

# CREATING A SECOND-HOME WORKPLACE

*District manager's front-line experience informs her approach to leadership. Creating an inclusive, caring environment is job No. 1.*

**S**henell Leighton spent six years as a Home Depot hourly associate before she took her first salaried job. Although she's been in leadership roles for 15 years, currently as district manager of several New York metro stores, that time on the front lines stays with her.

"Every time I'm in a store, I see myself as a cashier ringing up the register at the Valley Stream store where I started," says Shenell, whose District 332 in Queens includes about 1,700 associates. "My experience shapes how I lead. I am aware of the obstacles, as well as the opportunities.

"I was always self-aware that my actions and contributions were paving the way for other women and people of color," Shenell says. She welcomes the company's enhanced focus on diversity, equity and inclusion and believes our recent conversations about race, gender and equity are powerful and can be transformative.

"We are talking openly about our experiences. We are talking about what's difficult — and not just in one-on-one conversations with mentors we trust, but in larger settings in our workplace. That open conversation is the thing that can make positive change happen," she says. "That's huge."

Also essential: Putting equity front and center. "Becoming a salaried manager at The Home Depot changed my life. My first management incentive payment helped me erase my debt. It's important that we give our people access to resources that enable them to succeed at work and build generational wealth. We also must offer associates the financial

literacy tools they need to learn about growing their money. That may not have been part of their foundation growing up. It's something I had to learn."

The pandemic has put a spotlight on the challenges associates face in their daily lives, Shenell says, and also highlighted their fortitude. "I think about what our people have personally been through in their lives at home with their loved ones since March 2020 — death, sickness, job losses in the family, struggles with home-schooling — that all happens before they walk into work. And, still, through resilience and determination, they make it to the store, and they treat it like a second home."

Shenell believes a critical part of her job as a leader is to make sure that "second home" is a place where all associates are welcomed and included. She wants all our people, especially associates from underrepresented minority groups and women, to have the resources they need to ascend and create brighter futures for their families, as she has. "If we are intentional in our purposes, as a company and as individuals, we can chart our own path."

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District Manager, Queens, New York

