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Fresh Summit: Women in the produce industry take a seat at the table

By

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2020 has been a year full of challenges, but also one full of new opportunities and growth, as emphasized during the Center for Growing Talent's Women's Fresh Perspectives general session, held virtually on Thursday, Oct. 15 as part of PMA Fresh Summit.

The virtual session kicked off with the announcement of the 2020 CGT Frieda Rapoport Caplan Women's Catalyst Award, which went to Kristen Reid, executive vice president of MIXTEC Group.

"Frieda always made me feel really special," Reid said during her acceptance speech. "I am honored to receive the first Women's Catalyst award that bears her name."

Reid went on to mention things she loves most about working in the produce industry, including mentoring individuals and serving on boards and committees that are creating opportunities for young people to share the same passion she has.

As for her advice for other women in produce, Reid said, "Just get involved ... mentor someone, join a committee. The old adage that you get back more than you give is so true."

The session continued with a powerful discussion about the importance of diversity, inclusion, networking and the new work-from-home norm in today's world. The discussion was led by Johnny C. Taylor Jr., president and chief executive officer of SHRM, and included two prominent women in the produce industry — Sara Menker, chief executive officer of Gro Intelligence, and Beth Newlands Campbell, EVP and president, supermarket and market district, of Giant Eagle Inc.

The women discussed their backgrounds, the challenges they've faced and the obstacles they've had to overcome in order to achieve the level of success they have today.

The key to success for Campbell is "a lot of hard work, taking some risks and being humble," she shared.

As for Menker, she likes to view all challenges as opportunities to make things easier for the next person. Having been born and raised in Ethiopia and immigrating to the United States later in life, Menker said, "I always knew what it was like to be an outsider, so by design, I built a company where every person could be an insider."

"I always viewed the challenges I faced as an opportunity to change and bring that into the organization that I built," she added. "See everything that's wrong and build something completely different."

In order to make those necessary changes both Campbell and Menker speak of, people must be open to diversity and inclusion.

"The key for us is getting people to see through the eyes of the other," Menker said. "To understand the perspective of the other, to understand the journey of the other."

One way in which her company has done that is through dining together for lunch (pre-coronavirus). "There was a lot of community built around that lunch table and sharing life experiences," she said. "I think that served miracles and worked wonders for people who did not work the same way before."

Now that social distancing and remote work environments are a thing, Menker said her team has come up with new ways to preserve culture and stay connected through virtual wellness classes, dance sessions and even a company talent show.

Campbell agreed that the pandemic has brought about a lot of challenges, especially around losing

that sense of community in the work environment. She also noted that the pandemic is disproportionately affecting women who are being faced with a difficult task of working from home while also trying to care for their families.

“I hate to see all the progress that has happened with women in the workforce to go backwards and have women drop out,” she said.

On the bright side, Campbell noted, is that the new work-from-home norm has allowed her to recruit from anywhere. “The access to diversity and the opportunity to build a different and cool culture is really exciting,” she shared.

At the end of the day, everyone agreed that when people come together with a sense of inclusion, understanding and determination to better themselves and their work environment, nothing can stop them.

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