CHALLENGE IS AN OPPORTUNITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARY BETH JENKINS

Wisdom and insight from the leader of the healthcare behemoth.

Mary Beth Jenkins

Executive VP, Chief Operating Officer, Insurance Division, UPMC

The CCWomen Summit in San Antonio, TX kicks off today, and we can't wait to share stories and insights from our incredible speaker lineup.

One of these speakers is Mary Beth Jenkins, the Executive VP and Chief Operating Officer (COO) of the Insurance Division of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC). UPMC is a global nonprofit health enterprise with almost 100,000 employees. Needless to say, running the whole show is no easy task. But with immense wisdom and insight, Mary Beth Jenkins shows us that anything is possible with the right attitude.

Mary Beth's session at the CCWomen Summit is called "CCWomen Spotlight: My Journey as a Woman Executive Rising Through the Ranks," where she will share her inspiring story at length. For now, we are thrilled to share an exclusive interview with Mary Beth, where she discusses all things leadership, confidence, and the importance of perspective.

Q: Tell us a little bit about yourself. Where did you grow up and what did you want to be when you were younger?

MBJ: I'm a proud Pittsburgher, born and bred, and I continue to live in a town about an hour north of Pittsburgh.

For me, I didn't have any idea of what I really wanted to be. Perhaps I toyed with wanting to be a hairdresser and going down that path. Then, I decided, no, I want to do the college thing. When I started college, I thought that I would eventually work in New York City, for a large advertising or marketing firm. I quickly learned that things that you plan to do aren't always what you end up doing in life. This is not necessarily a setback, but it's about how you react and how you identify opportunities that you wouldn't necessarily have otherwise.

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Q: What has your career journey been like? How did you start your career at UPMC? How did you end up where you are today?

MBJ: I've had the privilege of working for UPMC for 25 years. Before I started, I went on a blind interview for the first position that I held. This was back when they used to actually print newspapers and job ads in the local newspaper. I replied to a job opening for a lead training specialist for a startup healthcare company.

At the time I was managing operations in a totally different industry, which was a banquet and auditorium type of industry. I wanted to be closer to home. I was commuting quite a way to work every day and working lots of nights and weekends. So, I went to the interview.

After the interview I was walking back to my car, and I called my husband to tell him. “How did the interview go?” he asked. I said, “They're gonna offer me the job.” Sure enough, within a couple of days they were excited to bring me in.

I didn't have industry experience, but I brought a lot of other different skills that they were looking for. Did I envision someday that I would be in the position of Chief Operating Officer or the person running the day to day of this billion-dollar entity? I would like to say, yeah, absolutely. That's what I aspired for.

But at the time what I aspired for was to be the absolute best that I could be in the position that I held. I worked hard to be present and to be at the table for anything that was needed. My advice is to always seek out opportunity, seek out projects, make yourself relevant, and always be present.

> **Make yourself relevant, and always be present.**
>
> *-Mary Beth Jenkins*

It's been a remarkable journey throughout these 25 years.

20 some years ago I went back to graduate school. I did that at night while I worked full time. I'd like to call myself a lifelong learner, because I think you're only as relevant as you make yourself. Continuing education is just incredibly important.

Let's face it. Networking. There is power in networking and really seeking out mentors and seeking out people to tell you how to do things differently.

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Q: We talk about the glass ceiling; the challenges women face in trying to break into the C-Suite. What challenges have you faced in your career?

> **I never allowed the glass ceiling to have a profound effect on me.**
>
> -Mary Beth Jenkins

MBJ: Over the years, I learned to deal with situations differently because the more you cope the better you are at it. You don't immediately throw in the towel. I view challenges as an opportunity.

One example is I never allowed the glass ceiling to have a profound effect on me. I felt that it was more age related. I was always, and I probably still am, the youngest person at the executive table. Health care and health insurance are very traditional industries. To infiltrate that with younger or different thinking is hard. So that was one thing.

I was bringing forward new ideas. I was challenging the status quo and that's hard.
It can rattle your confidence, but for me when I realized that I deserved a seat at the table, that it wasn't about age, that I had proven my abilities, I came to work that day, and I never looked back.

Perspective is a beautiful thing. Even though things at work can be really hard, I have perspective that much harder things are happening around me and that perspective is humbling. This is what happens when you allow your confidence to lead. Everybody has that ability.

Speaking at the CCWomen event in front of everyone is also not easy. I don't just wake up and say, oh, let me go do that. It takes a lot of confidence to speak in public and be vulnerable in front of strangers. But anything worth doing isn't easy.

I have a 19-year-old daughter and she's going to be a nurse. I tell her life is hard, it is hard, but life is good, too. There are challenges whether you are just starting in your career or as a seasoned executive. But it is our ability to lead in confidence, challenging the status quo, and having perspective to overcome obstacles and persevere.

That is why we have to celebrate. Women have to do a better job of celebrating women and helping other women. I spend a lot of my time to this day meeting with women of all levels within our organization and within our community. I like to ask, what can I do to help you to be successful in the future?

I believe that's my responsibility as a leader.

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Q: I like the fact that you call challenges opportunities. Can you elaborate on this?

MBJ: When we gather, we don't want to focus on the negativity of the problem. It's exhausting if all you do is talk about the problems versus what you're doing to solve the problem, that's really hard. If I agree with you, it'll be hard to change the conversation and move it forward.

I could sit and tell you dozens of times when I didn't feel as though I was being treated as an equal. But where is that going to take me? Where will that get me?

I try really hard to reflect on what spot at the table I choose to sit in, who I choose to speak to, what I choose to say, and how I navigate the politics of an audience. You cannot underestimate the importance of that.

Q: What are some important leadership qualities for a woman in leadership to possess?

MBJ: I just heard from somebody over the weekend, she said, "When I describe you, I always say you're so real. You get what you get with Mary Beth. She understands all aspects because she's grown up in the ranks of the organization and she's just genuine."

And I'm thinking to myself, genuine? How can you not be genuine? What does that mean? But I guess, for a leader of an organization, if people see me as genuine or real, or able to talk to talk or walk the walk, then I'm okay with that, right?

I want to be seen as relevant. I want to be seen as somebody who is willing to do any job that we ask our employees to do.

And if that's what they're referring to as genuine, that I am a real person, then, yeah.

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