Why Lateral Moves Beat Promotions: Leadership Lessons from Microsoft's Gavriella Schuster

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A lot of people, when they think about

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growing their career,

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they think a lot of just upward momentum.

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Right?

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I'm going to be an individual contributor. Then it'll be a manager, then it'll be a general manager, whatever. I never thought about my career that way. I thought about I want to learn how to do this, and I want to learn how to do that, and I want to learn how to do this. And so early in my career, I made a lot of lateral moves.

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And people were like, why? Right. Why would you do that?

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I was like, I want to keep going around and learning stuff.

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what I realized when by the time I actually made general manager at Microsoft, which not a lot of people do, right,

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one of the real benefits to the organization was that I had all that experience. And so I knew if I was developing a product, I knew then what it was going to take to

operationalize it, to sell it, to service it, all of those things, because I had worked in all of those areas.

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Hello. This is Transcending Tech, a podcast about the people behind the platforms and the stories that transcend technology. I'm your host, Ashleigh Vogstad.

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Today on the show, we have Gavriella Schuster. Her illustrious career spans more than 25 years at Microsoft, where she impacted billions of dollars in revenue in her role as corporate vice president. I first saw Gavriella back in 2018 on the Microsoft Ignite main stage. Tens of thousands of people, the T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas. And she was electric today.

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Gavriella is focused on creating an impact of a different kind as a leading voice and Ted speaker on leadership, allyship and inclusion in technology. She sits on the boards of some of the most influential technology companies, including Nerdist and Mimecast. Gavriella, welcome to the show. Well, thank you for having me, Ashleigh. I've really been looking forward to this conversation.

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And since we met in a public speaking environment, or I saw you on stage, I wanted to start there. You know, take us back to that moment when you're on this massive stage, you're surrounded by tens of thousands of people. How did you feel in that moment? Well, so I'll take you to the first time that I had to be in front of tens of thousands of people on a tiny little stage in the middle of a stadium, and, and it kind of started there.

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So the first time I had to do that, I was leading a product team, and we were demoing the product, and it was it was our internal, you know, our big global internal sales kickoff. Right. And I remember like everything was fine. Like, you know, we had worked out like we had backups of the backup if the demo wasn't working right.

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That's important in the live environment, in a live environment. But but like five minutes before I was due to go out there, I started thinking, oh my gosh. Like a lot of times when you're doing public speaking, you're in front of an audience that doesn't really know what it is you're going to say. So if you don't say the right thing or, you know, if you go off script, if you, you know, just say something different than you expected to say nobody knows, right.

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And so you're the only one that really understands that. But I was like, oh my gosh, I'm going in front of like 12,000 Microsoft sellers who do know what I should say, who are going to try and take this and bring it to customers. I have to say all the right things, right. And talk about pressure. So suddenly I was like, oh, no.

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And so my CVP, I think he saw my face like just shift in, in that moment. And he came back and he said, okay, relax. I see you're getting a little uptight. Here's what I want you to remember. Like, go out there, say, you know, call out for your team, call out for the sellers. You know, call out whatever it is, find them in the audience and talk to them, just like you would talk to them if you were in a small group.

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And don't worry about everybody else. And I was like, okay, okay, I can do that. So like I went out and I was like, where's my US licensing specialist or who? And where's my, you know, like all these different groups, right. And so like, I had an idea where people I knew were and I just talked to that group as I was doing this demo and, and so, you know, at the end, I mean, everything went fine, the demo was fine, nothing glitched.

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And people were like, so next time maybe you want to talk to the rest of us...[laughter]

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So then when I, when I had to do the main stage keynote for the partners and you know, that was like the bigger because I was the keynote, right. And my, my production leader said, okay, here's the deal. When you are out on normally when

you do a public speaking in front of a group, say you're on a stage with 3000 people or 2000 people, you tend to talk a little louder.

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Yeah. And you try and scan the room. Right? I certainly do both of those things. Like. And you try not to move. Right. Because it's distracting. He's like, forget all that. Because when you are in a center stage, a circular stage, and you have people all around you, you have to move to talk to everyone. And he's like, so here's the thing.

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Every time you breathe, move to a different part of the stage. Every time you stop to take a breath, move to a different part of it, you know, to set the scene for everybody. I can still remember it like yesterday. It's a circular oval of some sort stage in the middle of a stadium. So you do have people surrounding you 365 degrees.

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There's no stage backdrop, right? Yeah. That's a very different engagement tactic because no matter what your back is. Right. And so and he's like and just speak at your normal conversational level because we will take care of the audio. And if you suddenly are loud then we have to really pay attention. So just try and stay like regulated.

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And whenever you can there will be a camera tracking around for every place you're looking. Try and look at the camera because there's a big Megatron thing over your head. And if you're like scanning the audience and your eyes are going up and down, they will look really weird on the Megatron. And I was like, oh my gosh, it's almost like playing golf.

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Like, there's a lot of things to remember at one time. Did you did a fully dress rehearsal before that? That was like that was when during the dress rehearsal, like, you know, he was giving me those tips of like how to take, you know, and, and like, take the whole stage. Don't just like stay in the middle or something like try and move around the whole stage.

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So it's like a whole different thing when you are speaking to a group that big, but you definitely have to work your way up to that. Yes. Yeah. What do you recommend? Because, you know, I thought first, I'm always nervous to this day when I go out on stage, but I haven't necessarily found a difference in speaking to 50 people or hundreds of people.

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Like is it the number? But then but then when I think about getting out onto a stage like that in the stadium environment, to me that's a completely different level of things. Like how do you prepare for something like that? Is it growing the audience size over time or is it other things? So there's a few things, right?

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So

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like when you're in a group of say 50 or 100, you can be very, very personable, right? Like you can make that very interactive. You can call people into the conversation. Right. And make it very interactive and engaging. And then as the audience grows, it gets harder and harder to do that. Right. And so I think from like say maybe 150 to 5000, there's really not a big difference in the way that you would do a presentation.

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Right? Because you're generally on a stage that has a backdrop. Right. And then when you get to like kind of a different kind of setup, then it becomes a whole different kind of production environment. But yeah, I mean, you, you, you work your way up like I used to coach people that we had something on Microsoft campus called the Enterprise Briefing Center, Executive Briefing Center.

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And you have customers coming in and, you know, it's really just the customer. Sometimes that can be like ten people, sometimes that can be 100 people, but it's just the customer. And I used to coach my team. You should take as many of those opportunities as you can, because it's an opportunity for you to practice our pitch, like what we say to customers and see how people really react.

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It is an opportunity to practice your public speaking, and it's an opportunity to engage with customers. And you need all three of those things. So you should take as many of those as you can. And it's a pretty low risk thing. Like if you go into that and something doesn't go right, you know, there's a seller there, they'll make it up.

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And you know, you're you've got a team supporting you. That's a pretty low risk thing if you really messed it up. Right.

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So so that's the way into it is talk about something, you know, talk about it with a smaller group of people where it's not going to like ruin your career if you really mess it up and then you start growing, you know, the groups that you talk to.

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I mean, I have a marketing agency and I find in an agency environment, I guess, like any sort of sales rule really, but we're constantly on the phone hosting workshops with clients, hosting just even a regular weekly meeting conversation with clients. And I think that public speaking skills can be underestimated in how much they can propel career growth.

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It's one of the reasons I wanted to talk about public speaking with you is I think we get asked a lot in this day of AI and so much technology advancement. What are the skills to really invest in? And personally, I really think that public speaking is a key one. But what have you seen in your career in terms of public speaking benefiting a leadership path?

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Yeah, I mean, I agree with you. I think it's a key leadership skill, right? Because ultimately you want to be a leader. That means that you have people that you need to talk to, that you want to have follow you, and you need to be charismatic and you need to engage them, and you need them to want to follow you.

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And the only way to do that is through public speaking. You're not going to be able to get to everyone in scale like you need to, just doing one on one kind of discussions with everybody. And and so

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doesn't matter really, what your core personality type is. You can be the most introverted person, but you can learn to be a good public speaker.

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And I think it's really important.

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You know, you just brought up something I went to I'm in the entrepreneurs organization EO, it's called, and they do an annual speakers training. And I attended the speaker's training in September. It was down in Cancun. There was 40 of us in the classroom, five days, very intensive, very different backgrounds in terms of level of experience with public speaking, from nothing to people regularly doing keynotes much more diverse than I was expecting, actually.

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But one of the things that they talk about was run by a group called Speakers Lab, I think, out of Toronto in Canada, and these guys were so they're excellent public speakers. Of course, they were very charismatic, but the thing that really stuck with me is they said that everyone has a gene and there's different elements. How much I contact you make, how much you use your hands.

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If you're more prone to standing in one spot or moving around, if your voice is naturally loud, if you're naturally quiet. I think there was eight dimensions, but each of us naturally have a place that we kind of calibrate to on each of those dimensions. And that's your job. And their point is that every day is a good chance for public speaking, but a great public speaker is going to push the envelope and know when to break out of there.

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You know, to be charismatic and to really connect with the audience that you need that variation in there. I thought that that was really a good seeing other people

practice that. It really just became true. You know, even if you look at lawyers or anyone trying to convince you of something, we all are politicians. We all gravitate toward different personality types.

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The same personality is does not work for everyone, but knowing kind of having all those skills in your skill set is really helpful. It is, and

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it's not really about how polished you are. In a lot of cases, it's actually people like you more when you're more authentic, when you're not all polished, when you haven't memorized what you're going to say, you know.

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And so that's really an important skill because a lot of people go into it thinking, well, I have to be perfect or, you know, that's like in my mind, I had I was like, well, nobody ever knows what I'm going to say. So it doesn't matter if I don't say exactly what I thought I was going to say.

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Right. But

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since sometimes you go into things where people do know what you're going to say. But I mean, really the most important thing is that you want to be authentic and, and after any, any public speaking that you do, the key thing that people are going to walk away from is, did they connect with you? Yes. And so just know that they're really not going to pay as much attention to what you're saying.

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It's did they connect with you. And so you need to do whatever you need to do to be more connected to the audience. I mean, that's definitely one of the things I've had to work hard on is the perfectionism side of things. Like, you want it to go exactly. And I was definitely one of those people who had absolutely everything jam packed onto my slides, for example.

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But one of the freeing things over the years and discipline, and many people telling me is, you know, either not having slides at all or just keeping them really simple, it challenges you to be yourself a bit more, I think, and say what you want to say. Yeah it does. You're not following some guide, right? You know, and it really this really stood out for me.

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I was watching valedictorian and one of my kids schools speak, and they were so nervous and they were like trying to follow notes. And they kept losing their place and everything. And it was so endearing. And I was like, see, that's actually great public speaking because everyone out here is like rooting for them now, right? I was like, oh, come on, you can do it.

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Absolutely, absolutely.

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So yeah, in my class at Oxford, I've been there studying AI. And we did a and so these are all it's an executive program. So everybody is somewhat advanced in their careers. And we had to do an Oxford style debate in our classroom. And you know, that's the first thing that got me. It wasn't because a lot of the people weren't public speakers.

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They weren't as polished and not like going to a conference where, you know, everyone is trained as a as a public speaker, but you get pulled it. I liked the key personalities, the fumbles that you pay. They even say that some people can be self-conscious, say English as a second language. And I always feel a lot of empathy, like I can hardly do it.

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English in my first language was like, how do these people do it? You know, 4 or 5 languages, but but actually, to the listener, it can pull you in more. You're really paying attention to what the person is, is saying. Yeah. One of the other things in terms of public speaking that I wanted to wrap up on, maybe for this topic, is this

research that comes that has come out from the American Psychological Association about loneliness.

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You know, people are talking about the loneliness epidemic, particularly in the United States. And kind of I don't know, my working theory is that if we can improve our communication skills and be more confident with things like public speaking, it's not just such a stretch to go and, you know, ask someone at the bar for to go out for a coffee or a date.

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And I know as a mom as well, like, where do you kind of see public speaking skills, maybe helping people navigate life more generally? Yeah. I mean, I think it's it's about helping people build up their confidence. Right. And and learning that there's value in what they have to say. And when you have more confidence that there's value in you and there's value in what you say, then moments like that feel less intimidating.

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And and so, you know, it also also, I find that when people learn to speak about the things that they're good at, right? And that's what you would generally be public speaking about, then it does help them to build up that confidence and, and learn that people want to hear what they have to say, because I think that's the thing that keeps a lot of people from introducing themselves or networking better is because they're they're like, well, who am I?

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And why would someone listen to me anyway? So silly? Anyone listening? That's so silly. You know, we're all just human beings at the end of the day, and we all have this personal experience. And I think in a time of AI, there's Merriam-Webster dictionaries. Word of the year was slop. You know, there's so much content proliferating online. What we actually want more than anything is just some genuine human connection.

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Right? And everyone has a story. Just tell your story. So that's a good segue here, Gavriella, I want to hear your story. And to the extent that you'd like to share, just, you

know, going all the way back to childhood in your beginnings and what are some of the things that kind of helped you be the person that you are today?

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Well, I.

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I had a I started working very young. I, we needed me to work when I was younger. So, you know, I started doing babysitting jobs and I was like 11 or 12. And then I became a waitress, actually, I became a busboy when I was 13 and then a waitress when I was 14. And and so talk about learning to talk to people, you have to learn to talk to people when you're a waitress.

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And and I learned a ton from that. And then I did a summer thing when I was a telemarketer. That's a horrible job. I apologize to anyone who's a telemarketer, but that is a very, very hard job. A lot of rejection, a lot of rejection. Right? A lot of people just hanging up the phone on you. But I learned a lot, and I learned how to get people to stay on the phone and just talk to me and to be a person and not a script.

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And, and, you know, and from there, you know, I just, I just worked I had 1 or 2 jobs the whole time from the time that I was 14 till the time that I graduated college. Right. And and so I think, you know, that that taught me that one. No job is beneath you. Right? Which also means that you should have a lot of respect and value for anyone who does any of those jobs.

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Right. And one who, you know, whether they're they're pumping your gas or taking your change, working at the grocery store, being your waitress, whatever it is, you know, they have a story. And and there's a lot of reasons why they're doing whatever they're doing. And you should show them the same level of respect that you would show the president of a company that would come and talk to you.

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And so, you know, I think that was very important lesson. And and I also learned that, you know, if things didn't work out in a professional world, I could always go back to

doing some other thing. So there was always a plan B, and I think that also helped me through a lot of times, you know, where I was at work thinking, I don't know, this is a big risk.

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Should I take this risk? What if I get fired? And I was like, yeah, you can always go and do something else. I think that that is a superpower in and of itself. And, you know, the hospitality industry in particular, I find many of the people that I end up working the most closely with over the years, they have a background in restaurants or events or something customer service oriented.

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And for me, yeah, waitressing was also just really impactful. I mean, I quit my waitressing job to start my first agency, and then when I started my first agency, I realized I had no money to pay my staff. And so I went back to waitressing. I think I would do like the Friday double shift Saturday, double shift Sunday, and I was actually able to pay my staff with the tips that I made on working on the weekends.

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It's an incredibly flexible industry. It's incredibly flexible, and it can be very lucrative if you're good. Yes. And so what was your relationship like with your family and kind of lessons you took from your parents? Maybe. So. You know, my my dad is a super, super hard worker. Never took a day off, you know, even if he didn't feel well.

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And so, you know, there was a very, very strong work ethic. You know, my my parents had a lot of issues. You know, they used to argue a lot. Mine were perfect. And money was always an issue. And, you know, and, you know, it was it was it was not an easy childhood. But, you know, I learned that you, you know, you need to work your way through it.

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And every day is a new day. And, you know, my role in the family have a older sister and a younger brother and, and a lot of my role in the family was kind of like the peacemaker and the one that just like, did the things that needed to get done without making a fuss, you know, and and so it actually took me a long time to realize

that that was all fine and good, but I needed to not like I needed to stand up for myself too.

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And I needed to not let everyone just, like, walk all over me. So that was the lesson I learned, I think, while I was in college. And then I went back home and everyone was like, what happened to you? Well, it's funny you mentioned that actually, because I'm one of three and my best friend is one of three, and she's the middle child, and I always find she has a lot in common with my sister, who's the middle child.

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They're both very. They're strong and have their opinions, but they're both quieter. They're not so outspoken. And you're I mean, that's one of the things I love about you and having you on the show here. You're speaking on stages, doing the Ted X's like you have quite a voice, but it sounds like maybe that's something you cultivated over time.

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Yeah. It was, you know, it was it was I learned how

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I learned that, you know, sticking up for yourself doesn't make you selfish, right? Saying what you want, being clear about what you need and and putting yourself first. Those are really important things. And and I think when I learned that my life changed a lot

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and, you know, and I, you know, my, my family relationships actually got better, even though, you know, it was an adjustment and they didn't always like it.

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I think setting boundaries is incredibly important. You know, it's challenging being friends, I'll say, with family members because they know you at your worst. And it's it's difficult, even when I think about my own relationship with my parents, to give them grace, because I've known them at their worst. And sometimes it's it's difficult to let go and to see the amazing people that, you know, they've transformed into.

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You know, I do think people say people don't change. I definitely believe people. People do change. Yeah, yeah, I agree, I think people do change. So when I last saw you, we were both in San Diego at the Whitney conference, and you brought your husband there with you. And I wanted to ask. I'm about six weeks away from my wedding.

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And, you know, any secrets? Life lessons to share about a long and fruitful marriage? Well, I think what I would say is that it should be an equal partnership. And and I think that is very important. And sometimes you, you there's a lot of give and take in, in making a relationship work. And I got advice from a very wise college professor who told me that never compromise in a marriage.

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And that is like counter to what a lot of people say, right? They say marriage is all about compromise. But what he said was, don't compromise, because if you compromise by definition means that you find some middle ground like you want something, your spouse wants something, and you find some middle ground. That middle ground is someplace neither of you wants to be, right.

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It's not what they originally want. It's not what you originally wanted. And so when you do that, you end up kind of in nowhere land. So what what a great marriage really means is that consciously and intentionally, sometimes you go where you're you do the things your spouse wants to do. They do what you want to do. And you know when you're doing that and you're okay with that.

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Like you don't harbor some, like, resentment, like, we did this for you, and it's not like a scoreboard or a tally or something, but that you then end up doing the things that each of you wants to do, as opposed to someplace in being someplace doing something neither of you wanted to do. And I saw this with my parents.

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They moved from Natick, where I grew up in Massachusetts, to Smithtown in New York, in Long Island. And after like two years of struggling with this house that they were trying to set up to be what they wanted, they realized, like neither of them actually ever liked the house, and they both thought the other one liked it. And they they just compromise, right.

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And so like, they like that was a clear example to me of like, you end up where nobody wants to be. Right? And I was like, we are not going to do that. And and so, you know, that was really important. And, and like the, the equal thing. So you know, my husband and I did a, a pre marriage engagement class with a bunch of other couples.

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And one of the exercises they had us do was to take all of these household chores and separately divide them up the way we think that they're going to be divided when we're together, and then come back together and have a conversation about it. And so you each divided them. He didn't know how you were dividing them and you didn't know how he was dividing them, but then you came back together.

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So it was one of those things that challenged, like, how much have you talked about this? What do you know, that sort of thing. Right. And so my husband and I had talked about this a lot. Right. And so when we came back together, most everything was aligned except that he had we had pictures of children, and he had this picture of the kids, and he'd cut their heads and he put their heads, and he gave me their bodies.

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And I was like, well, we're not having kids.

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And and so, like, we were married for like three and a half or four years. And he was like, do you think we'll ever have kids? And I was like, well, are you ready to change how you would cut them up? And he was like, I don't even know what you're talking about. And so I reminded him and he was like, oh, I'm like, that's what's held me back.

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Let's hold you back. Wow. And so we agreed he would do all the same kinds of things that I would have to do. And and so then we had kids. Wow. It's taken me longer than I would have thought to get to this place. I'm 42 now, and I probably. I mean, my parents got together when they were 13 and 14.

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I think I had this fantasy version, and then it took me a really long time to find the person. I think you characterized it well, someone who I genuinely feel a bond of collaboration with, that I can trust whoever is doing it. The thing will get done and you know, we'll find a way of figuring it out together.

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I don't think I ever had that in a past relationship in a way that gave me confidence to move forward. Yeah. I mean, so this is the other thing is that recognizing in times when there's a lot to do and life gets really stressful, that your partners probably doing as much as they can. And don't get mad that like, you feel like you're doing everything right because like when our when our kids were little, you know, there were moments where I was like, oh my gosh.

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Like, I feel like I am just doing everything every minute of the day. And there's still so much more to do, and I'm not getting it all done. And, you know, and I'd have this like, flash in my head of like, what's scary doing? Right? And then I'd be like, okay, well, maybe you should pay attention and figure it out, right?

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And I'd watch him and I think he's doing the same thing. I am like, there's just too much to do.

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So instead of getting mad at him and being like, I'm doing everything, he's like, okay, I'm just going to have conversations about like, what are the things do you think we can stop doing? Because I can't get keep doing all of these things. And so made for better conversation. Well, I appreciate the advice. It's very top of mind at the moment.

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I want to talk now about what connected us really is Microsoft. And they've become this AI juggernaut in the market right now. But when you were there, your numbers are so huge. So. So if I have this right in about four years, you grew up to over $10 billion in revenue, billion dollars. You oversaw direct partner sales of $40 billion.

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And when you think of influenced partner revenue over $1 trillion. So, Gabrielle, I have to ask, we got some clues, maybe in the thinking about your childhood a bit, but truthfully, like what gave you the drive to make these big achievements? Well, so when I, when I was in college, my, my father lost his job and he had been working at the same place for like 27 years.

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And it was devastating for him. You know, his entire identity was tied up in his job, which I think is true for a lot of men particularly, but a lot of people. And, you know, he was lost without that. And yeah, it was really heartbreaking. And I was like, okay, so I want to make sure that in any job I do, I'm building as much.

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Capability in myself as I am giving to the organization that I'm working for. I want to make sure that all of my skills stay relevant, and I want to be a generalist, not a specialist. I don't want to get 27 years into my career and realize that I have become so specialized that it's really hard to find another job.

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So that really set the stage for me on my career. I actually changed, I changed my major, and I started doing other things to build out a broader perspective on what I could do. And and then I pushed myself in every job I had. I pushed myself to be on a continuous learning path in to stay relevant. So if I was doing something in a job where I had done it before, I was like, it might be time to get a new job, and I would start pushing myself to go find out the next best thing.

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And and when I started working at Microsoft, I realized I was in, like, I didn't ever expect to stay at Microsoft as long as I did. Like I had worked for and a half years at Cigna, four and a half years at Adobe, and I thought probably four and a half years

at Microsoft. But what I realized is that it was growing so fast, and there was so much to do that I could really learn every aspect of the business right there.

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And and I was lucky enough to be there at a time where they were really willing to take a risk. They really needed talent, and they were really willing to take a risk on somebody who they knew would work really hard, even if they didn't have all the experience that they were looking for for a specific job. I heard an interview recently with Steve Ballmer, and he talked about this exact thing that when he was at Microsoft, he felt confident with the rapid growth in the organization that the top talent, he could find a job for them because the business was evolving fast enough to provide these opportunities for growth.

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And he was contrasting that to owning the basketball team, the Clippers, and how you only have like one team coach. You know, there's there's not really the same talent progression within the organization. It's a very different limited environment. But certainly how many times roughly did do you think you changed roles in your time at Microsoft there? Oh, I had 14 jobs in 26 years.

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I had 14 jobs and I went across six different disciplines. So my, you know, my goal of like working all the different parts of the business, I did that. And so, you know, I worked in operations, I worked in enterprise services, which is consulting services. I worked in licensing and pricing, I did mergers and acquisitions, I did product management, I did partner management, I like I did sales management.

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I was I worked in many, many different parts of the organization. Yeah, it's just really impressive to see that, to see how broad that is and the differences that you can have even within one organization, all these different opportunities.

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Well, and so so the thing I'll say about that, right. Is that A lot of people, when they think about like, growing their career, they think a lot of just upward momentum.

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Right? I'm going to I'm going to be an individual contributor. Then it'll be a manager, then it'll be a general manager, whatever. I never thought about my career that way. I thought about I want to learn how to do this, and I want to learn how to do that, and I want to learn how to do this. And so early in my career, I made a lot of lateral moves.

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And people were like, why? Right. Why would you do that? Like you could, you know, go become the leader of that group because you're so good at it. And I was like, yeah, I don't really want to do that because that has an end. Like, then you're a leader and then what? Right. I was like, I want to keep going around and learning stuff.

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And and what I realized when by the time I actually made general manager at Microsoft, which not a lot of people do, right, that one of the real benefits to the organization was that I had all that experience. And so I knew if I was developing a product,

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I knew then what it was going to take to operationalize it, to sell it, to service it, all of those things, because I had worked in all of those areas.

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And so what I tell people who are earlier in their career is take this time to go do a lot of different things, because that breadth matters. I could have never imagined that the weird, disparate careers that I had would all kind of come together in some way in the end. I mean, for me, it was a lot of volunteerism.

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I'm a big advocate, and I always say, you know, you can come from a selfish place if you want on it. I always used to think, especially in my late teens or early 20s, no one would give me that work experience, you know? And yet if I put on the volunteer hat, all of a sudden I was running teams and programs.

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And I mean, for a year I worked with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and I was in charge of media and crisis communications. I had never done crisis communications.

There's protesters at these conferences like, I literally had no idea what I was doing and and never what. I have gotten that job in a different kind of capacity. But yeah, I just think saying yes to opportunities and new experiences, you can't foresee where that comes out always in the end.

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But it makes for great, great leaders. It does. And it really it gives you that experience that you need. It makes you more empathic for, you know, where somebody might be coming from, makes you work on your communication skills and your public relations skills and and just your learning. Just being a learner and being curious really serves you well.

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That's in my wedding vows. Shout out to James. He's very curious. I'm like, I think that that's one of the qualities I want to attract more of in my life is, you know, people who are actually interested in learning stuff. It's so much more energizing. Yeah. So one of the big innovations I was thinking, you know, when you joined Microsoft, they were a consumer business.

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Yes. My dad worked in it, and I used to go to when I was 5 or 6 years old. We would go to these. It shows. I'd glue like googly eyes on resistor chips and be playing like in a motherboard cities. And I swear I can still remember getting our copy of office that came in a cardboard box from Egghead Software and installing on our floppy disk.

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It was. Microsoft was a consumer brand. We don't think of that today. And part of Bombas Bombers era was really growing the enterprise business in which you had many leadership positions in. And I was curious, like the EA is one of the things he talked about. The enterprise agreement was one of the innovations, one of one of the things he talked about as as really making a difference.

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Yes.

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And he said that back then when you introduced enterprise agreements, it was a trust system. You would just ask a company how many licenses they were planning to use, and you would just trust what they had to say. And today, in my world, working with Microsoft, but also AWS and Google, these enterprise agreements are a really big deal.

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And we're seeing the size of enterprise agreements really increase. I'm just curious if you had any thoughts around this instrument of the EA and how it's morphed over these last few decades? Yeah, so so when I went into licensing and pricing, it was when we introduced the EA. Oh, wow. And and I was so up until then I had all these global roles and we didn't even have a US subsidiary yet.

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And and so we created this US subsidiary. And the person that was running it was someone that I had worked with before. And, and so the, the, the global licensing team wanted to come out with the EA. Well, mostly it was Steve's idea, right? Because Steve's like, we should monetize the desktops and we should we should be getting at least $250.

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He just made something right, $250 a desktop from every customer. And we should just tell them, we will give you everything we have for $250 a desktop and like and then they had to figure out what that meant. Right. And how do you actually do that? And so they came up with a whole plan and and they came out with this new annuity licensing.

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You pay us annually based on the your desktop count and then blah, blah. Right. And how many things you wanted to consume. It wasn't like all you can eat. It wasn't everything. But we we put prices on specific things that you could do that way. And, and this was huge. Right. Because before that everything was a box and it was all consumer packaged goods and it was either a box or it came with your computer.

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Right. Yeah. And and so our customers were not happy about the change because they were like, they're like, well, wait a minute. So we're just going to pay you and we're just going to trust that you're going to continue to give us upgrades, that you're going to give us good stuff, like it's not going to be our choice whether we by the next thing, we're just going to have to assume that you have a good product roadmap.

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Right. That's such an interesting insight into psychology that just doesn't exist today because we're so used to this licensing. Right. All right. And so it was like, you know, it took a lot a lot more than anybody thought, right? Because they were the team that kind of was in the think tank. Thinking about it wasn't really in touch with customers, and they were afraid to say anything because they didn't want it to leak that we were going to do this thing.

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And, and so

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the president who was running the US sub, he reached out to me and he was like, I was wondering if you would want to kind of be responsible for rolling out this new licensing. And I was like, I don't know anything about licensing. And and he was like, yeah, I know. But like, you know, how to like, launch things and do things that haven't been done.

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And this is a thing that hasn't been done. I was like, okay. And so when I was interviewing with the global team, they were like, yeah, but you don't know our licensing. And I was like, yeah, I know, but if it's going to take me more than like a month or two to learn our licensing, then we have a lot bigger problems because I don't know how I'm going to teach anyone else.

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What a great point. And so, you know, but but you know, I then I started rolling it out and we started getting this backlash from these customers. And I went back and I was like, I don't know, like, I think our timelines are unrealistic, you know, because like,

we thought, oh, we're going to announce it. And six months later everyone's going to move to the new thing.

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And I was like, not happening. And we ended up going about 18 months before we moved people to the new thing, because it just took that long to convince people that we were trustworthy, that we were going to come out with new stuff, that we had a roadmap that we could talk about, that we had the right value proposition for this.

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And, I mean, Microsoft's a small company. Roughly. How big were you at this time? How big were we then? So when I first started in 1995, we had three 3 billion in revenue and 8000 employees. And by the time we were rolling this out in 2000, we probably had maybe 8 billion in revenue. So in the big scheme of things, I mean, in relatively an upstart like IBM was the behemoth still in.

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This was the thing they thought, like they could do this because. IBM did something similar and IBM was all over the enterprise. Right. But the thing was that I VM was doing hardware mainframes, a very different business that required people like they knew they were putting their most mission critical applications on this hardware. They needed it supported for very long periods of time.

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It was a very different value proposition than the software, right, which was still very new. And, you know, the other thing was that a lot of our products weren't even enterprise ready. Right? So just before I took this licensing job I was responsible for, we had SQL seven coming out, and SQL seven was our first enterprise ready version of a database.

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And and so my job was to bring Oracle DBAs to learn SQL so that they could be departmental SQL DBAs. And so it really was still wasn't enterprise. It was still departmental. Right. And then the the other thing I did was we released Windows Active Directory and that was that was really much more that was really, I think our first enterprise product.

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And so then I needed we needed to bring Novell Active Directory specialists to come over to learn Windows Active Directory. And so those were the two things I had done before they asked me to do the licensing. And so I was like, all right, well, it's it's it's like this like we have to talk differently to the customer.

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We can't talk about each of the individual products. We're not going in there to sell office. Now. We're going in there to sell the suite that Microsoft has to offer both the front office and the back office together. And so we had to retrain our sellers how to talk about everything and to talk to someone different. Like up until that point, they were talking to like literally systems administrators and IT pros.

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And what they needed to start talking to was to see foes and CIOs because this was going to be a big purchase. Wow. I mean, I can't believe that you were there for all of these big decisions that happened. You know, it's hard to imagine that, you know, Microsoft today is just one of the biggest companies on the the planet.

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And hearing the history is, is super fascinating. So, so, so, so this was one of those things where like when, when I was I, I had this job in the US subsidiary, many, many jobs after that one where I had this tiny incubation product. So I was running the data center business for Microsoft US. And so it was about a $7 billion business, and I had Windows Server, SQL System Center, and then I had this little incubation product called Azure.

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I was going to say Azure. And and Azure had done $10 million a year before when I started. And about three months into the job, we realized that that $10 million was not even real because about half of it had been fraud. Oh. And so we were like, crap. So all of the assumptions we made about like, what we could grow and what was working, none of that was true.

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And so we had to start again and learn a whole different way of like, what were we doing? What was this product? How are we going to sell it? But when it came to our Our Strategy Day review and I was talking, I had to talk to Satya about how because he was running the server business, he wasn't the CEO, he was running the server business at that time.

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And, and I had talked to him about how was Azure doing, what was working, what wasn't working. And I said, you know, we have to go back to selling like we used to sell SQL when it was a data, when it was just for a departmental sale. Like Azure at this stage is not an enterprise product, it's a departmental sale.

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And we have to go in department by department and sell project by project, and we have to sell it with other ISVs who are built products on top of Azure so that we're selling some value other than just like this empty vessel. And and so, you know, was in that moment because Satya had been with Microsoft at that time, too.

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It was in that moment that that he was like, yeah. And I was like, yeah. So that history really helped to jumpstart this new business. You know, back to the enterprise agreement. You say this empty vessel of Azure, it's so funny because today it's it's a gold mine. I mean, purchasing compute is headline news everywhere. And that's really how the enterprise agreement, I guess, over time evolved is to be more of a consumption commitment that we're seeing with the major hyperscalers.

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Yep yep yep. Lots of evolution. So what do you think? I know you've been out of the business for a while, but what do you think Microsoft has gotten right, especially today? What have what is strong for them in the market right now? Well, there's a lot of things that they've got. Right? Right. Like recognizing that in a consumption business and in a world where technology isn't just the back office in it anymore, it's really the the front of the business.

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And it's really what's helping customers to transform what business they're in, that you have to actually go partner with customers. You actually have to go build the solutions with them. And so Microsoft started making investments like that about 8 or 9 years ago in co building co-developing solutions with customers. And and I think that goes even further with AI right.

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If you you know, if you really want a customer to adopt AI as part of their business practice, it's got to be core to their business practice. And, and so that the knowledge that the sellers and the support teams already have of the customer and the trust that they've built and the co-developed solutions is what's going to really help them to find the best use cases.

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So I think that's one thing. I think the other thing is they started really at the very beginning of AI, talking about how it has to be trustworthy and it has to do good, and how you have to have ethical AI. And that hasn't even caught on. Right. But they're still doing that. And I can't think of what his name, Suleiman, he was at Google.

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He was one of the co-founders of Google DeepMind, of DeepMind, which is now at Google. And he's the CEO of AI. Mustafa Suleiman, the CEO of AI at Microsoft. And I wrote his book recently, and I was actually very surprised at how much it was taking a stance of of caution. I agree, I don't think that you see a lot of that in the market today.

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Microsoft has some differentiation there. I also just got off a plane from Microsoft Build, so I was just down in San Francisco today and it was really neat. I've been going to build for years. It's not your typical business conference as a conference for developers. And I go with the intention to to learn myself, be hands on keys, orchestrate my my own agents, figure out what's going on.

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And what struck me is that in the past, I would say it was a Microsoft conference with developers, but this year it felt like a developer conference that Microsoft happened

to be at was a different orientation. And I wonder if that kind of comes through here in terms of co building solutions and taking it more seriously in terms of really getting to know what the developer community wants and needs.

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It was it had a it was a great vibe. That's awesome. Yeah. Yeah. I mean and actually that goes way back to the roots. Microsoft's roots, like Microsoft used to be much more like that with the developers. If you go back to like the early 90s and mid 90s and then kind of drifted away as they developed their own products, right.

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But yeah, I mean, and I think it's especially true at the early stages of any new kind of wave. Right. We had to do that with Azure too. Like you have to get in the you have to, you know, to sit in the same room and hack together and figure out the use cases and figure out what's going to really work.

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And then and then what Microsoft is really good at is going to build the building blocks, the tools to make that happen. You know, after 26 years at Microsoft and you mentioned Adobe and some of the other companies you're at, you haven't slowed down. And you now sit on the board of several companies. I'm curious, what has these board positions taught you about leadership that maybe you didn't take away as directly from your time at Microsoft?

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You know? Well, a few things that I, that I learned since moving into board positions is that the world doesn't move at the pace of Microsoft.

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And you have to be patient because, you know, it takes it takes a while to actually drive the change when you're not the one driving the change. And and that it is it is really important to help other like a lot of the principles of leadership that I learned growing up through Microsoft aren't just commonly used in the market.

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And so there are things that are very helpful for people to learn and understand. And and also thinking about the way that you think about your product is, you know, a lot

of organizations, it's not there's nothing inherent about that, right? Like, you know, learning like, well, is your product a lead product or an attached product? And, you know, what's the ecosystem look like around your product?

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What else are customers buying when they buy your product? Right. Where does it fit in to their overall buying? You know, a lot of a lot of organizations are very singularly focused on this. Super interesting. I never I never thought of that perspective around Microsoft because you have so many products. So you're saying in a sense that product and product marketing is really this key capability, and those have been more transferable skills than you would have imagined.

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Yeah, absolutely. Right. And and they're needed. Like they're just a lot of, a lot of organizations don't naturally think about that. They think about I have a product and I want to sell it, but not like, okay, but where does it fit in and how is it? How do you build your ecosystem around it? And who else is going to champion that for you?

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Because you're never going to have enough sellers? You know, that really excites me because I've been doing some research and working on this theory, which is essentially that product marketing is going to become increasingly important because in a time of AI, especially in software, when you can create a product near instantaneously in direct response to consumer demand, also 1 to 1 products, well, all of a sudden you have even more need for really strong product marketing.

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Go to market strategy or even product could collapse into go to market. I think is another fascinating way to think about it. Like even in the physical goods world, I talk sometimes about H&M and Zara really being this fast fashion disruptors. The fashion industry used to have two launches the fall show, the spring Show. They would make products twice a year.

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H&M, Zara come in and they can do products in three weeks from beginning to end. And even that has been further disrupted. Now you have this company coming out of

China, Cian. Cian is now turning around product in three days. So if we are getting this kind of collapse of timeline, even on physical goods, I've been thinking a lot around what that means for software and nonphysical goods.

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Yeah. Yeah. No, you're absolutely right. I mean, it it becomes like mass customization of one, but then you're going to have the same problem that we all deal with every day, which is you. No information. The ability to get any information we want is just there. But it's then overwhelming. Right. And and so, you know,

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if you could get anything you want, then how do you find the right thing that you want, right.

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And that, you know, like it's going to work and it's real and, you know, and it's not just paid reviews or whatever. Right. And and so yeah, knowing like who, who is my ideal customer, who how am I going to go after them. You know, how do I get them to know this. How do I get them to trust us?

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How do I create that brand, what the brand stands for, it's all become very, very important.

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You know, a lot of your career has been based in the US, but I noticed that you said on the board of a Beijing based company back in 2018, China Soft International. Curious what you noticed. Just cultural differences. You know, China is so headline news right now for the amount of innovation that's happening there.

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Everything that's happening with artificial intelligence. What did you learn from that experience? Rules are very different. You know. You know, we have a lot of kind of SEC regulations and things like that around what can companies do? What do you have to report? What's the role of the board. All of that. Not so true in in China. And so it was learning to navigate a whole different system and what was important to them

and what was what did it mean to be compliant and not compliant and transparent or not transparent?

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And who were you? What were you trying to satisfy? It was a whole different league, really. So it was a great, great learning experience. It was also even more male dominated then then other experiences that I had. And so, you know, really working through the credibility and why you should listen to what I have to say kind of thing.

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But but yeah, I mean, it was, you know, China is a fascinating market. I mean, actually a lot of the Asian markets are very they work very differently. They, they build for export. They don't build for their own.

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Consumption. Right. And and so like being aware of what's going on all around the world means makes a lot of difference. So yeah, I mean it's it's fascinating. And even though I, I was based in the US by, for my career, I would say 75% of my jobs were global global roles, global roles where I had to travel and be in other parts of the world.

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You know, just you saying that. I mean, when I think back to 2018, you were really the face of Microsoft. I knew that Sasha Nadal, of course, was the CEO, but, you know, it was your face on the channel. Magazines cover magazines. And you really were just, you know, sometimes I say Microsoft famous. I ran into Seth at build this week.

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He's the guy who's always doing the big live demos these days on stage. I'm like, oh my gosh, it's Seth, you know? And back then it was like, Gavriella, you were. I mean, yeah, you just really were Microsoft when it came to the partner community and putting that trillion dollar number on it. I mean, we're not talking about a small a small amount of revenue, but you touched on something in in speaking about that board experience.

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I know you're really passionate about allyship. So tell me what is we'll just start from there. Maybe what is allyship. How do you define that. So allyship is working with intention to recognize the power, the influence, the privilege that you may have in any setting and looking for those within that same setting who may not have that same power, influence or privilege, and working with intention to confer the power you have to them so that that you give them more of a voice and more of a place to be and to share their authentic contributions.

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That's what allyship is. There's been so many times in my career where someone has walked in the room and said, you know, listen to her. She has something really important to say. And just the entire energy of the conversation shifts. And I tried to remember that, you know, in my position now as leading a company to make that space for, for other people.

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Is there an example in, in your career where you had a really strong moment of allyship? There have been many. There have been many. And that's one of the reasons why I'm so passionate about this is, you know, I reflected on how was I able most of my career was the only woman in the room, and how was I able to still succeed.

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And it was because of the many allies that I've had. And and so then I thought, well, how do I make that something that more people can step into and, and work do with intention? Because I think you can

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you can unconsciously be an ally for a lot of people, and people tend to do it because they see someone and they say, oh, you remind me of me when I was that age.

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Or, you know, I would have liked someone to do this for me, but they don't necessarily do that or go out of their way to do that for people who are not like them. And generally it is the people who are not like them that need that the most.

01:05:30:01 - 01:05:31:22

And

01:05:31:26 - 01:05:41:00

the best example was when I made this move from licensing into product management.

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So I was moving away from working with customers and sellers and moving to work with engineers and, and the product. And, and everyone told me that that was a very hard transition. And I was probably going to fail because I had to be against me, I know. Right? And so I reached out to someone who was a well-respected engineer and I said, hey, look, I'm making this change.

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And I think one of the hardest things about it is going to be getting the engineers to listen to what I have to say. And so I want to make sure that I say that in a way that resonates with them. So would you be my mentor? Would you help me? I will bring you kind of what I'm thinking, what I think we should do and like, help me kind of frame that in a way that would make sense to an engineer to want to go do it.

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And and he was like, sure. Which is one of the things I find is that when you're clear about what it is you're looking for and you ask somebody, they will 90% of the time say yes. And so, you know, I met with them, you know, maybe every couple of weeks, every month, something like that. And I would talk about it and, and he would coach me and, and then one day we were in the at the start of a meeting and, you know, and I'd had a really hard time, no matter what I tried to do, these engineers didn't really listen to me.

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And and he just did exactly what you said. He said he was like, you know, I was just talking to Gavriella about some of her ideas here, and I think they were really good. So you should listen to them. And the whole thing changed. Like suddenly everyone was listening to what I had to say. And not just in that meeting, but like in follow up meetings.

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And we started to have real dialog, and then we started building trust, and it became a two way relationship. And and that was huge. And and he, you know, I pointed it out to him years later as I started to do this work, that he was a great ally. And here's why. But like to him, that was he didn't even know even know.

01:07:52:29 - 01:08:15:07

It was just natural in the moment. Yeah. I mean, I have a team of predominantly marketers and creatives, but with the way that my business is heading increasingly into AI services, it's like, okay, now we need to build up an engineering function and an engineering team. And, you know, in all vulnerability, I suppose. I mean, I find it really intimidating.

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I've never managed engineers before. And I also went to a friend for advice. And, you know, he just same thing. He just kind of he didn't think it was he was very supportive and very helpful, but didn't really understand where I was coming from necessarily. Like it just wasn't a big deal. So we'll see how it goes. But it's funny how some of these things don't necessarily change.

01:08:41:10 - 01:09:07:02

They do change over time, and I think it's gotten better, but it has gotten it has gotten better. There's there's definitely a lot more awareness of why it's important to be more inclusive, which is great, but then there's still not enough training for people on how to be more inclusive and how to recognize when to be that, and how to help people have the courage to do that.

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Right. Because it takes a lot of courage. If you're

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if you yourself don't know, like you're in a room of people that you've worked with for five years, but you're not thinking, I have a lot of influence here because I'm in a room of people that I worked with for five years. That's not what you're thinking. You're thinking, oh, I have something I need to talk about, blah, blah, blah, blah blah.

01:09:29:12 - 01:09:48:14

Right. But then you need to recognize, oh my gosh, that gives me a lot of privilege to speak up. And there's other people who have just started and they don't have the same thing. And so I need to draw them into this conversation. Like, you know, we that's what being inclusive means.

01:09:48:17 - 01:09:58:19

Yeah. And it's just so important, you know, the stats as a female founder entrepreneur myself, looking at these these venture capital, I have them written down.

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Is it like two, 2.2. 3% of venture capital goes to female founders, 83% of venture capital goes to founding teams that are exclusively male. And yet female founded companies usually generate 2 to 2 and a half times better returns than all male founded teams. And I was thinking about this like, why is that? And why? If I turn the looking glass inside, you know, why did I never try to fundraise?

01:10:28:28 - 01:10:49:01

I've never even considered going out to the market and trying to raise money. I'm curious, why do you think more women aren't founding companies aren't going for venture capital? What is that? So, you know, a lot of it is that.

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A lot of venture capital is networked dollars. Right. And so it's who you know, who knows other people, who introduces you, who builds that trust and credibility, that somebody should make an investment in you. And really going back to this core principle of allyship. Like, if I'm thinking about it, nobody ever walked me in a room and said, ash runs an amazing business.

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You guys should look at getting involved. Exactly, exactly. And so, you know, there's still a lot more male networking than female networking and male to female networking, right. And and so and I also think that, you know, there's still more like men who have an idea think that people should just fund them, whereas. Right. Whereas women who have an idea think they have to go like prove it out and make it happen.

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And then they could ask for funding. Right. And so, you know, it's it's kind of we still have work to do to overcome a lot of those social norms. And then there's still a group of men. I mean, like a lot of the investors are kind of older white men and they like have a tendency to see themselves in a younger white man who comes to them and asks for money rather than someone who looks like their daughter or something.

01:12:29:07 - 01:13:01:12

Right? Yeah, it's just different. I mean, I definitely have female friends, very successful entrepreneurs, but in technology, I still see quite a gap in the top ranks. And I'm sure there are many stats as well to back this up. Christine Bond Garden, the Whitney are really great around that research, but just anecdotally, I mean, it's not that often that I walk into the room with other founders or sea level executives and see strong, strong as an even close to half.

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You know, sometimes I was at an entrepreneurs event I flew down to Arizona for was Canadian entrepreneurs, and I was taking a big risk. I didn't really know anybody. Out of 100 people. There were two women and there were an additional five women. But I later found out that that was the event management company who was running the event.

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So I actually ended up hanging out more with the staff of the event than any of the participants. It's it's and I would love to be in an equivalent female oriented entrepreneurs group. But please, if anybody has recommendations, send them. Send them my way. But in terms of an organization happening at the caliber of EO, I just haven't found that.

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Yeah. No, I mean, and a lot of it is that like in technology itself, they're still very much this bro culture and, and a lot of like if you're going to start a company, you have to have good engineering, you have to have good developers. And there's actually not enough women who are in that category to go out and start the businesses, to have the credibility to go talk.

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And a lot of people, when they're making investment in a company, they're not making an investment because you're a good seller or a good marketer. They're making an investment because you have good product and they trust the people who are building it.

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Yeah. I think, you know everyone who's who's listening in. You know, if you've thought about starting a business I really encourage you down that down that path.

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Increasingly with technology where it is an AI, it's becoming easier. The barriers to entry are lowering there and always happy to have that that conversation. But Gavriella, is there anything that you want to share with the audience that we didn't make time for today? Well, so I will say that if you're interested in learning more about allyship, I have a whole training series.

01:15:04:01 - 01:15:30:19

It's completely free and powerful. It's fantastic. It's available on my website, which is very easy. It's just WW Gabrielle. Com and you know, you can take it at your own pace and it just helps, hopefully helps you to know how to take that action and how to find that courage in those moments that matter. And just to be inclusive here.

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The audience for this is not just women, this is for anybody. Yes, this is absolutely for anybody. Absolutely. To be an ally. Yes. Fantastic. Gavriella, thank you so much. I want to wrap up with a couple. We always end the show in a couple rapid fire questions. So what is a tagline for this season of your life? Oh.

01:15:58:28 - 01:16:06:00

Embrace change, I love it. There's a lot of change happening in the world right now. It's tough to keep up.

01:16:06:03 - 01:16:21:01

What's one value you've held on to, even when it's come at a high personal cost? Be true to yourself and you know, be aligned with your own integrity.

01:16:21:04 - 01:16:28:23

And one word close. What is your view on AI?

01:16:28:25 - 01:16:47:24

I'm excited about it. Excited! I like it! Well, Gavriella, it's been an absolute joy, pleasure and honor having you on the show. Thank you for spending this time with me and for everybody else. This is Transcending Tech. Thank you so much for joining the episode today. Please do like, share join the community. Thank you so much.