

Gina Schaefer

[Intro]

[00:00:00] **Christi Powell:** Hey everyone. Welcome to the Women Talk Construction podcast, where we discuss women in construction and other non-typical careers. My name's Christi Powell, and I'm with my co-host Angela Gardner. Thanks for joining us today.

[00:00:24] **Angela Gardner:** I wanna introduce to you Gina Schaeffer. She is the founder and COO of 13 hardware stores in Washington, dc. She is also the author of Recovery Hardware. Gina serves on the corporate board of C C A Global and the nonprofit board of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, and we are so excited to have her own this podcast.

[00:00:54] In fact, I think we actually. Promoted her book online the other day on Instagram, and we hope to do that more and get her similar people reading it. So and that's kind of the first question where we're gonna start. And I wanted to share this too. She mentioned Christi and I earlier before we got on that she's doing book clubs around this book, and I can't write to hear more about that because I think this book is gonna bring a, mm-hmm.

[00:01:17] It's gonna make a huge impact to our industry and how we really think about hiring. And building our teams out. So Gina, introduce yourself and then tell us a little bit about this awesome book that you've authored.

[00:01:30] **Gina Schaefer:** Hi, thank you. Hi, Christi. I'm so excited to talk to you ladies today and to be part of your audience and your, and your community.

[00:01:36] I published Recovery Hardware in September of last year, so still all feels very new and fresh to me. I started in the hardware industry in 2003. So it's been 20 years. This is our 20th anniversary of our very first location, and we are members of the Ace Hardware Cooperative. So there's about 300 teammates now.

[00:01:57] I'm in the process of purchasing. We've built stores from scratch and purchased some, and we're purchasing one that should close. I'm hoping next week. Oh, yay. Which will, yeah, it's very exciting. Which should bring us to about 300 teammates and we always get a little bit bigger in the spring anyway, so we're really excited about that.

[00:02:14] And I think we'll talk a little bit later, but I'm in the process of a succession with this company, and so that's also very exciting for me. Oh yeah.

[00:02:22] **Christi Powell:** Yeah. Nice. So, Not the whole audience has heard about your book or heard about the innovative way that you found to help our

communities and help the economy and also help your business at the same time.

[00:02:36] I would love for you to share with our audience all over the world your insightful, caring way of finding. Employees within Ace and why you wrote a book surrounding it. Will you, will you please tell us the story of how that book got started?

[00:02:52] **Gina Schaefer:** Sure. It's, you know, it's one of my favorite things to talk about because my team is so special to me.

[00:02:57] And we opened and I say we, I, I opened this business in 2003 and my husband joined me very shortly after, so he's my, my true business partner. And now with the esop, I have a lot of business partners, but we opened in 2003 in a neighborhood that had been destroyed by the riot. Martin Luther King was assassinated and the neighborhood sort of fell apart.

[00:03:16] People moved out, the businesses closed, and, and I moved back when people started coming here because it was a, an inexpensive place to buy, a place to live or to just rent a place to live. And I opened the business and started hiring folks, sort of unbeknownst to me, actually from a local recovery clinic.

[00:03:32] Shane walked into my life. He was, I think six or seven weeks clean from substance, active substance abuse, and asked me for a job, and I won't give you all of the details, but he eventually worked with me. We're friends to this day. He's clean till the to this day. Owns his own business now, and he started telling friends to come see that lady at the hardware star music, air quotes.

[00:03:53] If somebody can't see me, I became that lady, which is so funny to think about when I was young and inexperienced and before I knew it, we had a whole host of folks working here who were in some sort of active recovery program and. Folks who are returning from jail or prison and, and we created just a really stable place to work.

[00:04:12] I, I truly believe people should be able to bring their whole person to work. There shouldn't be a stigma if you are in recovery from something or if you've had something in your past that, that perhaps it's time to move on from. And, you know, society has not always been kind to those folks. Mm-hmm.

[00:04:26] And so we've created a place, hopefully that culture will grow long after I'm gone. Where people can come to work and be happy. And so, 14 years in, one of my teammates said to me one day, you know, the community has nicknamed US recovery hardware. Which was very, ... I'm sure I cried that day.

[00:04:44] **Christi Powell:** Yes. I would've, I'm gonna cry now.

Gina Schaefer: Yeah. And I said, you know what, that's a great name for a book. People had said for years, Hey, will you write a book? And I thought, I'm not sure if you know, running hardware stores is an interesting enough reason to write a book. It's no offense to our fantastic industry.

[00:04:58] Right? But that became sort of a, a touchpoint and something to really talk about. And so I started documenting the stories of a couple of my teammates who I think really taught me leadership lessons. People think teachers need to be at a university or in part of a formal program, and. What I was realizing is that I was learning over the years how to become a leader from people who no one would expect to be teachers.

[00:05:20] And so I, I have documented what I've learned from folks who are non-traditional teachers.

[00:05:26] **Christi Powell:** Hmm. I love it.

[AD]

[00:05:36] **Angela Gardner:** Do you know someone in the upstate. Of South Carolina's suffering from substance use disorder favor. Upstate is a recovery community resource center that provides a compassionate and innovative response to the suffering caused by substance use favor. Upstate helps rebuild lives, build families, and strengthen communities. Recovery from substance use disorder is a reality. For more information, visit www.favorupstate.org.

[00:06:24] **Christi Powell:** So, I want you to share also with the audience, and I'm sorry I don't have more questions, but I know you well enough to know a few things about you and and what really stood out to me is what your store looked like on the inside. And one of the things that you explained, And one of your speaking engagements was what your store looked like on the inside, and I was like, I wanna go see that store.

[00:06:50] So tell us a little bit about how, you know, the typical ACE hardware. Looks like a hardware store, everything looks the same, but it sounded like your hardware stores were set up a little differently. Will you tell us a little bit about why and, and what you did?

[00:07:05] **Gina Schaefer:** Yeah, sure. So another probably happy accident is the very first location that I leased was 20 feet wide, a hundred feet deep.

[00:07:11] It had three levels with no elevator, no loading dock, and no parking. It also had no storage. But, you know, I've decided storage is overrated at this point in my life. And so I think, you know, we, we consider ourselves city kids and you, we've adapted in neighborhoods that don't have the big traditional 8,000 square foot rectangle.

[00:07:31] Right. And what that means is we. Adapt to buildings that are a hundred feet long with no elevator and lots of stairs and, and weird spaces. And so we opened that location and it kind of became the inspiration for all of the locations that followed from that. We have one store that's completely underground.

[00:07:47] We have two other stores that are, that are two levels. We have a store that's in an old post office building. So no building has been, Too challenging for us as we've expanded. And then inside the, the one, and I don't know if this is the one that you're getting at, but we moved that original location to a new spot and it, we moved it into two old row houses essentially that were combined, that are three levels.

[00:08:10] My office is on the third floor, but the second floor in the back of that, of where my office is, is our garden center. And I like to think of it as our secret garden. I love that. The revenue from that space is, is world class. But it's tiny and the plants have to come up the elevator and there's a deck out back that we call our back 40 and it's probably 300 square feet.

[00:08:31] **Christi Powell:** I love it. I just love it. Just that environment alone makes me wanna be there, you know? Are there pictures? Secret garden? I could

[00:08:39] **Gina Schaefer:** definitely send you some photos.

[00:08:41] **Angela Gardner:** Yeah. Oh, that would be amazing. Yes. Send us photos.

[00:08:44] **Gina Schaefer:** I will. I'll do that.

[00:08:45] **Christi Powell:** So, one of the things that our men are asking that our listeners is why and how can I communicate better with the women on my team or women that we're hiring?

[00:08:57] And I just wondered if you could share a little bit about, you know, your experience with that and how maybe women can. Promote themselves to be able to progress into a position like what you've got, Gina, you know, obviously you're an entrepreneur that's a little bit different, but you, you've been on board seats, you're sitting in committees.

[00:09:19] You understand the difference between male and female communication. And we know that if we work together, it's a beautiful thing to the client. Yeah. It's a beautiful thing in our lives if we learn how to communicate better. So I was just wondering if you had any like secret. Passionate sauces that you use, maybe not with the men in your industry, maybe it's just with your husband, you know, just things that you've learned over the years that just help

you communicate better with men.

[00:09:46] For our women, but then for our men. You know, what kind of ideas could you give them to be able to communicate better with their teams?

[00:09:53] **Gina Schaefer:** Sure. I, I, I think it's a fantastic question. So I thought of three answers. The first one is sort of personal versus professional. We all know that communicating with everybody is a challenge.

[00:10:01] Absolutely. And it's probably one of the biggest challenges in business. And no matter how hard we work at it. We could always be better. So I think one, we have to recognize that, and the fact that we do actually all communicate differently, even between generations, right? Agree if you're, if managing a Gen Z versus a senior of either gender and then certainly when you throw in DC's a very multicultural city.

[00:10:21] And so we have cultural differences and so we, we handle all of that on a daily basis. So the two professional things, I think from a, just a, a suggestion standpoint, over the years, my management. Team has gone through DISC training and a Hogan assessment. Both very detailed personality assessments that have helped us figure out how we each communicate, not only how we wanna be communicated to, but how we need to communicate to others on our team.

[00:10:47] And this crosses gender, but it's been, my husband joked, actually, the first time we did it, he said, oh, I now understand every argument I've had to. My wife. Hey, it's true, it's true. But theoretically now we have the tools to know that if we're going to talk to this person or that person we know how they want to be approached and communicated with.

[00:11:06] And it behooves us to follow those instructions. Mm-hmm. Because it just makes that communication so much better. The second thing is I actually have a friend who wrote a book called 'Managing Up Nice' and she teaches us the variety of leaders we are probably gonna encounter in our lives.

[00:11:22] Mm-hmm. And it brought, she, she, she's named them all, some of the names are kind of funny, but she goes everywhere from the harmonizer who thinks that everything can and should be great all the time, all the way up through like complete narcissists. As an employee, it's important for us to figure out how to manage our bosses.

[00:11:37] Now it's easy for me to say because I don't have a loss. Right. Except for my husband on Sundays. But it's it's true. Yeah, it is. And so if you are in a, a, a growing leadership position, or if you want to be in a leadership position, particularly if there's man male leaders ahead of you and you know that the communication is, there's friction or you wanna grow if there's some sort of

impediment, learning how to manage your boss is just as important.

[00:12:00] In getting ahead as anything else you can do. Right. And so I think I, I, I'm gonna say we'd probably do all of this right in my business 40% of the time. Yes. But we know we need to do it right. So just knowing those tools are out there, I think is half the battle.

[00:12:14] **Christi Powell:** Yeah, absolutely. What a great tool. I definitely wrote that book down. I was like, anybody that wants to to grow should learn that. I think that you hit on a lot of things that I just wanna reiterate when you are in a leadership role or even not in a leadership role, so I'm gonna go back to being in sales for several you lumber yards. Over the course of my 27 year career in the field, each one of the people that I dealt with whether it be internally or externally, had a different way that they liked to do things.

[00:12:47] And the best part, I think of my career, one of my gifts was learning that first instead of creating a situation that might be uncomfortable if I ask all the questions and I asked, how do you need this? How do you want this? Where, how do you like to communicate? Yeah. I don't wanna, I don't wanna to Nextel-you, you know, back in the day, if that's not appropriate for you.

[00:13:14] If that's not good for you, would you prefer me email? Would you rather me send a letter in the mail back then? Right. There were so many ways of communication, but I think that's probably the biggest key is just us asking questions and learning what they need. Not only from the people who work for you, but also the people that you work for, right?

[00:13:34] Because their personalities are different. My boss now, I know that he would prefer less filler words, right? So typically when I send an email that I really need for him to read it is bullet points, and it's to the point, and there's no extra words, but it's, it's caring enough about that person. To do what, you know, will help them the most.

[00:13:58] That makes them want to be a better communicator with us as well, right? Yes. And it really does start with us. One of our, one of our podcast guests earlier today mentioned the same thing. It starts with us. Mm-hmm. If we care enough. Ask the questions. Yeah. Right. If you don't care enough, then I don't know why you're even listening to this podcast, but if you care enough, ask the questions.

[00:14:23] Yeah. So I love that. Thank you. Yeah. Thank you for sharing your perspective. I think it's so important, and I really, really want to come to your store that has. The plants and I wanna go the garden, all three. And I'll be garden in dc. I'll be in DC let's see, end of this month. Oh, okay. I don't know if you're gonna be busy or not, but I will text you my day.

[00:14:43] Send me the dates. Yes. Let's do we have to do something, see each other for sure. I'd love store tours.

[00:14:49] **Angela Gardner:** Well, I wanted to, you know, I wanted to say that throughout my career too, and Christie and I've talked about this, it, it, it's so important to find out and ask those questions. But for me too, it was really important and, and we've talked about this, is to actively listen.

[00:15:02] That's a point that really doesn't, you know, you can sit there and ask the question, but if you're not listening and, and hearing them and then repeating what you heard, That's important too. So, and I know it sounds like you're doing an awesome job at it. Which we love to hear sometimes.

[00:15:17] **Gina Schaefer:** Sometimes never. Nothing's ever a one and done. Right, I tell this story about watching the firefighters at O'Hare Airport they would set a plane on fire and then put it out. Well, you knew every single time they were gonna be successful. They knew every single time they were gonna be successful, but they also knew they had to practice.

[00:15:35] Right. And I think a lot of times we think we read a book or we do an assessment, or we have one great conversation and all of a sudden we're experts. Hmm. And that lesson, that lesson for me, watching those firefighters. Made me realize that it wasn't about putting it out, it was about practicing. And so I try to tell myself that if I, you know, I put the Healthy Ego and I do something, I'm like, oh, I've, you know, I've accomplished that. I check the box. No, probably not.

[AD]

[00:16:09] **Angela Gardner:** Neves Construction, a general contractor and woman owned business, specializes in assisting construction companies with finding and creating sh. Short and long-term solutions for employee placement in areas of professional and skilled trades needs Construction further provides construction services to owners and developers, including owners rep, interim project management, and supervision site inspections, and lending progress reporting. For more information, visit [neves construction.com](http://nevesconstruction.com). That's N E V E S construction.com.

[00:16:55] **Angela Gardner:** Well, earlier today we, Kristen and I usually tape at least four back to back. And it, it is incredibly interesting that, and you kind of briefly mentioned it, that this one topic came up and, and both Christine and I understand this topic very much. I, coming from a family business, understand it especially in construction, is that, we aren't as intentional about our succession planning processes and I, I am. I love that. I work for a company now that actually does that as well, just like you are, and we wanted for you to share a little bit more about what that process looks for y'all, because. It will certainly help

our listeners to maybe get some insight into that.

[00:17:39] **Gina Schaefer:** Sure. So one thing that I read recently that is both alarming and exciting is there's something like 2.9 million businesses that are planning on succeeding in the next five. Oh, is that the number? 2.9? It's 2.9 million. It's about 39 million jobs. I think it's a quarter of the gross gdp. And I can send you that.

[00:17:56] Those yeah, the source that I got this from, but it's a huge, huge number. Yes. Which means there's a lot of opportunity for businesses like ours to buy businesses that don't have a succession plan. Mm-hmm. If you're multi-generational and there are no family members left who want the business, or if you haven't, you know, Risen someone up within your organization who's ready to take it over.

[00:18:16] I feel beholden to our communities. And if I closed a store because I didn't have a succession plan, plan, that community would lose a vital resource. Right. And so so that aside, this is an exciting moment in time for, for opportunity women who want to buy or start any business in our industry Yeah.

[00:18:31] Should be able to find one. Mm-hmm. Somewhere in this country that is ready and ripe for sale. And then there's lots of ways to go about that. We decided about three years ago, two and a half years ago, that we were going to sell our business to our employees through an esop, an employee stock ownership program.

[00:18:46] Which I think, I mean, I think it's pretty common in the lumber, and it is the hardware industry. It is maybe more than, yeah, maybe more than most places. So I think there's about 6,000 ESOPs in the country. They still call us a unicorn because that's not very many. No, it's not. No. And the second we decided, Second, we announced the esop.

[00:19:05] About 165 of my teammates became owners, which we're super proud of, and people started coming out of the woodwork. Yay, asking me, how does it work? What does it mean? What did it cost? How long did it take? Why did you do this? And so I have my first sort of mini speaking opportunity coming up to talk about ESOPs to some folks in the, the financial world.

[00:19:25] But I do think that given all of this succession that's happening or needs to happen, Talking about these opportunities or these ways to succeed are, are gonna be really important.

[00:19:35] **Christi Powell:** Yes. Oh yeah. I, I love it. And I do feel like I, I don't know about you, Angela, but I do feel like this conversation is happening more than it was.

[00:19:43] Yes, yes. You know, who wants to work their entire life and build an empire and then walk away from it with nothing. Yeah. And how many people have you seen do that? It happens. It happens all the time. Yeah. I mean, that would hurt my feelings. Yes. Yes. To build something I spent my whole life and passion and work and, and build it, and then not be able to pass it off to my kids or pass it off to, you know, the, the next generation of someone who wants to also hire people and make the community better as well.

[00:20:16] So yes, I love it. I love it. Thank you for sharing that. Of course. Yes. Thank you. And I love you sharing the P part where if you are a woman and you want to own a business, There are so many opportunities out there. There's another one. Right.

[00:20:30] **Angela Gardner:** I like that. Yes, yes. I wouldn't have thought of that either, but that is wonderful.

[00:20:34] **Christi Powell:** Yeah, yeah. Love that. So, all right, so one of the other questions that I wanted to ask you, which I hope will help you in your business, is now that you are doing succession planning and you are going. You're finding an exit plan. I know that you have an excellent future still. Thank you. In the industry, you are not ready to stop doing good things.

[00:20:58] Oh, yeah. So tell us how, what, what is the plan for the future? Like what, what would you like to see happen? I know you're doing some speaking engagements, obviously some book clubs. We wanna have you on a panel sometime in next year. With women Confidence Builders because we think that you would be a huge asset to the women that listen and thank you, and men that join our, that event.

[00:21:21] But yeah, tell us what you wanna do, what you, what you have planned for the future, and how can we help you make that happen? Because that's what we have the podcast for. They're

[00:21:30] **Gina Schaefer:** so nice. I love this spreading everybody's joy and, and, and intelligence and so many fun things. Well, I didn't say this earlier, but I started.

[00:21:38] The transition process by hiring a business coach and really thoughtfully planning out what a two year process would look like, because you have to search for the person who's gonna take over if you need that person, et cetera, and so on. And I would say to anybody who is starting to think about this process, that it's never too early.

[00:21:53] Right? You know, people started asking me when I was like 32, what my exit strategy was. And I was like, my gosh, I just, I'm just getting started. What do you mean how am I gonna get out? But you know, you, you get a little wiser

as you get grayer. You realize that you can't do this stuff in two days. And so, but my first thing is, you know, plan that and I'm happy to talk to anybody about how we planned it because I think that NICE is really good knowledge to share.

[00:22:16] Thank you. I'm hoping to transition out in a minute, in the next couple of months and then really continue to spread the message of. Just thoughtful hiring and culture building and all of the great things that, particularly the kind of brick-and-mortar businesses that we're in, the connections that we make with our communities that are.

[00:22:36] Built on our teammates, you know, we're not doing it by ourselves. Mm-hmm. It takes a team to do everything. All of our brick-and-mortar businesses do. The people who are delivering the, the supplies and selling the supplies and all of those things. So I hope to be able to still continue to make an impact in our industry and others.

[00:22:52] For really thoughtful businesses that want to build a strong culture, that want to understand how to hire differently and why that's important to their business or can be. So yeah, so I'm kind of babbling, but I'm hoping to, it's, we love it more speaking. I really love telling stories of my teammates cause they're, they're amazing and they've helped me grow this business and so I'd like to be able to help other business owners do the same thing.

[00:23:16] **Christi Powell:** Well, I'm sure they would love that help. So tell us how to get ahold of you. Hmm. So if we have folks listening that wanna do business with Ace Hardware in Washington, obviously we wanna know how to do that. There's probably gonna be a lot of women in Washington that are gonna wanna look at your secret garden space.

[00:23:34] So just tell us how to get ahold of you, like if they need to connect with you or how to find your stores or, or whatever, or your book. Anyone out there in your book? We obviously will have a link to the book in every place that we need to have the book so that folks can have it.

[00:23:52] I love it. Amazing book, easy read, and really practical ways that we can do better in our communities by helping those that need more help.

[00:24:02] **Gina Schaefer:** Thank you. Well, so I, I have the url recoveryhardware.com and so people can find more about. The story and the book and purchasing it through [recovery hardware.com](http://recoveryhardware.com).

[00:24:12] I really encourage people to, to order it through their local bookstore if they have one in their community. I like the sales to go there. I'm on LinkedIn at Gina Schaffer and I'm on Instagram at Recovery Hardware, and so I've chronicled on Instagram, the, the book events that I'm having. I try to keep the calendar up to date there so people see.

[00:24:29] I link the podcast interviews I've had there. And welcome any kind of connection in any of those ways with the community. So bring it on. That's great.

[00:24:39] **Christi Powell:** I feel very humbled that I got to endorse that book. Very, very humbled.

[00:24:43] **Gina Schaefer:** Well, thank you so much. It's wonderful that people are reading it. That's the, that's special to me, so you're very welcome.

[00:24:49] **Christi Powell:** Yes, yes. Thank you for being on today. We appreciate you.

[00:24:54] **Gina Schaefer:** Yes. Thank you so much. You're welcome. Thank you.

[Outro]

[00:24:58] **Christi Powell:** Well, that's all for this episode. Thank you so much for listening to the Women Talk Construction podcast with your host, Christie Powell and Angela Gardner. See you next time.