

DARE Q & A with: Rebecca Jacoby



Rebecca Jacoby's extensive understanding of business operations, infrastructure, and application deployments, as well as her knowledge of products, software, and services, helps her advance Cisco's business through the use of Cisco technology. Since joining Cisco in 1995, she has held a variety of leadership roles in operations, manufacturing, and IT. Prior to joining Cisco, she held a variety of planning and operations positions with other companies in Silicon Valley. She holds a bachelor's degree in economics from the University of the Pacific and a master's degree in business administration from Santa Clara University.

Q: What is the biggest risk you've ever taken?

A: The core challenge I've had over time is to stay conscious about how I am evolving professionally, and making decisions that are consistent with my core values. It's all about knowing what I want to be, what I bring to the table and then consciously deciding how to match that to the context I'm operating within.

For example, I was heavily influenced about eight or nine years into my career when economic issues led the company to make difficult decisions regarding resources.

During that time I noticed some ethical elements that didn't match my value system. These elements not only affected me, they also affected the organization as a whole. I had to decide how I would handle the situation, and it all circled back to understanding myself, the context of my environment and being able to harmonize those two things. Ultimately I left this company.

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Q: Where did you get the courage and confidence to do this?

A: I get my courage from my family. My father passed away when I was two, and as one of nine siblings, we learned how to solve issues in a practical fashion. I learned just about everything I know about leadership from my mother - don't whine, try to solve the problem, have a good time and notice (*cont.*)

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A: (cont.) the positive things.

In addition, I have very little social fear, which I have observed is relatively unusual in the workplace. There is a tremendous amount of fear in the workplace where people feel they aren't necessarily doing the right thing or saying the right thing to get ahead. In my experience, people imagine there are more politics in the

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workforce than there actually are. I believe people need to turn their perspective around and recognize they have the capacity to control their own situation, or at least, how they respond.

Q: What is the biggest mistake you have ever made? What did you learn from it and how did you recover?

A: I once took a job with a company I knew had some risks associated with it. The company was on the decline, I was with them for a year and in that time they went from 1500 to 75 employees, yet I still had a job. The way I managed that situation was to show I would do whatever needed to be done. I leveraged every skill I had. It was also at that time I realized I didn't want to remain at the

company. I recognized they had a very different value system than mine, especially in terms of how they treated employees. I knew I needed to leave, which taught me a lesson about the need to always have an exit strategy. I also didn't understand the industry I was going into, which became another learning experience.

It's important to research the industry before taking a new job. Is it growing? Can you be proud of it? My great learning from this experience was that the place you work has a tremendous impact on your individual success. Be very diligent about the research process - making sure to interview multiple people within the company, asking them the same questions and making sure their value system matches yours. And lastly, taking it one level deeper by researching the leadership team to determine their goals and culture and ensuring it matches your value system.

Q: If you had a young woman you cared deeply about entering the workforce today, what single piece of advice would you have for her?

A: Be true to yourself - a premise that starts with knowing who you are, what you want and what you bring to the table. Go in with an approach that recognizes most people want to contribute and really try (cont.)

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A: (*cont.*) hard to do the right thing. If you can do this, you'll have an open mind and be able to solve problems and move things forward.

Q: What advice do you have for building self-confidence?

A: Take on a stretch assignment. Early in my career I was chosen as part of a small team for a special assignment. I worked in manufacturing where we had cycle times that were a year long. The assignment given to our team was to reduce cycle time in half, and to do so in one year. For two months our group met every week and spoke about how ridiculous this project was and how it simply could not be done. We had a fairly wise leader who allowed us to vent, and then one day he came in to our meeting room and told us the time for venting was over. He said we were to get the assignment done or they would find someone else to do it. After realizing we wasted two months and only had 10 months to finish, we put forth the effort and achieved our goal within seven months. Once you have the experience of accomplishing something like this, you no longer believe anything is impossible.

Also, recognize that you must work through your discomfort with challenging assignments and never be afraid to ask for help. Ask for help and you'll be amazed at how many people will help you.

Q: How did you make the leap from middle to senior management?

A: I have always focused on getting results! You become associated with success and build a track record. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, but your track record is what allows people to notice your strengths and forgive your weaknesses. Also, make sure to build relationships on practical results where you have the opportunity to help someone else and vice versa. There are countless times when you need the help of a colleague to get initiatives over the line, and good relationships are almost like having a "favor bank."

It all goes back to knowing yourself and who you want to be – because if you know that, then you're going to behave consistently. If you don't know that and you're all over the map, you find yourself wondering where your career got derailed.

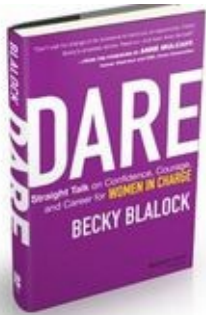
Q: What is your greatest fear today?

A: The CIO job is one of a few where you can create a legacy. You don't make a legacy by yourself. (*cont.*)

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A: (cont.) I want the people on my team to be successful. I want to preserve their trust in me and make sure I don't let them down, that my leadership enables, and doesn't derail their accomplishments.



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