

If you only have a minute: Rooted and Unwavering is all about connecting deeply with ourselves, others and our service in the world. How did Debi Hanes, now a senior leader at Microsoft, learn at an early age the value of mentors and also become a devoted mentor to others?

Help! Which Fork Do I Use?

By Esther Groves and Hylke Faber

As a self-described “Navy brat,” Debi Hanes moved and changed schools many times while growing up. As the “new kid every year” she could have kept to herself, but isolation didn’t fit for her. She chose instead to seek connections at every stopover.

That openness to relationships continued into her first job experience as a high school senior. While her friends were working fast food and retail, Debi, who loved her business classes and could use the money for college, landed an after-school job for GE, typing, making copies and fetching cash advances. “People did not see me as a high school girl, just as an employee,” she remembers. Men wore ties and women wore skirts and she quickly realized how much she liked the professional environment. “It gave me a different exposure than what most students get at that age,” she recalls.

Exposure to the corporate working world and some great mentors shaped the mentor she was to become. A friend gave her rides to work at GE. It was a small gesture but enabled her to do “a really cool thing.”

Then, one of the admin assistants (they called them secretaries back then) was going to a fancy work dinner at a hotel ballroom and invited Debi as her “plus one.” Debi remembers sitting in the office prior to the dinner learning the basics of using the seven utensils she would find around her plate at the event. “It had nothing to do with the day job,” Debi laughs, “but she took me under her wing to show me things. We had a fork at our dinner table [at home] and maybe a knife but there wasn’t all that other stuff around. She took the time to make me feel comfortable and welcomed.”

Another mentor later told Debi, “You have great ideas, but no one can hear you. You need to speak up.” To this day, she shares this advice with others.

Debi has carried her experiences into the present as Principal Group Software Engineering Manager at Microsoft. She creates a safe space for each person by sharing her own humanness and vulnerabilities – and by appreciating the unique contribution and level of self-confidence that each person brings.

One way she creates safety is an open forum she calls “Drinks with Deb” where team members are invited to talk to her about anything and everything. Even then, she notes, some people are intimidated to talk to a senior leader. Especially then it’s more important than ever to be genuine and come across as just another person.

Debi has not outgrown her own need for mentors. She has a few close friends who are willing sounding boards through life’s ups and downs - people she can ask, “How could I have done that differently? That sucked. What are we going to do about it?” and know that the friend will answer her honestly – not tell her what she wants to hear.

Summing up the value of mentoring, Debi points out, “The power of the collective mind is so much stronger than our individual one, especially under stress when we tend to keep spinning in our minds, especially when we believe we failed.”

A mind is like a dangerous neighborhood. It’s best not to go there by yourself.