



Collaboration Makes Everyone Better – Teresa Roseborough



ARLETTE: Teresa Roseborough has argued in front of the Supreme Court.

She's met with presidents and testified in front of Congress.

Today, as an Executive Vice President of the Home Depot, she leads our Legal, Government Relations, and Corporate Communications functions.

But don't let that very corporate description fool you.

Teresa is full of surprises.

Stay tuned for an eye-opening conversation.

ARLETTE: So, Teresa, tell me about your early career.

TERESA: I started my journey to become a lawyer as a student at the University of North Carolina School of Law in Chapel Hill, and from there, I had the opportunity to clerk for a judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the 4th Circuit, James Dickson Phillips.

And then, I had an opportunity to clerk for Justice John Paul Stevens of the United States Supreme Court.

And I was fortunate in clerking for both of those men, I had the opportunity to learn from men who had a deep love of our country, a deep respect for the rule of law, and a deep appreciation of the importance of impartiality in the judicial system.

And on the occasion of his (Justice Stevens) death, the Court called together all of his former law clerks and gave us an opportunity to participate in honoring him when he lay in rest at the Supreme Court and also joining with his family in burying him at Arlington National Cemetery.

And it was a great honor, to me, to have the opportunity to join in saluting a man who gave so much to our country, and having had the

opportunity to work for him will always be one of the most important experiences of my career.

And then, I came to Atlanta and started in private practice at a firm that's now called Eversheds Sutherland, mostly doing litigation work.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

TERESA: Then, I had a chance to go work for the Department of Justice for Janet Reno...

ARLETTE: Oh, wow. Very interesting.

TERESA: ...in an office called the Office of Legal Counsel, which when you think about nerd law, think about the nerdiest of the nerds in New York in the Office of Legal Counsel in the Justice Department.

So that's where I was.

Then, I came back to private practice in Atlanta and got an opportunity after several years to go in-house as the head of litigation for MetLife.

ARLETTE: Oh, wow.

TERESA: Such a varied career when I think about that.

ARLETTE: And then, how'd you end up at the Home Depot?

TERESA: Well, that's actually a great story. I think I mentioned that I clerked for Justice John Paul Stevens on the Supreme Court.

ARLETTE: Yeah, you did.

TERESA: But so did Frank Blake.

ARLETTE: Ah.

TERESA: And we both clerked for Justice Stevens about 10 years apart.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: And periodically, the Justice would hold reunions of his law clerks, and I got to visit with Frank at one of our law-clerk reunions.

And a few weeks after one of our reunions, he called me and told me that there was an opening for the general counsel position at the Home Depot and asked if I would mind if a headhunter called to talk to me about the position and to interview me.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: So, from that phone call, in the process of my getting to know more about the Home Depot and more about the opportunity to be the general counsel here.

ARLETTE: Very neat.

And it definitely reinforces the importance of building a network.

TERESA: It really does.

And I don't know if you want to know about the part where, on my first interview...

[Both laugh]

...with the Home Depot was actually at a McDonald's.

ARLETTE: Ah, yes, that sounds, you know, like our shabby chic approach.

Go ahead.

Tell us more.

TERESA: So, I had an opportunity to meet with Tim Crow.

We tried, initially, to meet at a Starbucks but found it too crowded.

So we went across the street to McDonald's and had a great 90-minute interview there at the McDonald's.

It actually reminded me.

One of my early customer-service jobs was actually working at McDonald's.

ARLETTE: Very good.

So you got your start early, in terms of having that customer-service orientation.

TERESA: Exactly.

ARLETTE: Well, we're glad that you went to the McDonald's.

It's turned out to be pretty good.

TERESA: It was a great interview.

ARLETTE: Absolutely good for us.

TERESA: You know, I had the -- an amazing opportunity when I became a lawyer.

It felt, from the very first day of law school, that I was doing what I was intended to do.

ARLETTE: Right.

TERESA: I always wanted to be a person that helped others, that helped communities be better, helped society to be better.

I grew up loving our government and loving our country, and it seemed by surveying the system of justice as a lawyer would give me an opportunity to do all of those things.

Love being a a lawyer.

I've loved every aspect of being a lawyer.

I love being in private practice.

I loved the opportunity to work for the government.

There's nothing like saying that you work for the United States of America.

ARLETTE: Right.

TERESA: And then, to my great surprise, I love being in corporate America.

ARLETTE: Mm.

TERESA: Loved the opportunity to be in-house at MetLife and to really learn about a business and to follow issues from soup to nuts and not just focus on a particular matter but really have something related to the whole business.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

TERESA: And then, got a chance to come back to Atlanta and work for the Home Depot, which has been...

GUTHRIE: The Home Depot.

TERESA: ...the best experience of my career.

GUTHRIE: Wow.

So, tell me why you say that.

What is it about the Home Depot that makes it the best experience?

TERESA: First, the environment that we have here at the Home Depot of working for a company that truly does try to do the right thing all the time.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: For a lawyer, that's Nirvana.

[Both laugh]

You're not trying to cover things up, you're not trying to make anything better than it is.

You're just trying to resolve issues and the problems in the best way you can for your customers, associates, and shareholders.

ARLETTE: Sure.

TERESA: And that's, for a lawyer, perfect.

I mean, it just doesn't get any better than that.

Plus, as a person, I've learned so much by being in an atmosphere here at the Home Depot, learning how to be my best self all the time, to relate to other people with authenticity...

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: ...to really be able to show genuine caring for where people are in their careers and be part of the process of helping them to grow in their careers.

Learned so much about customer service, about really what it means to put customers first.

ARLETTE: Sure.

One of our core values, of course.

TERESA: One of our core values.

So, it's a great atmosphere in which to be an associate, be a person, and also to be a lawyer.

ARLETTE: Well, and then, when you talk about being able to be your best self, I love that.

And one of the nice things about what you've done since you've been leading the legal department is, you've reshaped it.

You've allowed your associates to be their best self in some significant ways.

Talk a little bit about that journey in terms of reshaping the department.

TERESA: Well, first, I have to say, when I got here, I found an amazing legal department full of really, really talented people who were anxious to work hard for the company.

I tried to build on that by giving them the opportunity to learn and grow in their roles.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

TERESA: One of the first areas of focus was our paralegals, giving them the opportunity to professionalize their organization.

ARLETTE: Sure.

TERESA: Really, in fact, formed an organization, called PAVE -- Professionals Adding Value and Excellence.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: They formed their own internal education program to build upon their skills.

ARLETTE: Oh, wow.

So, internal development happening right within the team.

TERESA: Right.

ARLETTE: Okay.

TERESA: And they took on responsibility for deciding what they needed to shape their own career paths.

ARLETTE: Okay.

TERESA: And I provided them with an environment of support and letting them know that we were behind their efforts, but they really did take on the work themselves in figuring out what they needed to do to be professionals in the Home Depot, and I'm so proud of everything that they did.

ARLETTE: That's pretty exciting.

TERESA: Also tried to build and expand on the atmosphere of teamwork.

ARLETTE: Okay.

TERESA: So often we get so absorbed with everything that's on our desk that we don't get to learn and grow from what people are doing around us.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: So, building an atmosphere of collaboration where people got to work more as teams, had more exposure to what was going on around them, and more opportunity to participate in that.

I call it being one band, one sound, which I stole from a movie.

[Both laugh]

ARLETTE: There's nothing wrong with borrowing, probably.

TERESA: "Drumline."

But the concept that we all do our best when we're working together.

ARLETTE: Sure.

TERESA: And that the sound the least of us makes is the sound that we all make.

And so, we all have to support each other.

ARLETTE: Wow.

And so the team seemed to take to that, 'cause I can think about the level of collaboration not only within the legal department but also how they support the various partners in other functions.

I mean, I think the team has really taken that to heart.

TERESA: Well, the law department's in a unique posture to be able to bring together different parts of the business to resolve an issue or problem.

Often, we see the problem coming first, and we can pull together people from H.R., from I.T., from merchandising, from finance, to figure out how to address an issue and to form working groups to really think holistically about a problem or issue and how the business might resolve it before -- hopefully before it gets here, but even afterwards.

ARLETTE: Hopefully.

TERESA: And just encouraging people to take advantage of that opportunity that we have to be the mortar between the bricks of the business, to really bring pieces of the business together to form a solution is part of what's been fun about the law department.

ARLETTE: Now, I think about your early days at the Home Depot.

Superstorm Sandy hit the northeast very shortly after you started at the Home Depot.

Now, that must have been a very quick indoctrination into our operations and our impact on the community.

Did that shift your perception at all of the company you had just started to work for?

TERESA: It really did.

I had not been introduced to our disaster-response capabilities before Storm Sandy hit, and I happened to be on Long Island with a small group of associates working on an entirely different issue when the storm hit.

But we hunkered down in place.

But how quickly we became a part of the company's response to that storm really surprised me.

I can remember being in our hotel, 9:00 at night, second or third night of the storm, and one of the RVPs who was with us said --

ARLETTE: RVPs being...?

TERESA: Regional Vice Presidents.

ARLETTE: Ah, yes.

TERESA: Called and let us know that a truckload of generators had just reached one of our stores.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: We all got into a car, put on our aprons, drove down to that store, and became -- joined with a team of associates who were selling those generators to customers, making sure that the customers knew how to use the generators, had everything that they need to put the generators in place.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: Serving coffee to them.

The store did not have any power.

It was on emergency backup itself.

ARLETTE: But still figured out how to serve the customers and the associates.

TERESA: The associates were amazing.

Many of them were using their personal cellphones to help customers do credit-card transactions...

ARLETTE: Wow.

TERESA: ...and to access needed resources to support their families.

I remember being with one grandmother who was saying, "I just need to find a way to heat a baby bottle."

ARLETTE: Wow.

TERESA: And the associates working to figure out with her how she could heat a bottle of baby's milk...

ARLETTE: Wow.

TERESA: ...for her, yeah, young grandchild.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: So it was amazing to be part of that effort and to see how the associates worked together and how focused they were on serving the customers.

No one had any eye towards going home.

No one had any eye towards closing the store that night.

They were just devoted to serving the customers.

ARLETTE: Well, and I love the image that you just painted, in terms of it was only one of the first few days of your tenure at the Home Depot.

You put on an apron pretty quickly and begin to bleed orange with no time to even think about what you were doing but instead just grounded in this willingness to help.

And what I -- what that connects for me is the concept of making a difference being very rooted in who you are and in your early experiences.

Tell us about how and why you decided to become a lawyer.

TERESA: Well, I grew up as a child of Brown vs. Board of Education.

ARLETTE: Okay.

TERESA: So I was aware from a very early age that where I went to elementary school was the result of work that had been done by lawyers to open up the school system to children of all races.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: And my parents made sure I felt that as a privilege and an opportunity to get the best education possible.

So I grew up with this reverence and respect for how lawyers could impact society and how they could enforce the Constitution to make life better for everybody.

So I really wanted to be a part of helping others, of helping build strong communities.

I'm very patriotic.

Love the United States and what it has the opportunity to be.

And being a lawyer and being part of our legal system just seemed to me the best way to contribute to making communities stronger and people happier and contributing to quality of life.

ARLETTE: Well, and I love that, because it aligns perfectly with our values.

TERESA: It really does.

And our values are an interconnected web.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: You know, when we talk about building strong relationships, you get to taking care of people and respect for all people pretty naturally.

When you talk about creating shareholder value, you get to entrepreneurial spirit pretty easily.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: And so I love the web of support that the values create not just for us as associates but with each other and how they shine a light that we can all use to navigate both our professional and our personal lives.

ARLETTE: Now, you've worked in both government, private practice, and now corporate law.

How has each informed your view on how the law can be used as a force for positive change?

TERESA: Well, when you work for the government, and I was fortunate right out of law school to clerk for judges and to have the opportunity to think about the law from a point of neutrality, so not advocating from either side but really thinking about, "What should the law do in this situation?

What does this law mean in this circumstance?"

And had the same chance when I was working for the Department of Justice to be able to think about, "What was this law intended to do?"

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: "What was the outcome of this situation intended to be?

What was the Constitution intended to say in this circumstance?"

And having that opportunity to think of law as something as a tool or device for driving improvement has been great in my career.

And when you come to the Home Depot, we bring that attitude of customer service even to people who are making claims against the company.

ARLETTE: That's true.

TERESA: They are still our customers.

They're still people that you want to have a positive relationship with the Home Depot, and we want to think of them as people for whom we have respect and the opportunity to help improve their circumstances.

ARLETTE: Yeah.

TERESA: So, by bringing that attitude to the work that we do for Home Depot to the contracts that we enter to -- the contracts that we enter into with our vendors...

ARLETTE: Yeah.

TERESA: ...we want them to very carefully lay out the relationship so that we can avoid conflict in the future and so that the relationship can be the best it can be.

ARLETTE: Wow.

I've never thought of the law as a tool for improvement and just the analogy or the connection between what we do in the home-improvement space and how we utilize tools, and so it just seems like Home Depot was home for you before you even knew that.

TERESA: [Laughs]

ARLETTE: Now, over the years, your responsibilities have expanded to include government relations, risk management, and corporate communications and external affairs in addition to the legal function.

Your responsible for some of the most significant ways that we interact with the world around us.

How do you approach the variability in your responsibilities so that you can actually bring all of those pieces together?

TERESA: Well, a couple of images stick in my head.

One, I think if you've seen the Winter Olympics, you've seen the game that they call curling...

ARLETTE: Yes.

TERESA: ...where they throw a rock down an icy path.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: And there are people in front with the brooms, sweeping things out of the way of the rock so it can go to its intended destination.

And all of these functions have as their job sweeping things out of the way of that rock that is the business so it can get to where it's destined to be.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: And part of the goal of communications, of risk management, is making it possible for our associates' efforts to bring their best to bear for our customers and associates without distractions, without things that keep the business from getting to the heights that it can get to.

ARLETTE: Okay.

TERESA: And one of the things that we want to do in communications is, we want to make sure that both our associates and our customers and shareholders know who we are and how we're operating in the world...

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: ...and having a chance to understand how the Home Depot relates to them.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: We want our associates to understand the full package of benefits that we bring to them and the family that they have joined by becoming part of the Home Depot.

We want our shareholders to understand how our business is growing...

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

So important.

TERESA: ...and where we intend to be.

So, all of those functions come together to create an opportunity to help the Home Depot be all that it can be, to take obstacles out of the path of the business getting to success.

ARLETTE: Great analogy.

That brought it to life for me.

Now, our inverted-pyramid style of management and our eight core values that we've referenced really define our culture.

Give our listeners some real-life examples of our culture in action.

And I understand that a somewhat shabby break room was an eye-opener for you, so give us a little bit more insight into that.

TERESA: Sure.

One of my surprises when I first came to Home Depot is seeing the break room on the 22nd floor of the SSC building where the C.E.O. is, where the C.F.O. is, the head of H.R. is, the head of I.T.

And you go into this break room, and it looked like my grandmother's 1950s kitchen, never refurbished.

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: And so, I happened to mention to Frank Blake, who was the C.E.O. at the time, "Hey, don't we sell refrigerators?

Don't we sell countertops?

Can we do something about this room?"

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: And he said, "Teresa, when we fixed every break room in every store, we can pay attention to this one."

ARLETTE: Wow.

TERESA: And it was a real-life example to me of the inverted pyramid...

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm

TERESA: ...that the most important experience that we were all here to protect is the experience of our associates in the stores, of the associates that face off against their customers or with their customers every day.

And that really brought it home to me that it means that in very concrete and specific ways.

And if I have to trip over the carpet a little bit, that was okay.

ARLETTE: It's okay.

[Both laugh]

Now, you think about having 2,000 locations and more than 450,000 associates, that's who we're here to take care of.

TERESA: Right.

And as you mention often, and part of the lore and the culture that we got from our founders, like Bernie always says, "If we take care of those associates, they'll take care of the customers, and everything else will take care of itself."

ARLETTE: Well said.

Now, what's your favorite day at the Home Depot, the kind of day that makes you say, "That's why this place is so special"?

TERESA: Actually, my favorite days at the Home Depot are the days I get to work in the stores.

ARLETTE: Mm.

TERESA: I love that the people in this building get out of the SSC and go out into the stores and put on aprons and talk to customers.

I love having the experience of going to a store and going down an aisle and saying to a department supervisor, "Can I be your apprentice today?"

ARLETTE: Mm-hmm.

TERESA: "Will you teach me about insulation today?"

Will you teach me about power tools the next day?

Will you teach me about plumbing the next day?"

ARLETTE: Sure.

TERESA: And learning with the associates in the aisles and helping them to help the customers...

And even when a customer asks me on an issue or a question I don't know the answer, I just say, "We'll find the answer to this together, because I'm just as curious about this as you are."

And seeing how patient the customers are when you say, "I'm here to help, but I need help to help you..."

[Both laugh]

...which I often do is a great experience.

It lets us know what it's all about and what the organization is that we're really supporting is that interaction between an associate and a customer.

ARLETTE: Absolutely.

She's always talking about making a difference and improving the lives of others.

In every step of her career, Teresa has certainly embraced being a force for change, and she's certainly made a difference here at the Home Depot.

Thanks for listening.

This is Arlette, signing off.

Please join me again for our next episode of "Give Me an H."