

PUBLICATION

Everybody Leads: A Look at Legacy with Synovus Bank's Sarah Duggan

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In a recent episode of "Everybody Leads," Tim Lupinacci spoke with Sarah Duggan about her leadership journey as she prepared to step onto a new path with her retirement. Sarah has spent her career in the bank and lending industry and, in her most recent role, has served as the Executive Director of Wholesale Banking/Seniors Housing Healthcare Lending at Synovus Bank. As Tim remarks at the beginning of the episode, "Sarah's leadership has really lived out through her team through pillars of strong industry reputation, certainty of execution, and creativity." The episode highlighted key takeaways from Sarah's career – from her time right after graduating from the University of Alabama to the years she spent as a leader with an official, titled position. The moments she reflected on and the lessons she shared from the course of her career highlight pillars that we can all work to implement in our lives, no matter where we are in our own leadership journey.

Pillar 1: Team Members as Puzzle Pieces

Sarah reflected on the importance of building strong teams, noting that members of a team are like pieces of a puzzle. When you are building your team as a leader in your profession you need to bring on team members that fit into the larger vision. A puzzle piece that's not meant to fit in a particular spot can prevent other pieces from fitting as well – the puzzle, and team, won't be as solid as they could be if you put the piece in the wrong place.

Tim and Sarah's conversation emphasized the importance of trust in your team. If you can trust your people, you can give them more responsibility, possibly passing on tasks that you may ordinarily do yourself. This can naturally lead to their development as leaders so when the time comes for you to move on, there are a couple of people who have already taken on the leadership role in smaller ways. And, as Sarah explained, this allows you to take on the next path of your life without "any guilt or concern or worry," which for Sarah, is the ultimate goal.

As Tim notes, trusting members of your team and breaking off leadership responsibilities impacts the next generation of leaders. Doing so leaves a legacy for yourself and the future leaders – and pieces of the puzzle – that may come up behind you.

Pillar 2: Learn From Spilled Milk

Sarah shared that she keeps a "spilled milk" document to record and reflect on mistakes and missteps she has made over the last few years. Everyone makes mistakes, but if you take the time to reflect on them, the regret that is undoubtedly tied to your actions can be used as a tool. Keeping the "spilled milk" document and editing it as needed allows Sarah to learn from the missteps she has taken in the past and permits her team to learn from them as well.

She highlighted that, as a team, Sarah emphasizes avoiding the word "absolute" or "never" – try to avoid thinking *we should have never done that* when reflecting on mistakes. While there certainly may be some situations where that is appropriate thinking, it is likely more constructive to view mistakes or decisions-gone-wrong, as something that should have been thought about a little more carefully prior to taking an action that

turned out to be a mistake. It is important to keep an open mind when moving forward after you deem an event or response, a mistake. Your missteps can be a positive part of your legacy if you give yourself (and your team) the opportunity to learn and grow from them.

Pillar 3: Be Creative

Tim and Sarah spoke about how she has used creativity in her role in the banking and lending industry, but the principles of being open-minded and flexible, even as a seasoned leader, can apply to a variety of contexts. As Tim said, "I think that it takes...intentionality to be open to [creative solutions] because other times if you're just too black and white, you lose a lot of opportunities." That creativity goes back to having a strong team. Sarah noted that good relationships among team members allow for brainstorming and working together to find a creative solution. Those creative *aha!* moments, may not always show up in formal settings – they could develop in casual conversations in the hallway. Having the ability to connect and brainstorm with members of your team outside of set working sessions can be invaluable and may only come about organically if you put effort in on the front end to foster relationships among team members and build trust in each other. As Sarah reflected, strong relationships on a team can, in turn, "feed some of that creativity."

It is natural for a leader to want to leave a legacy when they move on to a new path, be that a different role within the same company, or a new path entirely in the form of retirement. The legacy a leader leaves can take many forms, and as Sarah Duggan reflected before her own retirement, that legacy can be seen through the people you bring up behind you. She was trained for her position by people before her, years before she formally took on the role, and in building a strong team of people that can carry on the work she put in place, reflecting on mistakes and missteps, and maintaining creativity in tackling her work, she has left a legacy for those who take on her responsibilities once she does step onto a new path.

You don't need a title to be a leader – each of us can be a leader no matter our position. As a first-year attorney, there won't be much to lead below me for quite some time. Even so, a philosophy I try to carry with me is that leadership does not have to take the form of hierarchy. We can be a leader amongst those who are at the same level as us, or even above us. Most importantly, we can be a leader in our own lives by using creativity and teamwork in the habits we form, our passions outside of work, and our relationships with others.