

DARE Q & A with: Penny Manuel



Penny Manuel is executive vice president of engineering and construction services for Southern Company. She directs the 1,500 people who are responsible for new generation and environmental strategy development, major project design and construction execution, technology due diligence, and operations and maintenance (O&M) support. She provides oversight for a \$250 million staff budget and a \$2 billion project budget annually, while managing \$7 billion in active capital projects.

Manuel has been with Southern Company since 1982, having begun her career as an engineer in power generating plants before moving into senior management and executive positions. In 2005, she was named vice president and senior production officer of Gulf Power, and in that position managed three generating facilities in northwest Florida. In 2007, she became vice president of technical services, and she moved into her current position in 2010.

Manuel earned a bachelor's degree in materials engineering from the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) and has completed the Advanced Management Program at Harvard Business School. She is a member of the Society of Women Engineers, the Pumpkin Center Baptist Church, and is active in the community, serving as a board member for Junior Achievement and executive sponsor for the United Way of Central Alabama and the Center for Energy Workforce Development. In 2011, she was chosen as one of UAB's "40 Engineers Making a Difference," and was honored with the Engineering Council of Birmingham's Leadership Award in 2013.

Q: What is the most challenging thing you have ever had to do, and where did you get the courage and confidence to do it?

A: In August, 2010, I accepted the position I currently hold. It is a very challenging assignment, managing major construction projects on seven sites, including the country's largest biomass facility in Nacogdoches, Texas, and twenty-first-century coal gasification in Kemper County, Mississippi. Eight months after I began, my fifty-two-year-old husband, Don, suffered what I thought was a very mild stroke, and five months later, he died suddenly and unexpectedly.

Don and I had a beautiful love for each other, and he was my rock. We had been together for seventeen years. He and I together built a life as I built my career. We had chosen for him to quit work, so that we could relocate and I could pursue my career dream. We had no children together, not so much by choice as by fate, so my life revolved around him and work. His death was a terrible blow to me. It broke my heart. (*cont.*)

DARE Q & A with: Penny Manuel

A: (*cont.*) Yet losing Don was not the hard part, although it was the saddest day of my life. Learning to live without him has been the challenge.

The first weeks are a blur, and the first months only memories of unspeakable pain and regret. I beat myself up for all the things I didn't do. I worked too much; I didn't pay enough attention to his health; I should have been more aggressive with the doctors. A very dear friend, a minister and counselor, told me that I had to quit blaming myself, or his death would kill me, too.

The best friends and sisters that God ever put on the earth surrounded me. For six days, they did not leave me alone, and they continue to lift me as I move on. My Southern Company family has stood by me, and I received hundreds of cards from them. My coworkers have donated thousands of dollars to our church in Don's memory.

***“Allow yourself
time to grieve.
Don't be a hero.”***

While my world stopped, life moved on. The challenges of a \$7 billion construction program did not pause for me to catch up. I wish I could say that I poured myself into work as a relief, but I did not, and I could not. For the first few months I was bitter and angry at myself for allowing work to interfere with what would be our last months together. It seemed to me that I had spent the last year of Don's life worried about the wrong thing.

With that said, the responsibility I carried for my company did force me to return. I engaged people to watch me at work who were close to me. My concern was that I would fall apart and not know it. My bosses and my team were kind to me, but the most important thing they did was never to let me give up on myself. “Too easy” was not what I needed.

As I write this, fifteen months have passed. Looking back, I can see what I couldn't see in real time. Call it advice, or lessons learned, or mistakes made. I won't say which ones I did and which ones I didn't do—but wish I had. I just want to pass it all on to others who may find themselves facing tragic loss.

Allow yourself time to grieve. Don't be a hero.

Don't allow yourself too much time to grieve. There is no timeframe for grief, and everyone grieves in his or her own way. What is right for me may not be right for you, but at some time, you have to will yourself to get back into life—and work.

Ask for help. Driven professionals, especially women, often find it hard to ask for help. I sought a grief counselor, but probably not as soon as I should. I engaged a professional coach to help me discover what I want from life and work, because what I want from life is just different now. Accept that you are (*cont.*)

DARE Q & A with: Penny Manuel

A: (*cont.*) forever changed. Sometimes life makes a slow curve, and you wake up and find yourself headed in a different direction, and you think, “I didn’t know that was where I was headed.” Sometimes life takes a sharp and dramatic turn, and all you can say is, “Here’s where I am going. I didn’t choose it, but I can choose for it to be just as good, only different.”

Define the work/life balance for you, for your family, and for your career. Each of us makes choices every day. A professional career is hard and demanding, but it is what Don and I chose together, and he was proud of me. He allowed me to do what I do, and we both made sacrifices for it. Do I still have regrets? You bet. I can’t go back, but I can appreciate the memories that my company and my career allowed me and Don to make.

Choose your company wisely. Work with a team who shares your values and beliefs and who demonstrate their commitment to each other.

I will not say that I am over my loss, because you don’t get over tragic loss, you go through it. I will say that my courage to go on comes from my faith—I am a Christian—my friends and work family, and from a long-held belief that success is about how you recover from the inevitable setback.

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

A: The biggest professional mistake I ever made was to take a job I didn’t want. When deciding to accept a new opportunity, I usually trust my intuition, that little voice in the back of my head. I was being considered for a new position, which did not fit into the career path on which I had always seen myself and for which I thought I was most qualified. The job was for an organization in which my immediate boss would be someone I did not want to work for. When the time came to award the job, I was the only one available for the assignment.

Having been with Southern Company all my professional life, I’ve always said that I would do whatever the company needed me to do: If they need a window washer, I’m your man. So, against my better judgment (and against my husband’s advice), I accepted. I was up front with my boss, who knew I did not want the assignment, but who had confidence in my ability to contribute in this role.

I’ll never know where I would be if I had said no. The new, difficult boss met my expectations, but (*cont.*)

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DARE Q & A with: Penny Manuel

A: (cont.) eventually moved on. I learned to value in him those things that made him strong. (He was one of the smartest men I ever met.) I learned to persevere and stand up for myself. I also learned that technical and management experiences transfer at the senior level, and that just because I am not the technical expert in a field, my technical background did allow me to ask the right questions and surround myself with the right people. Next time, however, I will say no.

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: I would tell her “Don’t be afraid.” Don’t be afraid to try and to fail. Don’t be afraid to work really hard. Don’t be afraid to be bold. Don’t be afraid to go somewhere you’ve never been. Believe in yourself, and don’t be afraid.

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

“Don’t be afraid to engage in a new challenge, but always set yourself up for success by being prepared.”

A: My career path began as a plant engineer. I held my first supervisor position at age twenty-five, so I have been in management most of my professional life. Middle management positions in corporate Internal Audit, Information Technology, and Human Resources allowed me insight into the broader workings of the corporation. Senior management expectations are both broad and deep. One of my mentors used the phrase “Make sure you get your major” when he coached young professionals who were anxious to move up. Ten years in the power plants became my major. Ten more years in broader roles honed what I call “management intuition” and allowed me to build relationships across the company as a foundation for my first executive experience.

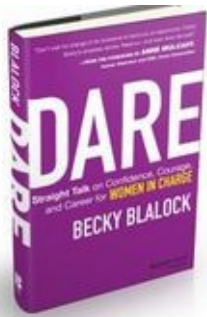
Q: What advice do you have for building self-confidence?

A: Self-confidence comes from experience, hard-work, preparedness, and learning from experiences. Don’t be afraid to engage in a new challenge, but always set yourself up for success by being prepared. Surround yourself with a small network of people who will be honest with you—both positively honest and critically honest. I can build personal trust in a small network, and the feedback when I do something well helps overcome challenges. It helps me be confident that I can do well and that I can get better.

DARE Q & A with: Penny Manuel

Q: What do you fear most today?

A: That one is hard for me. Don used to tell me that I wasn't afraid of anything. And while that is not exactly true, I do fear very little. As a senior manager, the decisions I make affect many people's lives and families. I wouldn't call what I feel "fear," but I do carry a deep sense of responsibility that my own failures and mistakes could have dire consequences for innocent people.



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