

*wisdom*  
WARRIORS

journeys  
through  
leadership  
AND life

WOMEN WITH THE COURAGE TO BE TRUE TO THEMSELVES

carol seymour

---

Foreword by Kathryn Beiser



# Julie Fasone Holder



***There may come a time when you go to a role for which you have no experiences to draw on that are helpful.***

When I was a junior in high school, my father lost his business and our home. I went from a comfortable middle-class existence to virtual poverty. My mother became the chief breadwinner and an inspiration to me. That profoundly shaped me and made me much more independent, ambitious, and resilient than many of my peers.

In 2004, I moved from the chemicals division of Dow, where I had spent 20 years, to the plastics division. Here, I would be leading 1,500 people while dealing with new businesses and a new business model. For a while during the transition, I worked with an executive coach. After doing an initial 360-review, he said to me, "You know, people don't know you or what you stand for." So he asked me to write down my personal credo, including how I wanted to lead and how I wanted to be known.

I came up with 10 bullet points about what was important to me (like *trust*), and what people could expect from me as a leader (like a commitment to make *them* successful). Then I had a communications person help me polish it up before I rolled it out to my leadership team. My leadership credo had an amazing impact.

*Julie is the CEO and Founder of JFH Insights*

**The credo became an incredible alignment tool that made us all accountable to lead with a new set of behaviors.**

I started hearing that people now understood what my expectations were. My direct reports started preparing their own credos and aligning them with mine. Then they started cascading the whole exercise down the organization. Sharing that one exercise effectively instilled a new culture of leadership in a historically hierarchical organization.

## Unmet Expectations

Of course, the credo didn't mean that everyone's expectations were always met. One expectation I had, for instance, went unmet when I moved into the C-suite. I moved into the C-suite role thinking that I had been sufficiently trained and prepared for it through my 32 years of experience with the organization. I was a good leader, and I was smart. I knew how to run organizations. I knew how to lead. I was ready.

**Those three years in the C-suite were the hardest of my career. For me, life at the top was very different and very lonely.**

That really surprised me. I just assumed that I could do things the way I had always done them because my previous experiences had helped me succeed in the past.

In hindsight, I realized that I didn't have a great appreciation for two things:

One, I knew there were differences between running a function and running a business, but I didn't appreciate the differences in the value the company saw between the two. I was used to running businesses. My background was in marketing, sales, and business leadership. The C-suite role was about running functions: HR, public affairs, and marketing and sales for the entire company. Having someone with business skills like myself running these functions meant I would inevitably be inviting people to look at things differently than they had in the past (i.e., from the perspective of how are we supporting the businesses).

## The Intersection

When you find the intersection of what you're really good at and what you're really passionate about, then you will absolutely have a wonderful career and be very happy in it. But when your gut starts telling you that you're no longer living your authentic brand, I say just trust your instincts. If you start feeling like what's going on is inconsistent with your values, or if you feel like you're no longer valued or valuable, those are hints that maybe this isn't the right place for you.

Two, I didn't think strategically about the importance of allies. I approached the role the same way I had done all the rest of the jobs in my career, which was in terms of working together to try to build a really good organization.

**I didn't have people around me who were rooting for me. The support systems that existed before were nonexistent.**

I was fairly naïve about how politics and "insiding" worked at the top and how protective people would be of their turf. I didn't understand the dynamics of working with my peers and the challenging nature of the culture. It was more competitive than any of my previous experiences.

No one was negotiating the conflicts in the "white space" to help us collaborate. Admittedly, some decisions I made probably should've been more thought through. Eventually, it got to the point where I didn't feel valued or valuable. I struggled a lot with that, as you might imagine.