

her story of rising

An interview with Rachel Guthrie

Customer Success Account Manager, Microsoft



I'm Kristin Kolesar, Mentor Coach for the Women Rising® program and today I'm sitting down with Rachel Guthrie, Customer Success Account Manager at Microsoft. Rachel is an alumni of the Women Rising® program. This is her story of rising.

Kristin: Very nice to meet you Rachel and thank you for taking the time. Share with us a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Rachel: This program changed my life. I was nominated when I was with the engineering group at Microsoft. I moved from finance to engineering. I was trying to get closer to the business and a role came up in engineering through someone I knew in finance. And I loved that role because I was learning continually. I was doing completely new things and that was exciting, like learning, teaching myself how to program and DAX and do Power BI reports at a level that I'd never done before. So that was fun for about a year. But in that time, I was nominated with 30 of my female engineering colleagues for this program, and I'm never one to skip an opportunity. I was excited to go through **Women Rising®**. I was also at that time ready to make a career change to get even closer to the business at Microsoft.

Every six months, we have to do something we call Connects, basically write a few pages, and answer these questions about the impact that we had on the business. I always had a hard time doing that in finance and then in engineering as well. It was hard to really wrap my head around the benefit I was making to Microsoft. And so, I wanted to get closer to the customer. It was through the program and the exercises I was able to do that. It was so applicable to where I was in that journey, and everything from learning about the difference between what are strengths and what are habits, recognizing that the things that I wasn't so proud of were just habits and not me. They were things that I could change. I loved the *How Women Rise* book that they had us read about habits. I read the book a couple of times and it really resonated with me.

At one point in the program through the coaching that I was getting with Christine, we talked about how I had promised that I would reach out to people in the customer success side of the business. I was at Microsoft for a couple of years before I realized there was even a customer success organization. I knew nothing about it initially, and then I had made a few connections and inroads. The timing has to be right. Through the program, I made commitments to my coach to reach out and follow through with some of those contacts, and in doing so the timing aligned, and I was able to apply for one of the roles. I felt prepared for it because of all the work I had done in the program with the StrengthsFinder and the values exercise that had really helped prepare me to have the conversation about why I wanted to make a move over to the customer side. It was a challenge for sure, but I felt well prepared, and it also kind of gave me the nudge to make those connections and take the scary leap. It was awesome.

Kristin: I love the timing of it. So, you went from a role in engineering as a Senior Program Manager to this other role as a Senior Customer Success Account Manager.



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Rachel: Yes, I was a Senior Finance Manager when I got hired into Microsoft almost 5 years ago, and I spent 2 years in that role. The second year was Covid, and then I was a year in engineering as a Senior Program Manager. And then I moved over to the Customer Success Account Manager role, and even with all my decades of experience as a CPA, I was starting almost at the beginning, an entry level customer facing role. Within my first year, I managed to get promoted. The promotion was interesting, because I'd always been trying to get promoted in finance and engineering, and there was always something else they wanted from me to make that leap. In a customer facing role all my soft skills count for something. I changed teams in that period. My former manager and my new manager were both going on and on about how I do this and that and "it's really amazing". I "hit the ground running" and all the things that they were talking about, such as building trust with the customer and relationships, those are all just the way I operate, and always have. But I felt like in the customer success org it's more valued than it was in finance and engineering. And so, all the things you can't teach that I've always been proud of as my strengths ended up working for me in this role. The program really helped me align what my values are to the type of role that would appreciate those strengths.

Kristin: What difference did you see in yourself when you were able to make that pivot?

Rachel: I came into my own. I gained more and more confidence in myself, especially as I got promoted, and I sort of got that outward recognition of what I always believed I was doing well, my confidence went through the roof and my ambition to learn more and do better increased as well. I became very motivated just knowing that naturally it was such a good fit, and I was doing all the right things already. There's always something else I want to improve on, but I was that much more motivated to do the work on those things and get even better.

Kristin: It sounds like it's as if the program gave you the opportunity to do a little bit of the soul searching and the inner work.

Rachel: Yes, one hundred percent!

Kristin: And then doing the inner work led to the outward recognition and the change to something that just fit more with you, and then that fueled you even more to get promoted.

Rachel: Yeah, very well put. That's exactly it. Without a program like this, you don't really set aside that time, right? I know there were 30 people in the program. At Microsoft it's easy to get sidetracked with other high priority things. We always have tons going on, especially engineering is always on. I think people deprioritize this type of work and don't give enough focus. It was great to be accountable to my coach, be accountable to my peers to show up and do the work that was necessary. I learned a ton in the process.

Kristin: That's wonderful! I love your story. A lot of times, people don't make those kinds of pivots. In general, they just stay on their one track. And you were able to move within a large organization where you didn't even know that the department existed.



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Rachel: I know! And it's funny at Microsoft, right!? You have your [internal] network, but really, it's all finance people or it's all engineering people. Especially for finance professionals, they're like "Customer success? like that's so "fluffy" ... "What are you doing?" especially with the CPA. I couldn't wait to get out of the monotony of the same month and quarter end/ year end cycles. Once I've done that a couple of times, I stopped learning anything. I couldn't improve on much more, but in Customer Success, things are always changing and there's always more to learn.

We have to understand everything about all the products which you're never going to do, right!? And then you also have to understand how that applies to the customer. Our customers are huge. I've got one customer right now, and they're global and it's a full-time job just keeping up with them. I love that continuous learning. I'm super proud that I made the leap.

Kristin: **When you look at the world you came from before moving into what you're in now, whatever is behind us is like a steppingstone to a certain degree, or we take something with us that helps us. Is there anything that stands out to you?**

Rachel: For sure. I was in finance and then I was in engineering doing basically analytics, and programming. That analytical mindset of trying to follow the data and see what the data is really telling us. You will hear a lot of things from the account team, and different people on the account team will have different opinions, and the customer will tell you something else. Then, you'll look at the data and realize that the story is somewhere in between. When you're negotiating contracts, and I'm deeply involved in that, you have to go back to the data and get people's stories straight. I was recently able to pull some data that we got from finance into a power BI and visually show the account team what the year over year growth truly was to understand what we could forecast in the future, and what kind of contract we could expect them to sign. It was pivotal getting everyone on the same page because there were assumptions certain people were making along the way and stories they were telling and sharing that just weren't quite true. To negotiate effectively, we have to be able to empathize with the customer's perspective too. And not come at things from an angle that they don't recognize. So those skills were massively helpful. And with that comes an ability to tell a story from the data and boil something very complex down to a succinct story.

Kristin: I love that! **What were some of your blind spots that maybe were revealed to you as a result of going through the Women Rising® program?**

Rachel: I read the book *How Women Rise* a couple of times, because I identified with so many of the habits that I didn't realize. I can't even stress how huge that was to realize that even just the way you word an email has an impact on your brand and how you are perceived. My blind spots were habits that I didn't realize were undermining my own credibility. Recognizing that these are things that a lot of people do and these are just habits, just like a chocolate bar in the afternoon. I can break that habit if I decide it's not serving me. That was eye-opening for me and just talking about it I feel like I want to go read the book again. That's what I mean when I say I found every part of the program resonated. It blew my mind on the positive side, to do the strengths finder, and to really recognize what my strengths are and how they map to my ideal job. But then the blind spots that I have, as far as my own, the learned behaviors. Those were surprising to me.



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Kristin: What elements of the program were your favorite? What parts of the program did you get the most value out of?

Rachel: I got the most value out of my 1:1's with Christine (my coach). She was fantastic! Especially because of the accountability I felt to do what we talked about. I'd have a chat with her, I'd say, "I want to go do this. What are the next steps?". I need to email so and so. I better have emailed by the time I talked with her again. That was great because I have to do what I say I'm going to do. And doing those things she pushed me to do are what got me where I am now. So, she knows I'm eternally grateful to her for that. The one-on-one coaching was amazing. The second-best thing was reading that book about habits. Well, I would say that and the Clifton Strengths assessment. And I've mentored a few people since then and had them do Clifton Strengths. I send them the book. Those are really the main things that I got out of it.

Kristin: The program has been over for a while, and you have maybe new goals. Is there anything that you're doing differently?

Rachel: It's so funny, because I feel like for the first time, I don't really want to make a move now. I'm happy where I am.

Kristin: You're probably in a role where there's always an opportunity to learn and grow. So that keeps you engaged.

Rachel: And it's super purposeful. You know, working with customers can be stressful, for sure. I'm in an stage in my career where I can handle that. I would continue to go back to that book for sure, because there's some great reminders in there.

Kristin: You mentioned you love how your role is so purposeful now. **What values are most important to you that influence the kind of leader you want to be?**

Rachel: I would say building trust and well-being. I love my role because I can really give myself a good amount of balance in my career. I work from home and that affords me a ton of flexibility. Well-being is central to the role I have now. Empathy is paramount to have with the customer. Inclusion is a huge part of my role where I'm connecting people who can help each other and helping drive a team to success. And then Integrity, doing what I say I'm going to do. And then, of course, gratitude is one of my core values. Those things are super key in my role. And it's all about relationship building and building trust across the Microsoft account team and the customer. Those are kind of the values I live into every day.

Kristin: What advice would do you have for women that are considering going through the Women Rising® Program?

Rachel: Do it. Take the opportunity! It's such an amazing program.



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I've done both straight up individual coaching and then I've done this program. And I would highly recommend the program over just ad hoc, individual coaching because it is so well structured, well thought out and planned. It leads you through a series of exercises and education, and then with the one-on-one component, that helps get you on the right track, whatever that next path may be. The insights I learned from going through that program in its format were so helpful. It was very balanced and impactful for me.

Kristin: As a woman, a leader working for a massive company (Microsoft), what's one thing that you wish you knew more about as it pertains to women in leadership?

Rachel: Hmm! I came from oil and gas, which is a real old boys network. After 6 years I left that company and came to Microsoft. I wish I knew the power of women supporting women, because the connections I made as a result of this program ended up just accelerating my career so much faster than what men had told me for years in the past would happen. It's really the women that were the ones that propelled me through. That's not been my experience in life until now. I was in sailing, and it was pretty cutthroat amongst the women. And then I was in oil and gas.

Kristin: Did you say sailing?

Rachel: Yachting, like Olympic campaigning.

Kristin: Oh wow!

Rachel: It was brutal. My whole life my understanding of women was that we were competing. And it wasn't until you know my 30's and 40's that I started to recognize women who were supporting me and had my back. I wish I knew the power of that, or maybe sought out other women leaders sooner in my career. Because I've not only had men who didn't follow through, but I've had women actively working against me in my past, bosses and VPs who didn't do anything for my career. But since I joined Microsoft, I'm really understanding what that can do for your career if you have women, mentors, and leaders to help.

Kristin: Now, I am really regretting that we are at the end of our time, and I just learned that you did Olympic Sailing. So that's awesome!

Rachel: [laughs]

Kristin: And I love that you shared that story just now, because that is a big deal that you were doing Olympic sailing, and the experience you had with women in that environment and then going to oil and gas and now to Microsoft. What an amazing experience.

Rachel: Culture is such a huge thing. Right?! I think the **Women Rising®** program really helps build a culture of women supporting women. When you [BenchStrength Coaching] come into a company and you have 20 or 30 people go through this program you are contributing to the culture by helping shape the way that these women think about each other, and how women leaders in the company can think about supporting other women in the company. It's unfortunate, but it was decades before I got to experience that.

Kristin: I'm so glad you shared that. And wonderful getting to meet you. Thank you for your time.

Rachel: Thank you very much. I really appreciate it.

