

WTC 'A Communication Culture' with Kristin Larson

[00:00:00] **Angela Gardner:** Welcome everyone. This is Women Talk Construction, and I'm Angela Gardner, and I'm here with my co host, Christi Powell. Hey, Christi. Hey, Angela. So, Christi, I want some feedback from you, because my day yesterday, I think I had a thousand... Things go wrong. I mean, every single item was thrown at me. How do you deal with days like that?

[00:00:30] **Christi Powell:** Um, lots of prayers and friends like you.

[00:00:35] **Angela Gardner:** Well, and I did call you, right?

[00:00:37] **Christi Powell:** Yes, you did. And I've had two months of those kinds of days, so totally understand. But for our podcast listeners, and especially you young folks that are listening, it's going to happen. And the best way to deal with it is just let it roll off your shoulders and just keep moving.

And, you know, My thing is prayer. It's not for everybody, but it also helps that I'm surrounded by great women like Kristen. That's going to be on with us today and Angela and Rachel. I have a great group of women who are there to support me no matter what's going on in my life, whether it's a win or a challenge.

And I think that's the most important thing that we can do, right? That's exactly right.

[00:01:17] **Angela Gardner:** Yeah. A win or a challenge. Yes. And our, and our next guest is probably, she's making lots of wins. Yes. So I want to get, we're going to go ahead and get her introduced here. And she is Kristen Larson and she is the CEO of Southwest Industrial Electric.

She has been there 16 years and making some wonderful strides, which I can't wait to hear more about. Um, and one of the things I really want to point out here because you can go on our website and read her bio, which is awesome, but her goal and interest is to always help people do well. And that's what we need to hear more in our industry, right, Christi?

Yeah. I mean, so, and she's, she's doing just that. And so I can't wait to hear more about that, but I'll let you go on ahead, Christi. I'll turn it over to you to ask the first question. Okay?

[00:02:04] **Christi Powell:** Okay. So one of the things that I thought was very curious about your background, Kristen, is that. You were in a nonprofit literacy center, and how did that experience working there prepare you for your role as the CEO of Southwest Industrial Electric?

[00:02:22] **Kristin Larson:** Well, thanks for having me on, guys. I really appreciate it. And that's a great question. I, as you said, I love helping others and I found that, um, when I was at the center, I was helping, uh, people who didn't know how to read in Hollywood, California, uh, learn how to read of all ages, as well as getting very study skills to be able to learn and get a job and, and I ended up having, you know, the nonprofit was sort of losing funding, unfortunately, things were being cut back and I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do next, but whatever it was, I knew I wanted to help people.

And it was interesting because my uncle was an electrical contractor and my aunt was the office manager. It was a small business and they needed someone part time to step in and perform this director of technical services function, which was basically just helping with anything the electricians needed to do, do their role.

And I decided to do that. It wasn't necessarily something I was planning to do for very long. I thought I'll do this until I figure out what my next move is. And then I just really loved the business. I loved the fact that we got to help companies, um, do whatever they were trying to do. So if it's a manufacturing company and they're, they're making a product, we could come in, set up their machine line and be able to help them produce this great product.

And I loved dealing with customers. I loved all of that. And so it. It aligned with the helping others, and then I ended up being there for a very long time. I'm

[00:04:01] **Christi Powell:** glad. I'm so glad that you did. And thank you for being on today. We really appreciate you for, you know, taking the time out of your day. And I know that you're an event right now, a green energy event that is in California.

So tell us a little bit about that real quick, if you don't mind.

[00:04:17] **Kristin Larson:** Yeah, it's actually in Vegas. So I'm, I'm in a hotel room right now. Yeah. Yeah. Um, and this is RE it's a very large green energy event. And we're here showcasing what we do with electric vehicle charging and battery energy storage installations.

So we had a booth at the expo and we're able to share what we do with many other people in this industry who are working on, you know, making the world a better place with, with green energy. Nice. Nice. Yeah,

[00:04:50] **Christi Powell:** it's great. I love it. It sounds like something that would be really interesting for 84 Lumber Company as well as we, you know, starting to transition into this green energy and just learning more about it.

It sounds like that's a great place to be. Oh,

[00:05:03] **Kristin Larson:** yeah. Yeah. It is, there's, there's a lot of resources at the, at the convention,

[00:05:08] **Angela Gardner:** I'm going to change it up a little bit because we, at the intro, we talked a little bit about, you know. And how you really care about your people and you want to see them do well, can you share some examples of how your focus on wellbeing of your employees has positively impacted your company's performance and culture?

Because we also want other companies to see that, you know, if you do this, you are going to thrive. Your people are going to thrive and you're going to create a culture. Of attraction and retaining your people. So can you share with us how you've done that?

[00:05:46] **Kristin Larson:** Yeah, I found that one of the key things is communication and open communication, the ability to communicate with your staff and the staff, be able to communicate with leaders.

And so we set up multiple ways for that to occur. And that involves, you know, we have regular reviews. Uh, at the company where we've structured it in a way to really allow people to bring up whatever they need to, we talk about goals, their short term goals or long term goals, how that aligns with the company and the leadership, how we can make that happen so that people really have a purpose at the company and they can also bring up issues if there's things that they're, you know, they're asked specific questions to be able to sort of drum anything up, honestly, that they might have going on that they want to fix.

And then it's about solutions.

Hi, don't

[00:06:39] **Christi Powell:** forget

[00:06:40] **Kristin Larson:** women talk.

[00:06:40] **Christi Powell:** Construction. com has a forum of community where we all get together and talk about what's going on in our lives. We have workforce development opportunities, scholarships available. If you have them, please post them there. Um, we also

[00:06:55] **Kristin Larson:** have jobs,

[00:06:55] **Christi Powell:** whether you need a job or whether you want a job field, that's the place to be.

And our network of amazing people are there to help make connections.

[00:07:05] **Kristin Larson:** I

[00:07:11] **Angela Gardner:** think what you just said is really important, like meaning, how you go about having those people feel comfortable bringing issues. Like how do you go about helping them feel comfortable doing that? Because that's, a lot of times the problem is they don't feel comfortable sharing that.

[00:07:27] **Kristin Larson:** Yeah, and I don't know that you can get everyone to always.

You know, I don't, everyone's different and there are people that are a little, they keep it a little closer, but I think, you know, we make it very clear and the way we even operate with people is it, we just, I mean, honestly, we just tell them, like, we really want to know, this is an opportunity to know.

What is going on with you? We want to know how it's going. If you're running into anything. And we actually, I mean, we have very detailed questions. Like, are you, you know, are you having any trouble with anyone that you're working with? Are you having any trouble with customers? Are you like, we sort of from experience of various issues that have come up, maybe someone, you know, does leave and, and usually we'll try to do like an exit interview if they, if they are leaving and it's their choice and find out, you know, how did you like it?

Is there anything you. Thank you. You didn't like and just through years of experience, finding out, you know, oh, well, they didn't get along with this person. They've been having a problem for a while and didn't know how to handle it things like that. We just sort of developed questions from those points.

And so it's pretty specific. And sometimes people will sort of start out. Not really saying much. And then you start asking the questions. Is there anything else? And oftentimes a lot of people do bring things up and, and we, again, our intention is not to get anyone in trouble and not, you know, it's, it's to figure out what is the solution and how do we fix it?

And then we, with our actions show that that's what we're doing because we, we do then work with people to figure out the solution. And it's not. Them getting in trouble or someone else getting in trouble, it is always geared towards that and they see that and then it makes them more comfortable. Next time to bring something up.

You're

[00:09:07] **Christi Powell:** just I feel like it's so important to learn everyone's perspectives. If you're going to have a large team, whether it be a small team or a large team, and it sounds like that's exactly what you're doing. You're trying to figure out, you know, get to know your employees. Find out where their perspectives are, where their, where their heads at, if they're happy, if they're not happy.

And I love that. Not everybody's thinking about their people like that. And that's, that's awesome. So your culture, there's probably pretty good. Your retainage is probably pretty good as well. And I would say there's a lot of people on social media who would say that it's a great place to work. So. We all want that as companies, right?

No matter if we're a small or a big company. So I want to shift gears a little bit. How does that affect your customer satisfaction? What ways do you prioritize customer satisfaction and ensure your team delivers the best possible electrical services and the culture that you have with your employees is always going to make a happier customer.

We know that. But how, how does that help your ROI as far as, and how do you ensure that your team delivers on the expectations that Southwest Electric has?

[00:10:20] **Kristin Larson:** Yeah, like you said, it definitely just goes hand in hand. If you have people that are happy, like their job, want to be doing it, have a purpose, then that's going to show through.

Like shine through to the customer and to the experience in the end. And just like I've told you, I like helping others. That's something our company, you

know, we talk about a lot is helping people. And that honestly, for you to be a part of the team and, and to align with what we're doing here, we care and we want to help.

And that is like number one, really. And that's with other staff, as well as customers, vendors, whoever we deal with. And, you know, we have a lot of quality, um, assurances that we've put in, in terms of different functions people hold, where, you know, we, we really look and don't listen, or, I mean, in some cases listen, but, you know, someone can say, this is what happened, this is what happened, we actually, you know, have ways that we monitor the customer experience, we have follow up calls on, on all our customers, on, you know, How did you like your service and anything we can improve?

And so we're constantly getting feedback from our customers to make sure that from the phone call to the installation, they're happy with everything. And then we have people that are always in the field, looking at the jobs, working with the foreman, ensuring that everything is good quality. It's going to work well.

Looks great. We're really about the aesthetic of like the electrical installation. Wow. And that we have a happy customer that gets what they need. So those are the main points with that.

[00:11:57] **Christi Powell:** And do you see an, a return on investment in having that kind of culture?

[00:12:02] **Kristin Larson:** Definitely. I mean, we have customers that we've had for the entire time we've been in business, you know, large customers that we service.

Who continued to go to us because they know that we're going to do a good job, that we're going to do it right, that whoever they deal with is going to help them. We sort of go above and beyond to figure out a solution. How do we get that tech out on Saturday night and Sunday night because of some shutdown, you know, and, and they see that and they continue to come back.

So we really retain customers as well. And, and that's a big return on investment.

[00:12:35] **Christi Powell:** Absolutely. Thank you for sharing that. I think it's important to, for especially small entrepreneurs that are just getting started to hear, you know, what kind of culture that you have that's made you so successful. And definitely those are.

Are two aspects that are making you

[00:12:50] **Kristin Larson:** successful. Definitely. Agreed.

[00:12:53] **Angela Gardner:** How large is your team?

[00:12:55] **Kristin Larson:** Uh, we have about, I think at this point, 40 techs in the field. Okay. And then about 20 to 25 administrative staff. Okay.

[00:13:05] **Christi Powell:** Yeah. So let's ask you the question. Angela asked me, what do you do on days that everything is a firefight?

[00:13:13] **Kristin Larson:** Oh, man. I mean, it's tough. Those, your guys answers are great. I usually, yes, I think having people in your life that you can talk to and who support you is so important. I know in terms of dealing with it, I usually try to just. Keep all the as much of my thoughts away as possible. Try to just concentrate on what I can do about it.

What's the biggest thing on my mind and is there some solution I can think of to, you know, take that next step forward and solving it and making it better. That's usually what I do. That's a great. I

[00:13:48] **Christi Powell:** feel like we're problem solvers as leaders. I think that's just kind of, that's our number one position.

Like you put your resume together and that should be the first thing on the resume, right? You wake up to them and you go to bed with them. It's like, there's no giving and sometimes they're just easy and easier than others. I do have another question for you. How are you, do you have any groups where you're letting your women meet together and, uh, and maybe minorities meet together?

Do you have, what do they, what do they call that now? E R G or is that employee resource group? Yeah. I think that's a ERG or do you, are you doing any of that yet? Or have you created a culture that it's not needed, which I've heard that a few times lately, and I love that. Well, it's

[00:14:34] **Kristin Larson:** funny because. We have a lot of women.

I mean, mostly in our office, we do have women in the field, but not as many as I would like to have. So I hope to continue to find women that want to be electricians. I think it's a great field to get into for women. But, you know, we

We tend to collaborate a lot and honestly, we'll end up having meetings a lot where it's just all women in that room meeting about something and we don't have anything specific to that, but we tend to, I just feel like all the women were all there and we talk together and again, we can support each other.

So, you know, it, it, it hasn't, I guess, become necessary at this size. You know, we have, we have also just a lot of things we do as a group to get together and we're about to have a, a kickball game on Monday.

[00:15:23] **Christi Powell:** Oh, nice. So you're building confidence with your team just by getting to know each other better,

[00:15:29] **Kristin Larson:** right?

Bond. Yeah, we do a lot of bonding. We have a, uh, someone just started a book club. Um, cool.

[00:15:37] **Christi Powell:** That's ERG. It's you're just doing it casually, which to me feels less. Stressful.

[00:15:44] **Angela Gardner:** Yeah.

[00:15:44] **Kristin Larson:** Is that a claim? Yeah. Someone wanted to start a book club. I said, sure, do it. I love it. I'll be part of the book club. Invite everyone, you know.

Yeah. I think most, mostly women signed up, but there are some guys that signed up for the book club. So, great.

[00:15:59] **Christi Powell:** That's awesome. I feel success is, especially in the role that I have. I handle the women owned business for 84 lumber company, and we have 7, 500 employees. I feel like the best thing success to me is that we don't have to have conversations around.

Collaborating collectively that it's just going to start happening or happening organically and we'll start seeing more and more people want to come to work for us because the culture is an open culture of authenticity and vulnerability and, you know, teaching and mentoring and being a mentee. I, I just feel like that culture is going to make the changes that we're asking for.

[00:16:39] **Kristin Larson:** Yes. Totally agreed. It's so, it's so important to have that type of culture, I think. I do too.

[00:16:46] **Christi Powell:** Yeah. It

[00:16:46] **Angela Gardner:** really is. You know, I want to ask how many females do you have as technicians are electricians on your team? Because it's very small.

[00:16:55] **Kristin Larson:** Yeah, right now. It's honestly 1 we did have 1

[00:17:00] **Angela Gardner:** juice. I mean,

[00:17:02] **Kristin Larson:** but it's I wish I could say it was more

[00:17:04] **Angela Gardner:** well, it's really hard to attract the females.

Um, yeah, our industry. And that's I wanted to ask you that. I mean, electrical welding. Although I think there are more females going into welding, but even roofing, right. There's just there, you don't see many females though.

[00:17:23] **Kristin Larson:** Yeah, it's one of those things where, you know, it, it tends to be obviously what you're interested in.

And each person is interested in what they're interested in. I mean, I back in the day would go in the field and help on some projects when, you know, it would just be very simple stuff just to. Cause there was some project that needed to get done. I was just like helping with like putting some wire terminations on or something for someone.

And, uh, it's fun. I mean, it really is fun, but it's just what, you know, it can, it's hard work. You're on your feet all day. Um, And what we're doing, we're, you know, bending conduit and going up on lifts. Or pulling

[00:18:00] **Angela Gardner:** wire, right? Pulling wire, yeah. Pulling wire. Yeah, we pull a lot of wires.

[00:18:03] **Kristin Larson:** Yeah. So it is, it is hard work and, and uh, strenuous and so you have to be, you have to want to do that, which I think there are definitely women that do and I would love to get more women into, that want to do that kind of thing involved in field work.

SunFast

[00:18:25] **Christi Powell:** has 40 plus years in business, specializing in fastener and assembly hardware distribution. SunFast tailors the customer experience to supply products or services needed to improve the way the customers do business. With extensive application and product knowledge, Sofast consultative support services can improve how your products are designed in the r and d stage, and their service can ensure the most efficient output of finished goods.

Sofast is your manufacturing and fabrication partner and they're looking forward to working with you. Thank you, SFAT, for all of your support.

[00:19:05] **Angela Gardner:** I've seen a lot more traveling once, but Okay, go ahead.

[00:19:08] **Christi Powell:** You asked your question. I was just gonna ask about training. So, To the women that are listening that may be interested in electrical position, not only with Southwest Electrical, but maybe they just want to learn more. What do you do as a company to train?

If a woman comes in and says, I want to learn and I'd like to be in the field. Is there, do you have something set up already or do you train obviously with your background of working for a tutoring center? Yeah. You obviously have some excellent skills at training. So I'd love to hear what, what is working for you?

[00:19:42] **Kristin Larson:** Yeah. So we definitely do have a training program. That was something early on that I found difficult was. Being able to hire someone, get them into a role successfully, have them have wins, have them be able to do the, do the job and, and not struggle too much because it is hard learning something new. And whether you're going out in the field, or whether you're an administrative staff, even people that are taking phone calls, it's.

You know, people are saying words and they don't know what they mean. And, um, I mean, I remember that for myself, taking a phone call and someone just talking, I would hit record because I was like, I do not know what they're saying, just going to say, okay. And then once I'm done, I'll read, listen, and I'll figure out what.

What they wanted, but I ended up finding that I just needed to set up a training program. So someone could go in and we literally just have like packets that are checklists with very with different standard operating procedures and policies and people move through them and they'll have practice things and essays and and all of that.

And you basically can go through with someone who sort of supervises the training. And we have, I just. Ended up developing a bunch of these things to just move them from knowing very little to nothing through to being able to do their position. And we do that with everyone. Yeah, we do everyone. Even if we hire an electrician that came with a background for years of electrical, we will still have them do our in house training program.

They can test out a certain things, but they still learn our standard operating procedures because we have We have very specific things to what we do at our company. And I found that, you know, electricians, they'll go to, to the schools for their training that they need to do. And then this will just be supplemental, but ours is very practical.

And so they'll sometimes come out of it saying they've learned more in this. You know, month, then they have been, you know, years of their schooling, depending. So

[00:21:39] **Christi Powell:** I think sometimes we put too much structure into it and then it's like, they don't really, they still walk away and not know exactly what to do in a, in a practical or an on job site situation.

So I love that you're thinking all of that through. And obviously processes and systems are, are key to you being able to train somebody that didn't know anything. Thank you. But for all those that are listening, uh, Southwest Industrial Electric is hiring and they want more women in the field. So if you're interested, obviously reach out to them.

Um, they want to see more women in, in the field and probably men too. I think we're all struggling with workforce right now. So we want to see everybody, every gender non binary and, and female and male applying for roles in the trade. So thank you for sharing that. As we wrap up, um, I would love for you to tell our audience how they get ahold of you, if they want to just know more about Southwest Industrial or, you know, how to reach out to you if they want to possibly fill out an employment application and yeah, just anything that you can share with our audience.

That's going to help them know who you are and where you are and how to

[00:22:49] **Kristin Larson:** get ahold of you. Great. Yes. Um, so you can go to out at Southwest electric on Instagram. That's a great place to actually, it has, like, all the, all the ways to reach us are linked in and everything. And then you

can also see our work and see some of the staff that we highlight on our Instagram.

And if you want to reach me, I'll just. Throw out my email address. It's Kristen at southwestelectric. com. You can email me. No problem. And I'll forward you to the, to the right person.

[00:23:19] **Christi Powell:** If you don't mind, Kristen, make sure you sign up for the breaking barriers forum. com. I think we had that in our email that we sent you.

A lot of folks like to ask you questions there. Um, you know, it might be four or five months before they might listen to your podcast, but four or five months before they're like, Oh, who was that? And I really did want to reach out to them. So if you put your, just put your name and introduction out there, um, that way, if there's women looking for jobs in electrical, that they can reach out

[00:23:48] **Kristin Larson:** to you.

Great. I'll definitely do that. I would love that. Awesome. Thank

[00:23:52] **Christi Powell:** you so much for joining us today. And um, one quick tip, if you were to give the audience one quick tip on how to go from being in the field to being the CEO, what would that be?

[00:24:05] **Kristin Larson:** Oh, that is a good question. Again, we talked about. Problem solving.

I think if you're always looking out for how you can improve things just in in whatever you're doing, and you're always, you know, looking at that next thing and you take on more and you take on more and what else can you solve if you get really good at what you're doing now? And then how else can you help the company?

How else can you solve problems that you're seeing around you and becoming involved in that way? I think that's always a good way to show that you that you want to grow, that you want to take on more. Yeah. And sometimes it can just naturally happen, uh, by doing that.

[00:24:40] **Christi Powell:** Yeah. What great advice. Thank you again, for being on today and sharing your time and resources with us.

We really appreciate you.

[00:24:47] **Kristin Larson:** Yeah. Thank you for having me. This is so fun.

Well, that's all for

[00:24:58] **Christi Powell:** this episode. Thank you so much for listening to the Women Talk Construction Podcast with your hosts, Christy Powell and Angela Gardner. See you next time.