

Inclusive Leadership

An Interview with Anne Chow

EDITORS' NOTE Anne Chow is a transformative business leader whose trailblazing corporate career spans over three decades in the technology and business sectors. She is currently Lead Director on the Board of Directors of FranklinCovey, a company dedicated to organizational transformation through leadership, culture, and execution. Additionally, she serves on the Board of Directors of 3M, a company focused on applying science in collaborative ways to improve lives and solve the world's toughest challenges; and CSX, a leading supplier of rail-based freight transportation in North America. Chow is also a Senior Fellow and Adjunct Professor of Executive Education at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management and actively supports numerous local and national organizations, including serving on the Dallas Mavericks Advisory Council and Georgia Tech's President's Advisory Board. In her prior role, as the first woman of color CEO in AT&T's 140+ year history, Chow led AT&T Business, a \$35 billion global operating unit comprised of over 35,000 people. Appointed to this role in 2019, she guided this team through the pandemic amid unprecedented market upheaval around the world to serve customers with communications solutions across all sectors including small- and medium-sized businesses, global multinational enterprises, the public sector as well as nearly all of the Fortune 1000. Chow's leadership experience spans product management, marketing, sales, strategy, customer service, operations, network engineering and more. As a lifelong learner committed to inspiration and impact, Chow engages with local, national, and global audiences through keynotes, panel discussions, and published works. She is the best-selling co-author of *The Leader's Guide to Unconscious Bias: How to Reframe Bias, Cultivate Connection, and Create High-Performing Teams* and author of *LEAD BIGGER: The Transformative Power of Inclusion*, due out in September 2024 by Simon & Schuster. Chow holds BS and MEng degrees in electrical engineering as well as an MBA with Distinction from Cornell University, and is a graduate of the Pre-College Division of the Juilliard School of Music.



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I was taught to believe in the power of education and lifelong learning, the importance of striving to be your best, the imperative of giving back and being in service of others, as well as the realities of immigrant paranoia. In my early years, I felt that I never quite fit in – so I developed an awareness of the relevance of belonging and the role of leadership in creating it.

After completing my university studies, I went on to have a robust career in corporate America, starting out in technical roles and evolving into

more business and leadership ones. I strived to create growth at the intersection of people and technology. Over the decades, I've often been “the first” or “the only” in what is done or accomplished, but this was never a top-of-mind objective for me. Rather, I leaned into my own development of what I believed leadership should be – very much human-centric in every way.

You spent more than 30 years of your career at AT&T. What made the experience at AT&T so special for you?

Never did I imagine that I'd work for the same “brand” in this first long chapter of my career. At first, I was drawn to the company because of my familiarity with it and its compelling role in society as more than just “the phone company.” As an engineer, I understood the importance of networking and what the power of connection could do in shaping not only our lives for the better, but industries, companies, and organizations around the world. I was driven to constantly learn, innovate, and lead, seeking greater opportunities for contribution. I

wanted to grow the business, but I also wanted to grow myself as a leader.

AT&T afforded me the chance to do that – 17 different roles with 26 different bosses over the course of over 32 years. I was fueled by AT&T's purpose, the people, and the potential for impact with customers and the market at large.

Of course, there were many highs and many lows, but at no point did I ever feel bored nor faced with a lack of opportunity. I'll be forever grateful to all of whom I worked with over those years. The collective experiences we've shared have shaped me into the leader and person I am today.

What interested you in writing the book, *Lead Bigger*, and what are the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?

I have a fundamental belief that leadership is a choice and the one common requirement for progress. Leadership takes on different forms, and each of us can choose to be a leader, not only in our jobs, but in our lives. While leadership truly transcends time, culture, and more, it, like everything else, must evolve with the times. Throughout my leadership journey, I've learned the importance of having a people, relationship, and connection-based approach which I feel now, more than ever, is required in all facets of society. While the world is becoming more interconnected, we see too much evidence of people being more divided.

In a growingly polarized world, inclusive leadership is necessary to move us forward. And I have a very strong point of view as to what inclusion is all about. I wrote *Lead Bigger* to help current and future leaders. Simply put, leading

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Will you discuss your life journey?

I'm a proud second-generation American, the daughter of Taiwanese immigrant parents. Through my simple origins and upbringing,

The Transformative Power of Inclusion

LEAD BIGGER

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FORMER CEO
OF AT&T BUSINESS

bigger is all about widening your perspectives for greater performance and impact. Through my book, I'm hoping to help people reframe their views of inclusion and embrace the fact that if you choose to be a leader, then by definition, you must be an inclusive one.

You placed a major emphasis on diversity and inclusion throughout your career. How critical is it for leading companies to build diverse and inclusive workforces?

My emphasis on diversity and inclusion is not separate from my leadership practice. Diversity is simply a reality of the modern world and goes far beyond solely issues of gender and race. As leaders we want the best teams – for our performance today and to ensure a successful future. To do so, we must lean into the people of today and those of tomorrow – which requires expanding our sources of talent as well as our own perceptions of what talent should “look/be like.”

Diversity includes an infinite array of dimensions and attributes we have, embracing the fact that no two people are the same. In the pursuit of diverse perspectives, it stands to reason that we must pursue and develop an understanding of diverse peoples. Inclusion requires action, representing thought processes and actions that aspire to yield greater innovation with greater results. Inclusion goes way beyond simple representation. Inclusion requires that you give voice to your people, and ultimately, also share your power and influence. If you do not lead inclusively, you'll eventually lose to a leader who does.

Do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women in C-suites and on corporate boards?

There are strong opportunities for women and other currently underrepresented groups in the boardroom. When we consider boards, the type of opportunities are vast – public or private companies, PE or venture-backed, family owned, startup to scale, pre-IPO, small/mid/large cap, not-for-profit, Foundation, and more.

The reality is that the path to these board opportunities is not often clear nor ever linear. As with any type of tenured governance constructs, there are systemic issues which exist that can serve as barriers to entry. This bodes for the help of organizations such as NACD, Women 50/50 on Boards, Women on Boards and others who have not only access to those who have secured opportunities, but also a vast array of allies and influencers. Those who want to pursue board service as part of their career should start their learning early and recognize the importance of building sustained meaningful – versus transactional – relationships.

What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership and how do you approach your management style?

In my early days of leadership, I believed that one of the most important attributes of a leader was interpersonal flexibility. A leader must pragmatically and personally meet people where they are and also recognize systemic realities (processes, politics, biases) where they are. This approach is a connected one and serves as a foundation for positive change with greater probability of alignment and success. As my leadership skills and perspectives have evolved, I've developed something I call the “7 Cs of leadership” which captures my management style as well as serves as a framework for some of the core characteristics I look for in leaders. They are: character, competence, collaboration, communication, courage, curiosity, and caring.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

Seek growth opportunities and open your mind to learning and new perspectives. Realize that your career is a journey, not a destination. Embrace the fact that every business is a “people” business. Seek and foster meaningful relationships. Stay humble. Hustle. Save as much as you can now because your older self will thank you. Treat your health as a top priority. Recognize that your job and career are only part of your life – albeit a necessary and substantive part – not your whole life. ●