

# her story of rising

## *An interview with Rima Jasser*

Global Director, Lean & Six Sigma, Ford Motor Company



*I'm Kristin Kolesar, Mentor Coach for the Women Rising® program and today I'm sitting down with Rima Jasser, Global Director of Lean and Six Sigma at Ford Motor Company. Rima is an alumni of the Women Rising® program. This is her story of rising.*

**Kristin:** I would love to learn about your leadership path and who you are.

**Rima:** I am Lebanese. I'd like to start with that. I immigrated when I was 18 years old to the States, and I didn't speak English, so I had to learn English as a second language at Wayne State University. Sometimes we take for granted where we came from; it really shapes who we are and I'm appreciative of the fact that I got the opportunity to come to the United States. It's the land of opportunities, right?

I studied chemistry in school. I wanted to be a doctor, but I fell in love with automotive, and the rest is history. I hired in at Ford at Dearborn assembly plant as an environmental engineer and I found out early on that I really wanted to learn about what we do as a company. I chose to become a production supervisor. And that's where it solidified my love for manufacturing. I love interacting with hourly employees, learning what they do, how I can be of help and service, and it helped me shape my leadership style, if you serve your people well, they'll support you back. Throughout my career, I became a better leader through those interactions. After a few years, I went into industrial engineering, then into lean manufacturing and became the plant Ford Production System (FPS) manager. I had the opportunity to work in staff as the regional FPS manager, supporting the NA Truck Region, and from there I went to the Asia Pacific to become the Regional Manager for the Ford Production System. I launched lean manufacturing across 18 plants. I had the opportunity to work globally with 7 different countries, which was absolutely the most incredible experience in my career. It was phenomenal! And then I transitioned back to the US.

I joined the power train manufacturing engineering team as a global industrial engineering manager. After 3 years, I was itching to go back to the plant. I was asked to go back to the Chicago Assembly plant on a short assignment to help with launch, and that turned into a full-time job. I took the **Women Rising®** class right before I went to Chicago, and I was still having coaching sessions with my mentor at that time; she helped me recognize what I needed to ask for to satisfy my career desires and aspirations. Prior to her coaching, I was reluctant to ask for what I wanted. She helped me formulate a plan of action to go and say, "Hey, Mentor, hey, Sponsor, this is what I'd like to do with my life; can you help me get there?" The part time job turned into a full-time job as an Area Manager at Final Assembly in Chicago. Then I transferred to Michigan Assembly, also as the Final Area Manager. About a year after I got to Michigan Assembly, they knocked on my door and said, "Would you like to be the Director of Lean and Six Sigma?" And that's when I took this role, and I've been here for about 18 months.

**Kristin:** And the role is Global Director... for Lean and Six Sigma. That's a big role!



# her story of rising

**Rima:** I am so grateful. Lean has always been my passion, and I always find my way back. I do it for a couple of years and I go back into different roles, and then I get pulled back into it. I absolutely love what I do.

**Kristin:** I'm curious about that. **Would you say that you have been pulled into roles that were not lined up with your passion in the past. And if so, how did you navigate that?**

**Rima:** It's not so much that I wasn't passionate about other roles, but to get to where I am today, I needed to do those various roles to prepare me to be a better leader. If you don't understand how the business is run, the best way to learn it is to just go do it. Get yourself immersed in jobs that are very difficult. The jobs that I had prior to this role were very, very challenging. You are responsible for a department of 500-600 people, and for the performance of that department from a safety, quality, delivery, cost, people, environment, and maintenance perspective. The responsibility was massive. I had to do those difficult roles to prepare me for where I am.

**Kristin:** Yeah, I think that's important. That's come up in some of my other discussions with other leaders in these interviews...going into that space that's uncharted territory, something that's very new for you and being willing to do that and how important that is to progress in your career.

**Rima:** Absolutely. When I first raised my hand and said, I'm interested in going back to manufacturing or to the plant, and to do the roles I just described, people thought I was crazy. They're like, "What are you doing? You have a very good job." It's an office job, work-life balance is awesome, and "you want to go and work from 5 in the morning until 8 o'clock at night? That's what you want to go back and do?" I said, "yeah, I do" and it was the best decision honestly. At the time people thought I was nuts. It really helped me appreciate what the plant folks do at an area manager level, and now I can serve better in this capacity, because it's all about serving others at the end of the day. By learning the struggles and the tribulations that role entails helps me be a more empathetic leader.

**Kristin:** You mentioned your coach had you go and ask for what you wanted, partner with your boss or sponsor to say, "Hey what do the next steps look like for me?". **What do you think kept you from being able to do that prior to those coaching sessions?**

**Rima:** Probably self-doubt is the biggest one. I didn't think I would be qualified to do it. I felt like I would be a burden if I go ask for what I wanted. Throughout my career, I was under the impression that my performance should speak for itself. My people leaders should be able to recognize my hard work and support my career aspirations. Sometimes it works, but other times it doesn't, and being that you are responsible for your own career development, you have to advocate for yourself. I didn't do that for a long time, as I had a hard time asking for what I want.

**Kristin:** For the person that is starting out, or they're at that emerging leader level, what advice do you have for them?



# her story of rising

**Rima:** If they've gone through the Women Rising® program...be a sponge. Learn as much as you can about yourself as a leader, and what's holding you back. There were a couple of things that really resonated with me in the program. Ruminating is probably one of my biggest areas of opportunity. I've learned through that class what can I control and if I can control it, then great! If I can't control it, then, don't waste a minute on it; just move on, because all it does is waste energy, right? Do not miss those coaching sessions, because I tell you what, it was so helpful to get that different perspective. And to get that push when you need it. So that would be my advice. And if you are an emerging leader who is contemplating going through the program, do it.

Also, just as a leader, the way I do things is that I try to learn. I listen. I seek to understand. I try to be present. The day I don't give back, I feel like I've missed something. So, being present, being available. Being humble will take you a long way because it helps you build relationships. I've got 30 years with the company. I feel like I owe it to myself, and I owe it to the younger generation who are coming through the system, to be a mentor and an advocate.

**Kristin:** That's great. Humble was the word I was thinking of as you were sharing. Humility might be your superpower. In a way it opens the door to be able to connect with others. What a beautiful thing that you're able to offer through your presence and your humility. I love that.

**Rima:** Thank you.

**Kristin:** As I mentor coach with the program, I hear from people in the program, "Well, I want to achieve this next thing in my career. I see myself moving in this direction. I would like this." And when it comes to networking, which is uncomfortable for a lot of people to do, how do they fit that in, and then manage all the other things? Do you have any tips for how you leverage or keep your networks serving where you're going in your career?

**Rima:** We talk about sponsors and mentors in the program. You know sponsors and mentors are different. A mentor is someone who's going to give you advice on something, and a sponsor is someone who's going to speak about you when you're not in the room, who's going to advocate for you. Through my career I've always built relationships with folks I admired as leaders. No one's going to sponsor you unless they've had a relationship with you. Whether it's a boss that you worked for in the past, or someone that you've worked on a project with.... as they see you develop and see what you are about, your values, and how you conduct yourself, how you achieve your goals and project deliverables, those are the ones that are going to remember and say "Oh yeah, I worked with her on that project, and she did phenomenal. And she can definitely do that job." That's what really helped me go talk to my sponsor and say, "Are you my sponsor?" And he looked at me, and he said, "What are you talking about? Of course, I am your sponsor." I'm like, "Well, then, act like one. Why are you holding back? I need you to please advocate for me because I want that job."



# her story of rising

It starts with building relationships, getting people to know you and what you're about and what you can deliver. Throughout your career, as you find people that you admire, and they admire you, and you have that connection, knock on their door, and say, "Hey, would you be my mentor?". And maybe you start initially as a mentor/ mentee. And then if that relationship grows further and they really like you, and they're in a position of power that can really influence your career, then say, "Hey, (leader), can you be my sponsor? I really admire how you do your business. I want to learn from you. I am looking for someone to sponsor me," and that "it won't be too time consuming, maybe once a month, we get together and chat." That's what I would recommend.

**Kristin:** Awesome. I love that answer. And I'm going to also ask you when you talked about people that you admire, **what are some of the qualities that stand out to you that you have found yourself admiring in other leaders that you wanted to embody?**

**Rima:** Kindness is very important to me, because at the end of the day people will remember you for your kindness, not so much for the levels that you've achieved throughout your career. How do they treat their people? Are they a good listener? Do they have good self-awareness? Can they speak to me with vulnerability? Can they pour their heart out? I wear my heart on my sleeve. And I'm okay with that. There is a risk with that because you can get hurt. But at this point in my career, I'm very sure of myself and who I am. I can't control others, but I can control how I react to things. So, to me, kindness, being a good listener, being involved in the community are the key traits I look for in a good leader. Community is a big part of who I am, whether inside community within Ford, where I'm involved in a lot of employee resource groups, or externally, where I spend a ton of my time with charities. I'm on the Board of Directors for *Crohns and Colitis*, I am also involved with the *March of Dimes*. I also support *100 Women Who Care Manufacturing*.

**Kristin:** I love your confidence that maybe comes through experience, maybe comes after many years of being in your field, working with lots of different people, coming to a country that is not your native country, and all that resilience that comes with that helps build your confidence. **It makes me think about the women that are learning to navigate being in a male dominated environment, and I'm curious what struggles maybe you found in those spaces and being able to be your authentic self?**

**Rima:** Yeah, and trust me, I haven't always been this way. I went through a lot of struggles where I would literally lose sleep over a comment that someone has made. I would feel very uneasy when I have to go interface with someone who I know is very judgmental, based on past experiences. And even to this day, I have to put things in perspective and say, "your opinion doesn't matter". You're not going to occupy any space in my mind. And something that Brené Brown has said, "If you're not in the arena fighting the fight, your opinion of me does not matter", so I always go back to that. Again, it hasn't always been that way as I have struggled with confidence and with being judged. But through experience, coaching and mentoring and through seeking out to the people that I know love me and won't judge me, I go and say, "Hey, I'm struggling with this. What's your advice?" The main thing is you're never alone. When you are going through those struggles, reach out to someone who you trust, that's going to give you solid advice to get you through it. And hopefully you get to a point where I'm at right now, where you can say "Your opinion doesn't matter. I'm fighting the fight. If you're with me in the fight, then your opinion matters. But if you're not, then I'm not interested in hearing what you have to say."



# her story of rising

**Kristin:** Almost like the differentiation between, Is this person for me or against me? You can be for each other and disagree on things and it's a very different experience than being against each other.

**Rima:** That's right. Yeah.

**Kristin:** Wonderful. **Is there anything you'd like to say about the program?**

**Rima:** Honestly, I wish I had known about the program in the first 5 years of my career because I probably would have had a different trajectory. If I had the coaching, if I knew what to look for, and if I knew where my shortcomings are, etc. because I'm like, "Wow, I did not know that about myself." If I had that opportunity to learn about myself earlier in my career, perhaps I would be in a different place, or maybe not. Who knows? Right? But it takes maturity to learn how to navigate through your opportunities and your shortcomings. When I was asked to participate in the first pilot, I wrote back to my VP and I said, "Listen, this is something that I absolutely endorse, and we need to see what we can do to make it a standard program at Ford, because I think a lot of the women can really benefit from it."

**Kristin:** Thank you for those kind words, and it's always good to hear the positive feedback, and thank you for supporting the program both through sponsoring and also participating in the workshop discussion. It's wonderful. And you're one of the originals. Right?

**Rima:** Yeah, exactly. I feel very honored, to have participated in the initial pilot. Which again, I found very helpful.

**Kristin:** Thank you so much for your time. I loved learning from you.

