. It might've been 10 years ago, talking about career trajectory and said something very similar to what you just said. "In your first half of career, get lots of different experiences and lots of different industries and lots of different functions. And then in the second half of your career, that's when you fine tune and go deep."



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Kelly: Yeah.

Dave: Final question. If you could go to dinner with any person who you don't know...

Kelly: Who would it be?

Dave: Yeah, and why?

Kelly: Unfortunately, for me, the woman I would have said is Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. She was an amazing force of all five foot one of her, brilliant mind, really focused, always recognize that you have to bring both sides together to get anything done. But adamantly supported the rights of women. And I don't consider myself political in any way when it comes to what I do, but that woman was amazing. And I really wish I had a chance just to sit and have dinner with her and have a conversation about some of the things she's seen and learned.

Dave: Sure.

Kelly: Yeah.

Dave: That's great. Well, Kelly it's been so great having you at HR Live.

Kelly: Thank you.

Dave: Great having you on The Hennessy Report. And we also have another podcast at the very end of the conference, Jason Harris. Back to you, Sara.

Sara: Great. Thank you both for joining us and thank you as always to our HR Live sponsor, Keystone Partners.

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