

FINANCIAL POST

Suite Women



The female executive team of Walmart Canada (left to right): Emma Fox, SVP of marketing; Shelley Broader, CEO; Gale Blank, CIO; and Trudy Fahie, CEO of Walmart Canada Bank. Photography By Tyler Anderson

Suzanne Wintrob

National Post · Dec. 6, 2011

Her maternal grandmother in the early 1920s was among the first class of women admitted to the New York State Bar. Her mother, an engineering graduate with four young children, obtained her pilot's licence in the early 1960s and routinely flew her husband to fishing trips in Northern Ontario. When Blank's mother passed away in her

early 30s, Blank's father -- who at the age of 86 still practises law in Montreal -- married a woman with an entrepreneurial background who taught her stepdaughter to always look on the bright side of life.

Not surprisingly, Blank gained a tremendous amount of strength and determination from these three women, who impressed on her the need to always believe in herself and follow her dreams. "There are no roadblocks," insists Blank, who became vice-president and chief information officer at Walmart Canada almost three years ago after a 30-year technology career, one that saw her turn heads at Loblaw Companies, Eaton's, Indigo and the Department of Canadian Heritage. "There are only different plans to get to where I want to go. I don't have to acknowledge it's a roadblock for it to be roadblock. I don't come from that place."

Blank's sentiments resonate with her colleagues on Walmart Canada's management team -- particularly the three women who join her in leading the retail giant: Trudy Fahie, CEO and president of Walmart Canada Bank since June; British-born Emma Fox, appointed senior vice-president of marketing this past summer; and American Shelley Broader, who was appointed CEO and president a few weeks ago. From their offices in Mississauga, Ont., the four women comprise half a management team that oversees 85,000 employees and a flurry of activity at 183 Walmart stores and 146 Supercenters. Walmart Canada does business with more than 7,700 Canadian suppliers, spending more than \$14 billion annually. These four women clearly love their jobs, adore the mothership and are committed to the company's mission: saving Canadians money so they can live better.

Still, they admit they couldn't have come this far without the influence of their strong-willed parents who helped shape their personalities early on. Growing up in the 1960s in Warton, Ont., Fahie recalls her mother being heavily involved in running the family's IGA grocery shop while her contemporaries were stay-at-home moms. Broader's father passed away when she was just 13 years old, prompting her mother to quickly sign up for teacher's college to put her four children through university. Fox's sisters both became dentists ("I was much less academically bright than they were," she quips), but she was undecided after high school so her father constantly pumped her with career ideas that combined her two greatest passions: shopping and people. His guidance eventually drove her into the world of marketing.

As they grew up and carved their own paths in the business world, each of the Walmart gals realized having people who believed in them was just as important as their own drive and determination. Blank, who has three grown children, counts one of her mentors as someone in finance who once "asked the guy pumping gas about the cost of bread and what he thought of a new tax." The seemingly insignificant episode taught her that "everybody has something to contribute, and as a leader you've got to be able to hear." Leaders don't have to have all the answers, she says, but they do have to be able to sift through information to create direction and opportunities.

Fahie also believes in surrounding herself with inspirational people, crediting a Walmart maintenance worker named Danny for teaching her to "always have a smile on your face and always find a way to help others in whatever way you can."

In Fox's case, one of her biggest advocates has been David Cheesewright, Walmart Canada's immediate past CEO and president, who is now leading Walmart's retail operations in Canada, the United Kingdom and Africa. He was Fox's boss several times while they were both working at British supermarket chain ASDA, before and after it was bought by Walmart in 1999, and was keen on transitioning her from merchandising to logistics. Fox's knee-jerk reaction: "But I can't do that." Cheesewright didn't waver, explaining that while she clearly didn't have logistics experience, she certainly had a good mind and a logical approach and he knew she would excel.

"That was a formative moment for me, and for other people I've mentored, particularly women in terms of giving them encouragement," explains Fox. "[With women there's] that kind of immediacy of, 'Oh my goodness, I'm not qualified to do that job' versus 'You are qualified, but in a different way.'"

The experience enlightened Fox about what it takes to be a leader and, in turn, has helped develop her leadership style (which she describes as "firm but fair" as well as transparent and honest). Fox, who has three children under 10, says a good leader must possess integrity, have the confidence to make sound decisions, and be able to distil information into clear messages that teams can follow. The best leaders also ditch the silos, she adds, and take a collaborative approach with both external and internal partners to drive common goals. And they're tenacious. They don't give up, something Fox says women have a habit of doing when the road gets a little bumpy.

Fox's colleagues add a few more qualities leaders should possess. Fahie, who started her business career at The Bay in Ottawa and moved on to leadership positions at American Express and CIBC before joining Walmart Canada Bank, says great leaders have the courage to make bold decisions and provide clarity when there's confusion, or the needs of the environment and the customer change. "There's been some work done on when do you lead from the head, when do you lead from the heart and when do you lead with guts," says Fahie, a mom to two tweens. "What makes a leader strong is knowing when you need to put the head forward, which is having a clear purpose, and when you need to lead from the heart, which is a focus on understanding and developing the people you work with. And the third one, being guts, is doing the right thing based on values when it's not sometimes easy to do."

Broader, the newest addition to the team and a mother of two school-aged children, believes leaders are those who can create a "followship" and a compelling vision so people understand their specific roles. They also know how to use facts and intuition, and surround themselves with experts to make sound judgements.

One place Walmart Canada's C-suite showcases its leadership skills is at the company's weekly associates meeting, which draws 400 to 500 people to the Mississauga head office. Fox has a regular spot to talk up the company's new marketing focus that she describes as "putting the customer at the heart of everything we do." Since joining the team, she has become the voice of customers, travelling to stores coast to coast to take part in "shopalongs," focus groups and other customer-focused initiatives.

"We're listening to the customer in a more powerful way," says Broader, who spent more than 20 years in leadership roles at Michael's, Hannaford Bros. and Wal-Mart before joining Walmart Canada as chief merchandising officer last December. "What might be the absolute right fit of products for British Columbia may not be right for the Maritimes. We're taking the time, with Emma's leadership, to really understand, community by community, the needs of our customers and make sure that we understand who we work for: the customer."

Almost 90% of the purchasing decisions at Walmart Canada's stores are made by women so it's natural that they be represented at some level of leadership, but it's not just the store's patrons who are getting extra attention. Internally, there's an overwhelming emphasis on building female leaders. Half of Walmart Canada's managers are female, mirroring the leadership team. The company's year-old Women in Retail program identifies high-potential female talent and provides a host of development support including a mentor-ship program and leadership development workshops. Further, Wal-Mart's Global Women's Council examines common challenges affecting the company's female employees in order to develop female leaders and promote inclusion.

"The reason we want to make Walmart the best place for women to work is because we want to attract the best talent into the business," says Fox, founding member and current chair of the Global Women's Council. "When you look at our growth projections over the next five years, in international alone we need another 500,000 employees. How do you get the best talent to continue to optimize the growth potential of more markets? It's by recognizing the talent pool is a very diverse one. For us to get the best, we need to ensure we've got a mixed-gender talent pool. That's an internal opportunity for us."

On a broader scale, Walmart Canada was the first retailer in Canada to partner with The Network of Executive Women, which attempts to attract and advance female leaders in the retail and consumer products industries. The company is also a founding member of We Connect, which certifies firms that are at least 51% owned, managed and controlled by women. And Walmart Canada hopes to develop a series of leadership summits for female-owned businesses and leaders in partnership with federal and

provincial governments. No wonder the company has been singled out by several corporate surveys as a coveted employer and for having one of the country's "most admired corporate cultures."

But don't think Walmart Canada's male employees are left to fend for themselves. On the contrary, says Broader, diversity and teamwork are the keys in breeding success. "My style of leadership is much more about creating a real cabinet in which to run this business, instead of a house of representatives," says the new CEO. "We really run the corporation in a very collegial way. The beauty of inclusiveness and diversity is that each person has their own unique voice and life experience, of which some of that is because of gender, some of that is work experience, some of that is birth order. There are all kind of things that create a unique individual and I think gender is just one piece of that." FP

GETTING AHEAD

YOUNG MALES AND FEMALES HAVE TO REALIZE TALENT IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN GENDER THESE DAYS

Shelley Broader, Walmart Canada's new CEO and president, is adamant that it's a talent-driven world and young people -- both male and female -- must recognize that business is no longer just a man's domain. Case in point: Women comprise half of Walmart Canada's leadership team. Here are some of the pearls they regularly share with young audiences as well as with their own children:

- Follow your instincts and surround yourself with strong leaders. "What has made me successful in my career has been being true to myself and never feeling like I had to compromise my own beliefs to get ahead, and to find both male and female role models and mentors and sponsors to teach you the business and teach you the corporate ropes," Broader says.
- Do what you like to do, play to your strengths and the rest will follow. Focus on what you can do, not what you can't do. And be sure to believe in yourself: "I'm putting on my epitaph: 'Don't do a half-ass job,'" says Gale Blank, CIO and vice-president. "I was a waitress for many years, but I was a good waitress."
- Understand who you are and what you want to be famous for. "What is your brand? Be positive, support the people you work with and be someone who gets things done," says Emma Fox, senior vice-president of marketing.
- Choose work you are passionate about, work hard, give something back and treat people the way you want to be treated. "Be yourself, be authentic. Others respond best to someone who is genuine," says Trudy Fahie, CEO and president, Walmart Canada Bank.