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Profile Carmen Allison

Williams-Sonoma's Carmen Allison said that in learning, like in retail, customers' needs and experiences must be weighed to deliver truly effective products.

BY BRAVETTA HASSELL

Shortly before her start at Williams-Sonoma Inc., Carmen Allison was given a challenge that would transform how she approached her work.

Asked to develop a leadership program for more than a dozen of the specialty retailer's high potential leaders, she first started down a more typical route, but there was a catch. The CEO suggested letting the leaders take the reins in deciding what development experience they wanted. Essentially, ask the learners what they need.

"I really had to step back and say it's not about me and my experience and my wisdom about what programs work and don't work, what experiences work or don't work," said Allison, vice president of global talent development at the home products retailer.

So she sat in the passenger's seat, and the leaders — vice presidents at the company with their own experiences — told her what they were missing, what they struggled with, and what areas of the company they wanted to become better acquainted with. They became the designers of the nine-month program that Allison would deliver.

This was a tremendous shift in perspective for her, one where she had to check her ego and her own expertise and "that's what a lot of instructors do and programs do," she said. "I know what you need and I'm going to give it you, and here's the binder' vs. I put all 18 of them in a room for a day and a half, teach them how to collaborate and then help them decide how to shape and design their year."

Each year since, cohorts have come up with different ideas she hadn't thought of, Allison said. When one group went to the supply chain in Memphis, Tennessee, another wanted to go to Rejuvenation in Portland, Oregon, to see the company's manufacturing and learn how a new brand is developed. Allison said she felt sad for the second group because the Memphis trip was so enriching, but the Portland experience was just what they wanted.

Allison said she used her experience and wisdom to ask good questions. "But at the end of the day, they're the decision-makers, not me."

A Customer-Focused Experience

With Williams-Sonoma for four years, Allison drives a learning strategy that mirrors the company's internal mission to put people first. She talks about her associates like they're customers, so she measures herself and her team's success based on the customers' satisfaction.

"If a customer's not satisfied, we pay a lot of attention to that," Allison said. "If no one's coming to the class, clearly the customer doesn't want the product, and we need to shift."

Delivering these type of customer-focused experiences includes sitting down with leaders one-on-one, said Amanda Haas, director of culinary for Williams-Sonoma brand. She said Allison's work around delegation and negotiation has changed the way she leads her team.



Williams-Sonoma Inc.'s Carmen Allison sits outside the Stanford Shopping Center's Pottery Barn in Palo Alto, California.

More often, however, these learning and development experiences are delivered across the organization, 29,000 employees worldwide. At any point, there's a variety of webinars, blended learning and classroom experiences taking place across Williams-Sonoma's 11 different functions and eight brands, including Williams-Sonoma, Pottery Barn and West Elm. Williams-Sonoma operates more than 600 retail locations in the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico and the United Kingdom, and has franchises in the Middle East, Mexico and the Philippines.

The company's associates access training through Allison's team as well as the company's corporate education curriculum, WSI University. Allison meets with her 12 direct reports regularly to discuss employee feedback. "We talk collectively, and modify what we're teaching, how we're teaching, when we're teaching or what we're

teaching," Allison said.

Prior to arriving at Williams-Sonoma, Allison worked for Gap Inc. where she said she really grew as a learning professional. She drove training strategy for the company's Old Navy brand, and then led executive development before having to lay off everyone from the new department she had built, including herself.

Allison said the downtime gave her time to think about the direction she wanted to go in next. What fed her? What did she get excited about? Food? She'd spent 13 years running a business unit with PepsiCo Inc. and Yum Brands Inc. Or retail? "The pace and excitement within retail and having a product to sell and the people that support that work in the business is very exciting to me," she said.

Time to Think

Allison grew up in Leavenworth, Kansas, an army town. She attended Northern Arizona University and earned a business degree with an emphasis in hotel and restaurant management. The economy was good then, she said, and after graduation, there were plenty of jobs to choose from as well as the military, which was looking for people who could lead teams that ran restaurants.

In her mid-20s, Allison traveled around the world serving in the Army's Morale, Welfare and Recreation facilities. She spent time at West Point in New York; Fort Benning, Georgia; and Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas. She was also once stationed in South Korea where she led 170 national employees across three restaurants, a golf course, bowling alley, liquor package store and two taverns in subposts.

She said she learned so much living in a foreign country that she'd recommend the military to anyone as a place to develop as a leader, become more flexible, self-aware and culturally sensitive. Allison said she still draws on those experiences for her work in learning as well as diversity and inclusion, which she also leads.

Working across the two functions makes sense. "We touch so many people. We have the opportunity to ensure we're walking the talk in how we engage and interact with everyone," Allison said.

When she arrived at Williams-Sonoma, Allison said one of the first things she observed was how much learning focused on associates in San Francisco and New York. Learning was very classroom-centric, which made getting people together for training difficult. However, with time and help from Skillsoft, the company now offers training courses based on competencies through the online portal WSI University, which any employee can access.

Allison's team has transitioned several classroom courses to e-learning, and that's just the beginning. "It's at that point of taking a first step and saying we need to make what we have accessible to other people," she said.



Carmen Allison spent a year learning about and making pottery. "It gives me such appreciation for what it takes to make some of our products, to envision and then have craftsmen all over the world make those products," she said.

That need to share and collaborate and a continuous drive to improve has helped develop webinars, which are especially successful with the store management population, she said.

Currently, the learning team is evaluating how best to deliver a 16-module interaction-driven course outside the classroom. Putting People First is a program for district managers that is all about coaching, feedback and inspiring and engaging. Working with Harvard's Mentor Manager, Williams-Sonoma is piloting a blended learning program across Asia and Europe with a group of 10 directors. The leaders will meet together once in person as well as use Harvard's leadership development program to complete homework and participate in a virtual webinar.

Allison said developing critical thinking leadership skills virtually is a topic that comes up frequently among her peers at other companies. "People have tried different things," she said. "I don't know if anyone has really cracked the code on that — we'll still have to fly everyone in, which gets very expensive."

But therein lies part of learning's appeal to her: The act of working toward a solution, the assessing, improving, strengthening and scaling results.

Learning's Continued Draw

One of the things that excited Allison about leading learning and development for Williams-Sonoma was the fact that half the company's business came from online and the other from its physical stores. The dynamic was new for her, challenging what it would mean to develop, train and support the respective employee groups.

"You can walk into a brick-and-mortar store, and you can talk to the associate and see and hear very easily what skills they have, what they know, what they don't know, how they're taking care of the customer," Allison said. "But within the online area, the e-commerce, you can see some of the products but it's much more hidden around who owns the different pieces."

This makes assessing online skills gaps to figure out how to train to fill them difficult, she said. But some progress is being made. Allison and the heads of marketing and human resources have partnered to identify ways that allow teams to connect with each other and learn together. This has included the development of more collaborative interactive learning sessions and more interactive meetings as well as the use of social media.

Allison said she's seen some success in this new environment; "now we're determining whether there are certain skills that need to be taught or skills that need to be bought."



Carmen Allison, outside of the Stanford Shopping Center's Williams-Sonoma store, said she is fortunate to have fostered close partnerships with a handful of external experts.

When it comes to driving e-commerce performance, executive-level consultant Brian Zotti said it's critical for companies like Williams-Sonoma that have significant activity in-store and online to invite feedback from their customers. Their voices in the dialogues about customer experiences inform business strategy and add a critical perspective to further enlighten employee strengths and opportunities. "It's important that they first ask, 'Who are we reaching and how are we reaching them,'" he said, "but then bring those customers into the conversation."

Allison said the team hasn't found the perfect way to assess and address the necessary skills for e-commerce employees, but they're getting there.

Creating a truly inclusive global learning environment is important. Allison is digging into what makes mentorships effective, and whether there's some hybrid solution she can create for the company's call centers.

There are five "care centers" across the U.S., and soon some of the associates will begin working remotely.

What will that mean for those employees' training and development? Allison said it's an interesting challenge. Rare is the moment a leader can sit back, relaxed and confident they've got it all figured out, especially in learning. A program may be great, but it has a shelf life, she explained. This constantly raises the bar, and keeps her and her team going.

"Things making a great impact in the company today may not make an impact tomorrow," she said. "I have to be ready to constantly assess and reassess to make sure we're meeting the needs of the business."

Bravetta Hassell is a Chief Learning Officer associate editor. To comment, email editor@CLOmedia.com.

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