

her story of rising

An interview with Carlene Bills

President & CEO, Ford Component Sales



I'm Kristin Kolesar, Mentor Coach for the Women Rising® Program and today I'm sitting down with Carlene Bills, President and CEO of Ford Component Sales at Ford Motor Company. Carlene is an alumni of the Women Rising® Program and currently leads a global team in the aftermarket and EV Chargers segment. This is her story of rising.

Kristin: Thanks for being here today. **Let's start with you walking me through your career path and what helped you to progress to the next level?**

Carlene: If you look at my career path and where I started, I had a non-traditional path at Ford Motor Company. Typically, at Ford you come into an organization, and that's the organization that you stay in. So you come into finance, you stay in finance, you end up retiring out of finance. But I had an awesome mentor who told me "When they give you an opportunity to step in a white space"... it was the first time I ever heard this word white space and it's an undefined space... "don't be afraid to take it on." And so, thinking back then of not being afraid to take it on. The issue I ran into was that I never got offered the opportunity to go into the white space. So what I had to do was really reposition myself, so that I can be in the forefront, so that I can take more difficult projects internally to the organization to be considered for external opportunities. It was not easy. It was not easy.

I tell people a story about sometimes you feel like when you come to work in the morning, and I go into world headquarters and I'd walk to the elevator with all my peers. We are all walking, talking, having a coffee. They push the elevator button. The elevator opens up for them but as soon as I get ready to get on the elevator, it closes. But I still got to get to the twelfth floor. So, what does Carlene do? She goes around and takes the stairs up. I still get to the twelfth floor, but it's going to take me a little bit longer to get up. Sometimes you feel like when you have that different path than your peers, you start going up the stairs, and you're making momentum, then all of a sudden, there's chairs coming down the stairs, lights go off, there's a couple of stairs missing, so it's never an easy path.

And I tell people about the journey that I went on, and people say, "How did you do it?" I didn't give up! When I got on the stairs, and I saw a hole in the stairs, and 3 or 4 stairs were missing, I stepped back and I took a running start, and I jumped over those 3 stairs to get back on my path. But in some cases, you can just get discouraged.

Kristin: That's a powerful metaphor by the way. I really like it.



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Carlene: Some people get discouraged along that climb to the twelfth floor (chuckles). So, I would say that when they say, "how did you do it?" I took on difficult assignments. I went into white spaces, where nothing was clearly defined, and went in and created my own. I was very candid in my response. And I would say I was not candid enough until I took the **Women Rising®** Program.

Kristin: Okay, so tell me more about that when you say I was candid, but I wasn't candid enough. Can you elaborate?

Carlene: So, I was very confident in my approach, but I thought that if I did what I was supposed to do, that people will recognize my accomplishments and award me accordingly and it didn't happen. And I tell you I never felt so low, so crushing in my life. I felt like... I was up for a promotion opportunity. I knew I was next in line. The people leader that was positioning me for that next role left the company but left a clear pathway. Carlene is up next for that promotion, when the position opened up, another leader said, "Hey, I didn't know you were interested in that position?" I didn't speak up because it was my assumption that the leadership team knew that I was next up. But shame on me because I didn't speak up.

I remember coming into my Women Rising® meeting and I was my mighty low. I tell people 95% of the time Carlene Bills has a smile on her face. But there's another 5% and I was in that 5% stage which was very detrimental to me because I was ready to quit. But my coach said, "You know what Carlene, you've got to ask for what you want." She said, "the men do it all the time. They come in; they say I need a promotion. I'm looking for a promotion. I'm not getting equal pay," and instead of us waiting as women, because we're a little bit less vocal when it comes to pay issues. We figure our work would speak for itself, but it doesn't.

And lo and behold! After I had that conversation, she said, "Ask for what you want," I ain't stopped asking.

Kristin: Good for you.

Carlene: Every step of the way, because I know when I take over a role, that my predecessor makes way more money than me and didn't have as many responsibilities. So typically, when I get into a new role, they say, "Well, you can have this role and everything else!" but don't want to pay me what my predecessor was being paid. So, what do I do? I ask for it. Don't ask for it by mouth. I put it in writing.

Kristin: That's smart. That's great. I love that. And I'm sure anyone that reads your story that's going to resonate with them as "oh, okay, put it in writing. Ask for it."



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Carlene: Yeah, don't verbalize it. And I've verbalized it many times, but it was never in writing and so when you put it in writing now, there's a document. Now, there's a trail. So, I'll tell any young lady as you're coming up and you're starting off your career, document what the issues are and what you want.

Kristin: Yeah. That's very, very good. I love your advice, your wisdom. **Since you've gone through the Women Rising® Program, you've seen more changes in your career, so you can directly tie it back to some things that you learned through the program. What stood out to you the most?**

Carlene: I think for me the values discussion and understanding what you value versus what other people value and how everybody's values are relevant. Make sure that you stand firm to what you value, and you don't deviate. But be flexible, and understand what other people value, and try to find that sweet spot in the middle without compromising what you value. I think that was one of the key takeaways.

Looking at my StrengthsFinder assessment, what I did was try to overcompensate on the things that I was not good at, instead of overcompensating on the things that I am good at and focusing on those to help lead and open up doors and discussions for me. You know I've got to work on the things that I need help with, but really highlight and honing in on my strengths is what I found to really help me not be afraid and be able to connect with other people.

Kristin: Do you have any thoughts or words of wisdom that you haven't shared that you'd like to?

Carlene: I would definitely say know that you belong, know that you have purpose. Know that everybody's walk in life is different. But how unique you make your life is about you. You have to focus on your own internal self-healing, self-care. If you're not taking care of yourself, there's no way you can take care of others. And so, as you start to concentrate and really start the deep breathing exercises, the focus, the yoga, whatever it takes to get you in your space to make you successful. I tell people success is just not climbing a corporate ladder. Success for me is achieving the goals that I set for myself, and it could be climbing a corporate ladder, and sometimes it takes a little bit longer to get on that pathway, but really making sure that you're doing it for you, and not for other reasons.

Kristin: That's great.

Carlene: I tell people when I get tired it's going to be time to go bye bye. When I stop smiling, and I stop enjoying what I do, it's going to be time to go bye bye.



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Carlene: I'm in my "legacy phase" of my life, but for the younger generation that's coming in behind me, I kind of feel like if I break my life up into 3 phases the first phase out of college, I call it the "puppy phase". You're getting out. You're trying new things you're going in, and you're turning stuff over. You know you're being curious about your surroundings. So, you're just really out there. You're just learning, you're absorbing everything.

The next phase in life for me was that "do something" phase. And in the "do something" phase, you go out and you build things, you curate, you publish, you get patents, you're launching products. So, you're out there creating things, and in that "do something" phase is where you start to look at, "What do I want to be when I grow up?" When you sit in the audience and you look up at amazing people. You know I can remember, sitting in an audience looking at Mark Fields and Alan Mulally, and just saying, "Wow! I would love to be on that stage." So what does it take for me to get on that stage? Now, in that "do something phase", this is where the coaching comes in to start helping and enabling the young women.

And then I say that final phase, it's the legacy phase that I'm in and that's really about helping others go through the journey in the "do something" and the "learn something phase". My goal is to make sure that the next generation have the tools in their toolkit to be successful and not give up. Not go through the same level of issues without clarity as I did. Let that path be a little less rocky for them.

Kristin: Wonderful. Thank you so much. It was such an honor and a privilege to get to talk with you today.

