

Embracing Change with Cheryl Brown

Introduction and Guest Welcome

Linda Ostovitz: Hello everyone and welcome to Real Talk Real Growth. I'm Linda Ostovitz, the host of this show. Those of you who know me know I talk plain. We talk real, therefore, we grow. Today, I am thrilled to have one of my dear friends with me Cheryl Brown, who is an attorney. I met Cheryl in Howard County, probably as a result of our relationship through the Howard County Chamber of Commerce, but maybe even earlier than that.

And she has been historically in her life labor and employment attorney with a firm in Columbia, Maryland. Not all that long ago made the decision to leave us for which we are saddened, but we understand that for her it was the right decision and gave her an opportunity that she was very interested in.

So we're gonna explore that with Cheryl a little bit. But first of all, Cheryl, welcome to this podcast, Real Talk, Real Growth. Thrilled that you said yes to me.

Cheryl Brown: Thank you so much, Linda. Anytime that Linda and I can get together and talk is always a pleasurable experience, and I said earlier that we could talk for hours, so I'm happy that you invited me.

Linda Ostovitz: Thank you for saying yes. Yes.

Cheryl's Career Background

Linda Ostovitz: So as I have hinted a little bit in terms of your career you were an attorney with Davis, Agnor, Rapaport, and Skalny, which is a well established Columbia law firm. How long were you with them, Cheryl?

Cheryl Brown: 13 years.

Linda Ostovitz: Mm-hmm.

And you did practice primarily in the labor and employment field, is that correct?

Cheryl Brown: I did, yes. The entire time.

Linda Ostovitz: Mm-hmm.

Community Engagement and Leadership

Linda Ostovitz: So not only were you practicing as a lawyer for the firm, but you were also very engaged in the community in Howard County,

Cheryl Brown: I was.

Linda Ostovitz: So would you share a little bit about what your other engagement has been in the county?

Cheryl Brown: Absolutely. Davis, Agnor, Rapaport, and Skalny, is part of their values is the community and it's one aspect of the firm that I took seriously was always giving back to the communities that we served, which a lot of companies do. But we were always encouraged to engage with I guess charitable organizations, business groups that really not only focused on the clients that we serve, but enhanced our practices as well.

So as a labor and employment attorney within the business practice group, we focused we were members of the Howard County Chamber of Commerce. I also was involved with SHRM, which is the Society for HR Management. Not only their local chapter, but their national chapter. I was also involved on the board at Northwest Hospital, which is part of LifeBridge Community and throughout all of these organizations, even from the beginning when I first joined the firm, the best way to get involved in an organization is to join a committee and.

Linda Ostovitz: Absolutely.

Cheryl Brown: That's how you make connections, friends, professional friends. That's how you really become invested in that organization. So I just started volunteer for a committee and kind of once you volunteer for committee, you're off and running.

They look at you like, oh, we have you if you're that person. But, for me, it's easy to do that. It's easy to give back and really become engaged with that, especially with the support of the firm that I had. And that really became my family as well, like my professional family.

But you make a lot of really good friends along the way.

Linda Ostovitz: That's interesting when you say you join a committee and you're off and running and Oh my, isn't that the truth? But just to be clear when my little spoiler alert here is when Cheryl decided to leave Maryland. She was the chair of the board of the Howard County Chamber of Commerce so off and running directly to the top to be a little more precise is where she was when she made the decision to leave.

So where are you from originally?

Decision to Move to North Carolina

Cheryl Brown: So I grew up in North Carolina in Winston-Salem, and my entire family lives in North Carolina. When I left after high school, I had not really lived in North Carolina since high school. I went to college in Atlanta. I worked in dc, went to college in Pennsylvania. My husband and I moved around and we ended up in Maryland where we were, 20 years in Maryland.

Three boys in Maryland. So my, the majority of my adult professional life has really been in Maryland, so it was not an easy decision to choose to leave for so many reasons, but I grew up in North Carolina and that's where my parents and family live, so that was one of the decisions that we made.

Linda Ostovitz: Here you are, mid-career at the top of your game, at the top of your community involvement. It must have been some really powerful pulls, if you will, that caused you to make the decision to leave Maryland and you returned to North Carolina. So first of all, where did you go in North Carolina?

Cheryl Brown: Asheville, North Carolina, which is in the western part of the state and the mountains.

Linda Ostovitz: I've never been there, but I've heard wonderful things about how beautiful it is and how fun it is. So we'll have to put that on our list to visit you there. So what made you leave your work here and your life in Maryland and move it to North Carolina?

Cheryl Brown: So as life goes, you don't ever plan these things. So it is just one of these opportunities that came about and I think to your point. I wasn't looking to leave my firm. I wasn't looking to leave Maryland. I think my husband and I had always talked about ending up possibly in Asheville, North Carolina, or purchasing maybe a house, a second house in Asheville, North Carolina.

'cause we love Asheville, we love the mountains. My boys went to camp there. We vacation there, and it's only an hour and a half from my parents, which is in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. So that was in the background. So when you have an opportunity, a professional opportunity that presents itself in the place that you've always thought you would end up someday, you start looking at things a little differently.

And I remember when I had the opportunity. Crazy. If you had asked me this a year ago, I would've said, no, this was never on the table. But it piques your interest and I think you have to look at things. And I think my husband even said five to seven years too soon we would be having this conversation, but we're now having this conversation, life throws it at you.

You have to have that conversation. And I loved Davis, Agnor, Rapaport, and Skalny, I love my professional friends in Maryland. I love what I was doing. There was no particularly reason to say, oh, I have to move, but my parents are older as they're aging. There's no one here other than myself. My sister's in Colorado. It's an area we love and it's a completely different professional opportunity.

And I love the name of your podcast because if you don't challenge yourself and you don't continue to move and take risk or push yourself outside of the comfortable box we live in, you don't know the potential of your growth. And I think from a professional side, that was. Very enticing to see if I could push myself even, even in my fifties, which is a crazy time to be thinking of this. But yeah, I kind of took a risk and pushed myself with all that other stuff, being positive. I knew I had kind of a comfort level that, I could do it even though there's somewhat of a safety net. 'cause it's North Carolina, it's safe, it's family, it's place we like.

But yeah, I took that leap. Very, very crazy. But.

Linda Ostovitz: But you know, what's occurring to me is that even though you and Bill anticipated that you might end up back there someday, even if it was a second home, you did this on your terms and so many big things that happen in our lives are precipitated by something

over which we have no control that makes us say, oh, I need to do this. And you mentioned your parents who are getting older and, but it was a choice. It was absolutely a choice that you made. And of course, when you talk about something to challenge yourself, this is who you are, right? Any one of us can stay in this safe space. If you stay in this safe space, you don't grow perhaps.

Cheryl Brown: Right.

New Professional Opportunity

Linda Ostovitz: What was the professional opportunity that caused you to say, yes, I'm gonna grab this.

Cheryl Brown: Attorneys always think, and you probably have thought this too, what is life like outside of a law firm? What is life outside of billable hours? What is life outside of that always trying to find the next client. So you always think that every attorney has thought that. So this is an opportunity to move outside of law firm, moving in-house to a company corporation.

My background is always represented businesses. So I always have that kind of in-house business corporate background. Focusing on labor and employment, but this is a company part of the Coca-Cola family. So it is a huge from a business standpoint, this company's been around for 40 years in North Carolina. It's part of the Coke family. It has huge support. International implications, and it's an opportunity where I, in talking with them, I knew that they were struggling, but I also knew I could do it. They were looking for a VP of human resources, general Counsel within Southeastern Container.

And as we talked through the needs and the opportunities, it was just a really good fit for my skillset and I could help them along in the process that I felt super comfortable with. With that said, it's in a manufacturing facility, you're in the beverage manufacturing industry, which is so.

Different than just your run of the mill, law firm businesses type thing. This is on a bigger global scale, but at the same time, people are people and companies manage their employees very similarly. The laws, from a legal standpoint, from a labor and employment standpoint, primarily the laws are federal laws that we're dealing with, especially when you have a company that is across the country. So yeah, it was it's a big opportunity, but it's super exciting and I challenge myself every day. Every single day there's something new that I'm learning,

Linda Ostovitz: Do you wear a hard hat to work given that you're in a manufacturing facility? I have a perception that outside of your office, there's Coke bottles being filled and caps being put on. On and trucks being loaded.

Cheryl Brown: So this is where I'm gonna date myself, and you'll appreciate this. I'm sure if you ever watch Laverne and Shirley and you imagine that Steve, Laverne, and Shirley and the bottle are going by and they have their I think they had hair nets on, I don't even know if they had hard hats. They're bottling and it's going by.

It's not like that at all. So yes, I have safety equipment, I have safety goggles, I have safety shoes. We have safety vest and ear, little ear safety ear things. But what I learned, which is so

fascinating to me 'cause I remember the first time going into the manufacturing facilities and we have five plants scattered around the east, eastern side of the country.

But everything is robotics, everything is equipment. You see very few people. That's not to say that there's not people out there, but it's a lot of engineers. Industrial engineers running equipment that I wouldn't even be able to comprehend how that equipment is being run. It is very technical.

And that was kind of an aha moment to recognize how far we've come in, just because I'm not in that space, but I've learned so much and we recently went to Germany 'cause a lot of the manufacturing equipment. For the beverage industry is in Germany and they just held their big conference called Drink Tech.

It's an international conference for all beverage manufacturers across the world, and they only, they hold it every three years, and it's an opportunity to learn about that equipment and the equipment. You have separate equipment for filling, you have separate equipment for making bottles. You have separate equipment for making the little closures that go on top and the separate equipment for the plastic bottles and the glass bottles and the cans.

In the beer industry. It's a fascinating industry. But yeah, so those are the type of opportunities that, that are afforded me right now and just I'm learning a lot.

Linda Ostovitz: I'm a lawyer. I work in an office, I work in a courtroom. I would know. I can't even imagine what a big difference this is for you.

Challenges and Adaptations in New Role

Linda Ostovitz: Like you've described a whole nother industry, but I guess the thing that's maybe consistent is you're still dealing with people, and so when you talk about hr, you're still dealing with people.

Are you encountering different types of issues with people in Asheville than what you were in Columbia, Maryland? Or do you find that HR issues are HR issues?

Cheryl Brown: HR issues are HR issues, but I think what I have learned is that when you're in a manufacturing facility, you have, there's a distinction between your plant employees, your hourly employees, and what's important to them and what concerns they have versus employees who are in an office. Your salary employees.

So that has been. You have to be approachable and you have to understand what they are going through and their day-to-day lives, I think to them, it's so different than what I think we experience. So that has been, an opportunity to really get to know some of these employees and part of.

This is just who I am is making sure that I go and I am, go out on the floor and I'm going to all these shift changes and I'm meeting all these employees and I'm actually traveling to every single plant, which is part of my 90 day goals, to make sure that I meet with all the shifts and the

employees that understand, because I don't think you can really lead until you understand what they're going through.

Linda Ostovitz: Such wisdom to do that. You can't manage people unless you know 'em. You can't help 'em unless you know 'em. So yay to you for doing that. And then the other aspect of your job is general counsel, which is different from hr and so does being general counsel to basically a manufacturing place different from being. From the work that you did for really businesses and corporations that maybe weren't in the manufacturing arena.

Cheryl Brown: Yeah, knock on wood. I'm gonna say this lightly 'cause I hope nothing happens, but so far, so good in that space and we have a big support system of outside counsel, so a lot of it is coordinating with them and making sure that we're on the same page and things are running through me. I think, just from a business background, making sure that our contracts are in place and looking at things.

Internally and having, and certain issues may come up. Probably the biggest issue in a manufacturing place is safety. Safety is the top priority. And, that aligns so well with the labor and employment side of it. Osha a lot of our legal issues would come up with hiring or firing, so most of their issues.

But if there is a need to hire outside counsel, let's say for international purchases. That's something that our international attorneys would deal with. Or making sure our outside real estate attorneys, because we have plants in so many different states, you have to rely on your outside counsel and then you just help support them.

We're trained to ask those questions and we're trained to know what we need to know, in order to have conversations with outside counsel, and they haven't, this company has historically only relied on outside counsel and not had an attorney in-house to manage that. So that's another new phase for them.

So we'll see how it goes, but they have the benefit of having an attorney and also someone who's, willing and excited to be the VP of hr, which is always an interesting combination, but it works right now.

Linda Ostovitz: That's huge. I was actually gonna ask you, when you stepped into the role of VP of HR and of general counsel, were you filling a vacated position or it sounds like you are creating the position of general counsel, is that right?

Cheryl Brown: Yes, yes,

Linda Ostovitz: Okay. That's a cool place to be, right? You get to write the script and create the outline of how it all works.

Cheryl Brown: absolutely it's good. Yeah, because you can do that but there's also, the challenges. It's never been done before. Even with the VP of HR position I think this has been a position that they've been wanting to fill for a while because they really wanted to make sure that it was a more strategic position and they wanted to elevate it.

Because what I've learned is, and this is a testament to the company, is a lot of these employees who have worked here 30 and 40 years. And I think 13 years at DARS is a long time, but these have voiced 30 to 40 years, Linda. And, with that, they have a lot of wisdom.

Also as part of succession planning, that's a lot of knowledge and experience that's gonna be moving on and leaving the company. And so that is probably one of the top priorities is figuring out what we're gonna do with these more tenured employees because they've been here for so long and as they leave, do we have the bench strength to fill in and meet that demand. That's the number one challenge, but that's the number one challenge for so many companies, not just here. There's so many companies that are like that.

Linda Ostovitz: I understand it's your job to figure out how to manage those tenured employees and probably strategically figure out what you need once they move on to whatever's next for them.

Succession Planning and Recruitment

Linda Ostovitz: Is it your job then to recruit and hire and, fill those gaps that might be created by the retirement of those long-term employees?

Cheryl Brown: Yes, the short answer is yes. The long answer is I have a team and we have support from the senior leadership team. We have support from the board. It is, and you have support from the Coke system. Like you have a big support system, but yeah. That is the goal is identifying some type of succession plan to recruit employees in the manufacturing space. It's a challenge because as I said before, it's a very technical job. A lot of engineers and making sure that you have the right people, but finding the right people who want to stay another, 20 to 30 years. That's the other challenge because as you know, people move around a lot. And people, if you can keep someone three years, you're doing a great job.

Linda Ostovitz: Do you have a training program, an internal training program, for getting these folks to have the technical expertise that you've talked about?

Cheryl Brown: Yeah, and I think what's cool is, Maryland I find was more advanced in these kind of apprenticeship programs, workforce development programs, and I have had that experience in working in Maryland. And so what I can develop down here is making sure that we have that workforce development apprenticeship programs here, and understanding how North Carolina, and I'm just looking at North Carolina, but we also have plants in Virginia and Ohio and Tennessee.

But looking at those opportunities to develop that training program, because a lot of the employees, we look at community colleges, technical colleges, even the colleges like you look at, at Virginia Tech, you look at NC State, Georgia Tech, like a lot of those engineers will come out of Clemson looking at those schools as well.

What I'm finding is I'm really trying to learn and understand what the needs are in order to target who we need to recruit. And they, because the company is so part of the Coke system, there's not a lot of advertising as to who they are. They think for a lot of times, employees would find the company, but what we're finding is we need to do a little more marketing and advertising out there to start finding people.

It's very competitive in the manufacturing space. My big word, Linda, is opportunity and patience. These are my two words that I use all the time. Patience in learning in the process, and there's a lot of opportunities, which is great. If you start any job, that's what you want is opportunity.

Linda Ostovitz: Those are two great words and I'm not surprised to hear that they're your words. And I feel like you've got a blank slate there to a great extent and you're the perfect person to come in there with your experience and a fresh view, and a willingness and an excitement, like you say, to make this scenario a better one. How long have you been there now?

Cheryl Brown: I've been here about two months.

So two months. Yeah. And it is amazing how much my life in Maryland I do. I think about it, like what I can take away from that and use that. And I think that's probably the same for everybody but you actually, I don't think you realize how much you learn when you're going through a job or when you're in it, until you're out of it and you can reflect back and then you're like, wow, I really learned that.

I'm gonna take that. I'm gonna take that. That's good. So yeah.

Linda Ostovitz: I think that's accurate for sure. So on the corner of your desk there, you have a little display of some bottles I recognize the, red and white Coca-Cola bottle. How about what are the other two bottles that are there?

Cheryl Brown: So the other two bottles that are sitting there are Coca-Cola bottles, but they have the Baltimore Ravens on them. And when I first started, my team knew I'm not shy about being a Ravens fan, although this season's a little tough, but.

Linda Ostovitz: It is.

Cheryl Brown: But as part of my welcome gift, they gave me two little Coke bottles with the Ravens Super Bowl championships on 'em, and also the other one has the Ravens on it.

And that was, when you move from a state to, it's completely new area. This is completely different. So it was a nice touch that they gave me when I came aboard, so that was very nice.

Linda Ostovitz: That was very sweet. Very sweet.

Personal Reflections and Future Plans

Linda Ostovitz: So you took this huge jump off a cliff a couple of months ago. I know you don't have a home yet, permanent home. Your husband is not with you yet all the time because you don't have a permanent home. Your boys are still in Maryland and everything about your professional life and your personal life has changed. Would you recommend this to other people who might be thinking, I want something different. I want a different opportunity. I want an a way to be able to really write the blueprint for the success of this company. Would you recommend it?

Cheryl Brown: I think as we said at the beginning, like change is hard and change also can be growth. I think you have to decide, it's a personal decision for everybody as to where they are. I believe everyone has it within them to make that change, you just have to decide if it's that right time for you.

And actually it may not even be the right time and sometimes it's just a leap of faith and it's, it is a risk. I think at my stage in life it was the right time to consider it because as the boys are getting older and they're transitioning and they're on their own, like we're in a different stage.

Had it been 10 years ago, or even five years ago, I probably would've thought differently, but sometimes things happen at the right reason and. It is, it's a courageous act to say, okay, I'm gonna do this. I don't know what's gonna happen. I have no idea. But if I don't take that opportunity and try it, I probably would regret passing it by.

And if you are going to regret passing over an opportunity, then that probably tells you you should be challenging yourself and taking it. I don't know how I honestly I don't know. It all happened so fast. It was moving fast. There were many conversations with my family.

I did, I worried about the firm, I worried about the chamber. I worried out the boards I was on and the friends that I had. And yeah, it was, but it, I guess I believed I could do it. And everything in Maryland would still be okay, which of course it is. Of course everything is fine and that the friendships that I have will always be my friendships and my professional group will always be there because we really have developed those connections that we talked about at the beginning.

When you join a committee, when you become engaged, it's not always about the organizations, about the people that you work with. And I will be honest, I miss people. It's hard when you look back on LinkedIn and you see everybody doing thing that you know you did. But I will tell you, I have my first chamber meeting next week and I went to a SHRM meeting a couple weeks ago, so just gimme a couple months and I will continue to be getting involved. Oh, actually in the United Way, I did went to a United Way meeting, so I'm exploring opportunities down here because it is important to me to be a part of the community. And when you're in-house, you don't always have that opportunity as you did with the law firm.

So it's not always about networking, but here I look at it as marketing the company. Recruiting it and making sure that we are the company that everybody wants to work at. That's the only difference. It's still networking, but I kind of pivot, if that makes sense.

Linda Ostovitz: And is your company supportive of that effort? 'cause that's so much of who you are.

Cheryl Brown: I know.

Linda Ostovitz: Yeah.

Cheryl Brown: So far, so good. I think if it's all part of kind of marketing who we are and recruiting and making sure that people want to work here because there's a face and there's an

image and it's like, Hey, wait a minute. They're involved. They do more. It's not just that manufacturing plant up on the mountain.

So yeah, I think it's an opportunity. There's my word. And we'll see, we'll kind of explore that and see what happens because, yeah, it's good. Recruiting's hard and making, we don't have necessarily a marketing team because it's Coke. Like they, Coke is, I don't know. It's, that's another it's very unusual to be in that situation.

And so I'm I guess recruiting, marketing, communication, legal. I don't know. I have all these hats right

Linda Ostovitz: You wear them beautifully. I will tell you, you gave me chills as you were talking about a courageous act. I used, the less elegant term jumping off a cliff, but it was a courageous act that you took and about friendships, but knowing you as well as I do they're so fortunate to have you, and especially to have you in a role where you are creating, you're not walking in and saying, okay, I can check the boxes for this job description.

You are creating the job description, which I think is so cool, and the strategy, and you being out there with your beautiful face as the face of Coke. Huh? Who could be more fortunate than to have that?

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

Linda Ostovitz: So thank you so much for joining me today on Real Talk, Real Growth.

Maybe we should check in with you in a couple of months

Cheryl Brown: Yeah.

Linda Ostovitz: and you'll be telling me you're running this group and that group and on the board and the chair person, and hopefully have a permanent home that you and Bill have found and love to spend the rest of your days in. That would be great.

Cheryl Brown: and I want you to come visit and I think my experiences and friendships in Maryland only prepared me for this job.

Linda Ostovitz: You know what? You give as much as you receive my dear. And no relationship is a one way street. Even if it's not a good one, right? But the best ones are two-way streets, and we all learn from each other and help each other, and I'm so happy to see you and wish you all the best and thrilled for what you've accomplished so far.

And I will talk to you soon. Thank you for joining us on Real Talk, Real Growth, Cheryl Brown, ladies and gentlemen.

Cheryl Brown: Thank you, Linda.