

WTC 'Attracting & Retaining Women' with Jason Blair

[00:00:00] **Christi Powell:** Welcome podcast friends to Women Talk Construction. I'm here today with Angela Gardner. She's my co host business development director at Hill Electric. She's a mom, a leader, a businesswoman. And if you're new, welcome.

If you love our content, please share it on your favorite listening platform. Thank you for supporting our workforce. And let's get started and introduce a special guest. Special guests that I got to meet at LBM strategies, Jason Blair from towel building centers is with us today. And I was so impressed with him when he spoke at LBM strategies in 2023.

It was cool because I, I spoke first. And when he came behind me, just the things that he said really drove home the conversation that I was having as a woman in our industry. And we appreciate that so much. If we don't have men standing beside us. We can't make this industry a viable option for all women.

And I'm just really excited to have Jason on and the way he leads, there's no magic sauce. It was not intentional. He is providing a safe environment in our industry for women and men, actually, in a very natural way that anybody can just pick it up and work with it. So we really are excited about having you on today, Jason.

Thank you for being here. Um, I'm going to get started right away. Because we've got a lot of content we want to cover with you. Um, you really are a leader in our industry on how to just make women feel comfortable in the workplace, in this industry, which isn't always easy. So what is a normal, I'm going to start out with what is a normal workday look like for you?

[00:01:53] **Jason Blair:** Yeah, you bet. Well, thank you, Christi, Angela, for having me on. I'm excited to be here. And, uh, yeah, so normal workday for me, you know, this is my first role as a CEO and our first time being a CEO. And. One of the, you know, the things I didn't see coming was my day is always a mile wide and an inch deep.

So the number of topics that I get to move through every day is so varied. And that's different as you come up in this industry and you're very focused on one

segment, my role previous to this, I was a vice president of merchandising and marketing. So my day was consumed by those two topics mostly. And.

And today my world is, is very broad. So, you know, my normal day, I don't know that there is a normal day. There's not a, there's not a pattern to my world. I do my best to not let my calendar control my life, but, you know, I could be, you know, here, here at our office in Washington, I could be out visiting stores.

I could be out. At an industry event, right? It's, uh, it's, it's just, uh, just whatever is the necessary piece, uh, throughout the, throughout the week that that needs to happen. I wish there was a little bit of repetitive nature to it, but there's not a whole lot. I mean, we have some standard meetings throughout the week and keep in places.

Is to make sure that we're communicating on, on a normal and a regular basis, but I wish I had a more elaborate story there, but I don't. First

[00:03:12] **Christi Powell:** of all, of being a CEO. Oh yeah. Yeah. I feel like everything's important when you're a CEO. Is that correct? Like, yeah, there's no aspect that you get to like, you're away from.

[00:03:25] **Jason Blair:** Yeah. And, and, and everything is, is equitably important or it needs to be equitably important while you're working on that topic, right? You have to balance your time and. Make sure you're focused on the right things, but, you know, you've got, whether it's finance or it's, you know, HR or it's operations or it's or whatever it might be, you've got to make sure that when you're, when you're in a CEO seat, when you're dealing with that topic that you're all in on that topic.

Um, and then it's a bit of, for me, it's been a bit of a learned trait to learn how to turn it off and then turn it back on for the next. And then I've learned a lot about some topics. I hadn't been had a lot of exposure to previously in my career. Yeah, really nice for me.

[00:04:04] **Christi Powell:** Speaking of topics, Angela's got a great question for you, because we're going to dive in and find out how you have so many women on your team.

Yes.

[00:04:12] **Angela Gardner:** Yes. Well, it's great to talk to you, Jason, finally, because I heard so much about you from Christy when she came back from that

conference. So, um, I get to meet you in person. Well, virtually. So I'll get us started and I mean, this is such an impactful question that you're going to get ready to answer.

What proactive steps did you take to achieve a workforce where. 70%, let me say that again, 70 percent of your staff are women in a traditionally male populated industry. How did, how did this diverse team contribute to your successes or to the successes of the overall organization?

[00:04:52] **Jason Blair:** Yeah. So, and for clarity for the listeners out there, five of my seven direct reports are, are women and 25 percent of our overall workforce of about 600 inside of TAL are women, which is.

From what I understand is way over indexed for the norm in this, in this industry, you know, part of it was inherited, you know, the, the CEO before me had done a, done a nice job of building a diverse staff and then we pulled that forward, you know, the, that, like you mentioned earlier, like to me, there wasn't this outward intent that I want some number of women on my team.

I really just don't think that way. I, I, what I wanted was. The best people for the current situation of this company on my team. And so that's really the focus has been that now along with that is creating an environment where everyone is welcome at the table. It doesn't like that part. It isn't about whether you're, you're male or female.

It's about Can you do the job? Are you the right person for the role? But I also do like the diversity that it brings to the table. To me as a leader, managing each person is very different. One of the things that I've learned over time is to really be mindful about when you're about to, particularly like a one on one situation, when you're going to manage or lead somebody, being really thoughtful about how you lead that individual person.

And then, then in addition to that, leading women and men is different. It's just, it's just a different experience that happens. And, and so for me, I think it's made me a better, and what I would term as softer leader, not, and I don't mean that like in a, like, I mean that in a very positive, and

[00:06:27] **Christi Powell:** that's not a bad thing, right?

[00:06:28] **Jason Blair:** I, I'm not, yeah. I'm a, I, I, I've, as I've grown and I've, I've become less of a type A brute. 'cause I grew up in this industry. I worked all, all kinds of positions and, and you know. In being software's leader, I think,

or being more passionate as a leader, compassionate, maybe as a leader is the right, right word to use.

There has created this safe space for anyone to be successful regardless of who they are.

[00:06:55] **Christi Powell:** Yeah, that's really important. Well, it is a lot of times we have a black and white, right? There's no gray when it comes to how we're going to communicate and that's not true, right? There are a lot of women out there like myself who doesn't like shopping doesn't like doing girly things Like I just don't right?

So I'm more comfortable with the male crowd when it comes to, like, having fun, because we talk about things. I like football and hunting and, you know, that kind of thing. And so that is a great area. And it feels weird when you feel like you have to be in the white or the black. Um, and I'm just using that as an analogy.

[00:07:35] **Jason Blair:** No, I think it's a great analogy. Like we have fun with some of those things. Like, like, so when, when you're in an environment where, where there's a female in the room who doesn't like sports, but likes to hang out with the guys, we'll jokingly in our group, we call it, we'll call it sports ball. Like, because then it's non definitive.

We could be talking about baseball or golf or football or whatever. We have fun with the, with the nomenclature around it and making it a safe environment. So it's not like the two guys go off in the corner and talk about the basketball game. That's nice. We're going to talk about all of it. And then we have some fun with the.

Like, if we're going to go do something as a group or, you know, you go out, you're out with a vendor. Right. And, and the vendor says, Hey, I'd like to take you golf. And some of our joke is, but some of us would like to go shop at Neiman Marcus instead. So we have like fun with the, we would do that, but you know, we have fun with the, with the environment are very open about.

That we don't all like to do the same things. And in this industry, sometimes you get trapped in this, you know, we got to go play golf or we got to go hunting or we got to go to a sporting event. There's lots of other things out there that we have to think about. And we're not, you know, say that we're great at that yet, but we talk about it, which I think is important.

And then you create this

[00:08:47] **Christi Powell:** environment where somebody

[00:08:49] **Jason Blair:** doesn't feel left out of the, Oh, well, I don't play golf. So therefore I'm not going to do, and that works both ways, whether you're male or female, right? Like this whole idea of let's be inclusive in a fun way with everyone that's on the team.

[00:09:04] **Christi Powell:** So it's funny because Angela's teaching me like the, the brand of clothing,

[00:09:08] **Jason Blair:** I

[00:09:10] **Christi Powell:** have no clue, right?

Say I'm

[00:09:12] **Angela Gardner:** the

[00:09:12] **Christi Powell:** opposite

[00:09:12] **Angela Gardner:** of

[00:09:12] **Christi Powell:** her. We are the opposite, right? She did not grow up loving football, hunting and fishing and riding dirt bikes and racing mud jeeps. She grew up, um, you know, in a totally different atmosphere. But the point I was trying to make here is. The fact that your, your leadership style is the way it is, you know, those of us that are white, black or gray are all going to feel comfortable and you're going to find men out there, right?

That don't love hunting and fishing. My daughter's best friend, it's like pulling teeth to get him to go to a sports event or He's just an artistic kind of guy, but he's still a guy,

right?

[00:09:52] **Christi Powell:** But he doesn't communicate the same as the men that I worked with for 20 years of my life. So I think it's really cool because that what you are doing is creating a culture that everyone feels included.

And that, That's really the point we're trying to make, right? That's the conversation we're having. Exactly. Groundbreak

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Okay, so one of the things that you talked about on the stage mm-Hmm, , that I want you to share just a little bit more about is, um, you've got a special program that you really like. Uh, I think it's called the OZ Principle. I do. And you implemented that for accountability. But found that that particular program might have been part of your success story with the attraction of female talent.

Is that correct?

[00:11:19] **Jason Blair:** Yeah. Yeah. So I've, I've been fortunate enough to, I, in a previous career, I went through the Oz principle training and the Oz principle, the point of the book is creating a culture of accountability. And here, it's how we have a great list of core values. And 1 of them happens to be, I am accountable.

So there's this great tie in with all of this. And, and I, I was able to see the success and previous opportunities of leveraging the book, the principle, and, you know, when I, when I got here, sat back and spent some time learning and understanding the organization, and then. Pick some pieces and parts out of the principle that felt like they would be a good fit to help us move forward as a team.

And we've taken those and continue to adjust and modify those over time for the crowd that we're training on. But 1 of the pieces of that book is called the results pyramid and the idea behind the results pyramid is, is that in our lives, our experiences at the bottom of the of the pyramid. They drive our beliefs, our beliefs, drive our actions and our actions drive our results.

And if you think about the 2nd slice, which is the belief portion is, I would contend and I would believe that. I know I don't just believe I know that I can't

change your beliefs. I can't tell you. Hey, you should like chocolate ice cream when you don't like vanilla, or you should like a particular sports team just because you move to the town.

Right? That's. Like, that's not, uh, and in this industry, I can't make you believe that, uh, I can't tell you, you need to believe that we're inclusive, but I can provide an experience where you are, where I can begin to, to, to form beliefs. I can create that environment where you need to reinforce that over and over again.

And beyond the culture of accountability piece, what I've worked on utilizing that for my team is making sure that we provided the right experience for everyone to have a voice. So instead, everyone is welcome at the table earlier. But, but just because they're welcome at the table, doesn't mean that they necessarily have a voice or they feel like they have a voice.

They do have a voice in my mind. They have a voice,

[00:13:17] **Christi Powell:** right?

[00:13:18] **Jason Blair:** How do you create an environment where everyone does have a voice? And I'll, I'll be honest, like they'll, that. Like, that is components of having worked with some really great women in my past. You know, there's some key folks along the way that really helped me be successful that I would say believed in me before I believed in myself.

And so that I've been able to learn from and flip that bit. And, you know, really lean into believing in, you know, in women in this industry, in this case, believing and I, that wouldn't necessarily just have to be in that case,

[00:13:50] **Christi Powell:** a

[00:13:51] **Jason Blair:** man in the room that needed to be need to believe in. I would do that, but in this case, there's been opportunity here.

And creating an environment where, uh, where when you get in that boardroom and you have that, you know, weekly team meeting, it's really easy sometimes for that male, female role to really start to stand out. Right. I, you know, as a, as a man in this industry, part of how I got where I got to was by winning like lots of little races along the way, being super aggressive.

And. Being that guy that, you know, I think back in my career, I've thought about what would I tell my younger self? Or one of the things I would tell my younger self is. You don't always have to be the hardest working guy. And I don't mean that from a, like, you don't have to be the person that works a hundred hours a week.

[00:14:38] **Christi Powell:** Yeah. You don't have to be an overachiever every day.

[00:14:43] **Jason Blair:** Right. And so there's that, and then you get into these, these leadership roles and it's sometimes hard for that personality in those rooms or those personalities will just stand out and

then,

[00:14:53] **Jason Blair:** uh, people tend to overtop. Overtalking has been a struggle for my whole career, but like, getting, creating an environment and then being as a leader, being very intentional and planned and saying the people in the room that are less likely to be the 1st 1 to raise their hand to speak.

Why don't I call on them first? Why don't I continue to do that and do that and do that? So then think about it. I'm creating an experience where their voice is like the first, not the last voice, not the ad on it, setting the tone for the discussion, they start to understand and believe, like I believe in them, that their, their original thoughts, their original unbiased opinion of whatever it is we're going to talk

[00:15:36] **Christi Powell:** about

[00:15:36] **Jason Blair:** is really important and really sets the tone.

And sometimes it's really important to hear human resources perspective on an operational challenge.

Absolutely.

[00:15:45] **Jason Blair:** Very different perspective of it, right? So it's great. It's not always right. It's not always wrong, but it's really interesting here and vice versa on that. So that's that environment that we've worked hard to create here.

[00:15:56] **Christi Powell:** And that creates a successful environment and a successful organization too. I feel like that we need to mention that women can

do the same for women. So, you know, when I hired Alex, you know, she had some challenges and she was super quiet and she didn't believe in herself. And I was able to do the same thing for her.

So it doesn't matter if you're a male or female. You still need to notice those folks that are in the room. They're there for a reason. You've brought him to the table because. You believe in them, let them know you believe in them. Let them have the opportunity to talk, even if it's not always right. And you don't always implement that project or that idea.

It just gives them self confidence. And I've, I think I've created a monster. She's more self confident than I am. And it's really cool to see, um, just, just how a little bit of encouragement and a lot of paying attention will do for a team.

[00:16:53] **Jason Blair:** Yeah, for sure. And there's a balancing act there where you can, uh, you have to, sometimes you have to pull back on folks, right?

Especially sometimes women in this industry. I've had to fight so hard to get to where they're at that. They, they can tend to be overly aggressive in particular situations and coaching through that and saying, Hey, Like, you don't have to be the loudest voice in the room. You don't have to be incredibly demanding of whatever you're asking for.

Like, don't start there. Don't start at the top. Let's start at a different point. And you'll find that instead of, because that can tend to, what I found in this issue is, Really strong women, like really bold women tend to shut down the rest of the audience, just like, so, you know, in, in some of that's cultural and respect and like, Oh, I'm not going to say mentality, but, but working through and softening that.

And then like, I love the environment we've created here is we, part of one of the other parts of the Oz principle is this creating an environment where you do feedback in a way that's non threatening.

So

[00:17:56] **Jason Blair:** it really creates this platform where You can then that meeting happens and something doesn't go well.

You can then have a conversation afterwards where you give some appreciative feedback and some constructive feedback in a way that's non threatening. And then that person that, you know, over indexed 1 way or the other. Here's that

learns that, you know, starts to work hard on creating that. It's created an environment where I think about my executive team.

And then the rest of my direct reports, we have this really fun environment here where there's not nice, not any backstabbing. There's not somebody trying to climb over. Somebody push somebody out. It's a, it's a fun world that, uh, I believe that open environment and allowing everybody, those voices at the table has really helped.

[00:18:39] **Christi Powell:** That is awesome. We are running out of time. So we are going to have you back on because there are some other things that we're going to talk about. Right. That, um, I feel like are really important to our audience, but for today, thank you so much for like sharing where you're at and what you're doing and how you're making a viable path for women in our industry.

But tell the audience how to get a hold of you if they want to meet you, if they want to know more about you, if they want to just follow your leadership style, how do they get a hold of you? How do they follow you? How do they just connect with you?

[00:19:12] **Jason Blair:** Yeah, they can find me on LinkedIn. I'm easily searchable.

Jason Blair, CEO at TAL. UHT Building Centers, uh, you could send me an email, uh, jason dot blair att building centers.com. Happy to, happy to have conversation. I love talking about this topic, and I really appreciate you guys having me on today. This is fun.

[00:19:31] **Christi Powell:** Thank you, Jason. We can't wait to have you back on shortly.

Thank you so much.

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.