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BUSINESS DAY

Deborah Harmon, on Playing to Your Team's Strengths

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By **ADAM BRYANT**

*This interview with **Deborah Harmon**, chief executive of Artemis Real Estate Partners, was conducted and condensed by **Adam Bryant**.*

Q. Were you in leadership roles or doing entrepreneurial things when you were younger?

A. I wish I could tell you I ran a lemonade stand at the age of 10, but I didn't. My mother would always tell me that I had so much energy that she didn't know what to do with me. I also loved winning, and the natural place that played out for me was in sports. In high school, I played three sports — field hockey, basketball and tennis — and in college I played tennis and lacrosse.

I loved team sports. The collective victory was always more powerful for me. If I had a choice between playing singles and doubles tennis, I played doubles.

Tell me about your parents.

It was really my parents who taught me the foundational traits of a leader: confidence, grit and a real desire to make a difference. And I come from a family, going back to my great-grandmother, of working mothers and

entrepreneurs. I watched my mother raise a family of three kids. And when I was in high school, she decided to become an independent theater producer, and then worked her way from Off Broadway to Broadway as a producer. I watched how hard it was, and she really taught me that there is no such thing as work-life balance. The concept of “having it all” is possible, just rarely at the same time.

My father was an investment banker, and he loved the different businesses he worked with. He would talk to me about his work, and he always brought me into the office from a young age. He would also say that you don't have to have the highest I.Q. in the room, but if you're willing to work harder than everyone else, there's no limit to what you can accomplish.

He also taught me an important lesson about managing people. When we were young and talking during family dinners, he would always start the conversation by saying, “What was the most difficult problem you had today?” And after we talked, he would say, “How could you have handled this differently?” Through his questioning, he helped us become our own problem solvers, and to find something positive in every situation. And then he would always say, “What's the best thing that happened to you today?”

Did you know what you wanted to do when you graduated from college?

I always wanted to run my own business, so my career was a series of experiences to get to the point where I could do that. But I had no idea I was going to end up in the real estate industry.

My first job after college was at Banker's Trust. They had an extraordinary corporate-finance training program — they flew professors in, and really gave you a mini business school. I wanted to go into the corporate division, working with companies like AT&T and IBM. But I was sent to work with small, private companies. I was devastated at first, but then I figured, let's see what happens.

It turned out to be the perfect training if you want to run a business, because you're analyzing companies and figuring out why one company works and another doesn't. I absolutely loved it. Then the bank moved me to real estate. For me, real estate was like going to Siberia in those days, and I didn't

have any interest in it. The company knew it was a tough transition, so they said they'd pay to send me to business school while I was working.

What I learned, and what I teach my children, is that it's not about getting the most glamorous or the most prestigious jobs. What matters most is where you can learn and grow and have the most responsibility.

Any “memo to self” moments when you first started managing people?

I am a problem-solver and a fixer by nature, and I also had a mantra of “no surprises,” because as the youngest and least experienced manager at the time, I wanted to know what was going on. If you have that attitude, it encourages people to bring you their problems early and often, and that's good. But if you're a fixer, then you risk spending your whole day fixing other people's problems.

Another lesson I learned was to play to people's strengths, rather than trying to shore up their weaknesses. Because if you play to people's strengths, you create a team of complementary skill sets. It's like a puzzle.

How do you hire?

I'm a big believer in the idea that chance favors the prepared mind. I use that in our company with young people because they have to be so detailed-oriented, but also in seeing how people prepare for the interview. I'll see how much thought they've given to who we are, what our culture is, and then really try to drill down on what motivates them, are they a team player, and why they want to be part of this team.

Then I'll ask, “If you could do anything over again, what would that be?” And believe it or not, I've actually had people say, “Oh, I wouldn't do anything over again.” If they say that, the interview is over.

I'll also ask about the most difficult ethical decision you've ever faced, and how you dealt with it. And sometimes I'll say to younger people, “Do you think your grades are a reflection of your abilities?” If the grades are on the low side, I'll give them an opportunity to explain why. I'm listening for someone who goes a level deeper, who doesn't just give me the answer they think I want to hear. And maybe they had a parent who was dying of cancer and had to go

home and help take care of them, and they did the best they could.

At the end of the interview, I'll say, "Do you have any questions for me?" People judge you by the quality of your questions, so take the time to be thoughtful about the questions you want to ask.

Each week, Adam Bryant talks with top executives about the challenges of leading and managing.

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