

International Women's Day: Women, Leadership, and AI-Driven Transformation in Supply Chain

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Lori: So the future of supply chain in a nutshell is consistently changing, consistently being disrupted, but moving from efficiency, resiliency to autonomous is really how we're gonna help our supply chains grow.

Sin: Hello, my name is Sin To and this is The Future of Supply Chain, a podcast where we discuss hot topics, best practices, and the latest innovation in today's global supply chain. And today we have a premier, as I'm joined by my wonderful co-host, Zoriana.

Zoriana: Hello everyone. I'm Zoriana Zahorodnia working [00:01:00] in supply chain product marketing here at SAP, and I'm thrilled to join Sin today as a co-host for the very first time. Today we have a very special episode dedicated to International Women's Day, so we'll be talking about women in the supply chain. And to do so, we are joined by two wonderful women, Mindy Davis and Lori Harner. Mindy. Lori, welcome to the podcast. Would you mind sharing a little bit about yourselves and your role at SAP. And Mindy, why don't we start with you?

Mindy: Well, thank you for having me. It's nice to be here. Yes. My name is Mindy Davis and I lead Product Marketing for our cross portfolio solutions across supply chain management. I have been at SAP for 20 years, which I cannot believe it's been a wild ride. And always looking forward to engaging with women [00:02:00] and men alike in terms of customers and, and colleagues at SAP. Lori, you wanna introduce yourself?

Lori: Sure. My name is Lori Harner and I'm the Vice President of Product Marketing for supply chain planning. In my global role, I oversee the planning application. I've been at SAP approximately one year but have been in supply chain for about 15 years. Before coming to SAP I worked in a large company for and focused on the ERP side of the house. So I'm happy to be here and joining you for this particular podcast today.

Zoriana: Thank you. Thank you both. As you know, supply chain leadership often means making complex decisions with high impact while still operating largely behind the scenes. So, Mindy, from your perspective, how has being a woman influenced the way you lead, make decisions and drive change within supply chain [00:03:00] organizations?

Mindy: Yeah, great question. Like I said, I've been here 20 years and it's been a wild ride in terms of seeing how my influence has changed along my progression. And I think women in particular have a very sharp aptitude for displaying empathy. And what I mean by that is we can make connections and make decisions by connecting with our colleagues and really bringing out their expertise when they're making decisions or navigating transformation.

And especially, I want to do a call out to author Brené Brown. She wrote the book "Daring Greatly" and my leadership style has been influenced by Brené in terms of leading with courage, empathy and trust. And the way I do that is making sure [00:04:00] that everybody can be vulnerable at some point in their decision making, but not shamed in terms of expressing their points of view and decisions.

And I think women in particular can make a real, real impact in driving change, especially when we look at a supply chain organization because supply chains are very complex and we're always making decisions in the moment.

And I think the more vulnerable you can be, but taking that position of vulnerability and making it a competitive edge in terms of how you communicate, how you negotiate discussions, and how you drive impact in the supply chain organization.

Zoriana: That's a great answer. Thank you. And this year's International Women's Day theme is 'Give to Gain'. So Lori, what does 'Give to [00:05:00] Gain' mean to you in your day-to-day role as a leader in the supply chain environment?

Lori: Yeah, I think give to gain is kind of twofold, right? So, if we look at give to gain in our actual internal perspective, it's really gaining a better understanding of meeting your team where they're at in their growth trajectory as well.

So, I think the gift to gain would be lead by example and be able to help guide your team members and your individuals around you and your ecosystem with a good positive format to help our customers. And so as we pivot to our customers and our partners, the give to gain there is really gaining a better understanding of where their pain points are, what their challenges are. How we can help them with solutions and services and work together as a full ecosystem in helping them grow their businesses, helping them enable tangible outcomes within their businesses and helping them through [00:06:00] our software service as well as our people at the center of what we're doing.

So, that is where what I would say give to gain means to me is a full feedback loop, a full circle, and a full environment and ecosystem where we're all working together for common goals and helping our customers and partners achieve their maximum optimal business outcomes.

Zoriana: And it leads perfectly to the next question because supply chain leaders constantly balanced, cost, resilience, and speed. So Mindy, how has your leadership approach evolved over time and what role does collaboration play, what actually, Lori just mentioned, in driving better supply chain outcomes?

Mindy: Yeah, I think from, if you take a look at supply chain in particular, we have typically in the past or always been focused on driving efficiency out of your supply chain, [00:07:00] right? Making sure that we're managing cost and perfection. And with ever since COVID and beyond, really we need to take a look at how we can be more resilient.

And so my leadership approach has evolved with this because where I in the past have typically been focused on identifying broken processes and how we can sharpen our edge and fix gaps in these processes. Now it's really about navigating your team and making sure that we're coming together to evaluate potential market risks that are going on and making sure that we have a competitive edge.

So, now we're taking a focus on where we are going to have the most impact on the supply chain, right. In terms of identifying maybe it is an inefficient process that [00:08:00] we need to fix and better resolve. Or maybe it's how are we

reacting to a tariff, a change in, you know, market dynamics, whether it's political decisions that are going on and really having an eye on or a focus on innovation.

So, I think it's two things. It's now instead of kind of focusing on cost and efficiency. It's where are we innovating and where will we have the most impact? So, it's more forward thinking and to bring your team along with you in terms of identifying those areas, especially in product marketing for example. Where are we going to have the most impact in terms of ROI for a particular solution or a particular messaging outcome or how are we connecting with different personas and making sure that we're identifying the [00:09:00] stakeholders with different expertise and bringing them to the table so that everyone has a voice and can drive towards the same vision with a focus on impact.

Sin: That's a great answer Mindy. And you also mentioned innovation. So, technology like AI are the key drivers of supply chain transformation and innovation. And these are creating both challenges and also opportunities as our digital solutions evolve. So Lori, this question actually goes to you. Where do you see the biggest opportunities and challenges AI brings to the industry?

Lori: Yeah, so I think that's two fold, right? As we look at it from our own internal area. We are adopting AI every day in our day-to-day works as product marketers. From everything from creating content to developing go-to market plans, to even looking at incorporating new ways to do video, design, [00:10:00] go-to market plans, as I mentioned.

And then also just basically, different types of assets that we can leverage AI within our own applications. We even see it in our hiring practices, in our performance review practices, et cetera, where AI is embedded in everything that we do.

If we look at how we're helping our customers as well, if we take planning as an example, we have inherently had artificial intelligence and machine learning embedded in our applications, including like the demand sensing applications where we get unstructured data in, put it into forecast plans, et cetera. We've been doing that for years, but the pivot now to move to generative AI with explainability type natural language, scenarios within our planning application and then moving towards agents. And agents is really the area that you're gonna see more focus on from a product perspective in that bringing out agent capabilities to take on mundane tasks or even, even [00:11:00] more sophisticated tasks throughout the planning cycle, and then having that still that

human plus agent interaction as we build out solutions and embedded applications, et cetera, to address common tasks and then even some cases sophisticated tasks.

So it's twofold. We're using it inherently within our applications today internally, and also providing an AI journey for our customers and partners within our products and services.

Sin: And Mindy, what do you think does this idea, this twofold that Lori just mentioned, does this idea of give to gain apply here as well? For example, in knowledge sharing, data transparency, or driving adoption of new technologies in supply chain.

Mindy: Absolutely. I would give a very specific example of how I'm using AI. We have a series of product launches, right, [00:12:00] innovations in our products that we want to announce to the market. And typically in the past, it would take me months to work with development, product marketing, the field, making sure that we have the right innovations and can talk to our customers in a human way about how we're solving customer challenges. And bringing those to market so that we can best position ourselves against the competition.

And so what typically has taken me months has now been shrink to literally days because I can use AI to identify the key differentiators in our products that we're announcing. Come up with a messaging that's very unique, specific to SAP that differentiates us from the competition but at the same time positions ourselves as key leaders in using the AI tools. So, for example, I used our internal [00:13:00] tool our Joule agents. So, Lori talked about using AI agents and I'm using that in practice in my daily work now.

And so we can very quickly see how AI is being adopted internally to help us become more efficient and competitive in our communications, but then also sharing that externally with our customers to deliver that unique value proposition that drives us ahead of our competition.

Sin: One follow up on the technology question, because AI was actually in every episode we did from last year to this year, and it will still be. And it was also a big topic in Davos. So what I would like to, to know from both of you is how do you see AI and also Agentic AI and AI per se will evolve in supply chain to help both like in the supply chain, not to just do cost [00:14:00] efficiency or cost optimization, but also really driving innovation from talent acquisition to in the shop floor. If you can share some kind of example, that would be great.

Mindy: Yeah, I can give an example. I mean, AI agents is definitely where the market is headed, and SAP is in a very unique position because we have 50 years of experience across industries, across business processes.

And in supply chain what we're seeing is we are the only competitor or only vendor in the market who has access to all the financial, operational, HR data, and we are using AI to literally make sure that we're connecting or taking that data from across business process or business function. So, think about in supply chain, we talk about designing products, planning for [00:15:00] against demand and supply. Making the products or manufacturing them and delivering those products and then making sure that those products are maintained.

And we think of that as you have to connect as, for example, if I am in planning, in this case, I have to connect with multiple stakeholders across these different functions, whether it's engineering, design, planning, manufacturing, logistics, et cetera. And now with AI we have the capability to attract that data or identify only the data we need using AI agents. So that's shrinking the process of going after, or connecting with all these different functions of the business where I can do that with literally a click of a button where AI will, an AI agent will go extract all the data that I need to make sure that [00:16:00] I'm delivering the product to my customers.

So, this is both internally as SAP and then certainly with our customers, making sure that we're connecting, collaborating and contextualizing all of the information at our fingertips using AI as the tool to do that.

Sin: Yeah. Cool. This is huge. As this episode is now about International Women's Day, let's take this opportunity to also discuss how the working world in the supply chain industry has changed over the recent years and what opportunities and challenges now exist for all professionals working in this field. So, Lori, how has the role of women in supply chain industry evolved as the sector has transformed in recent years from your opinion?

Lori: Yeah, this is great. I've been in the industry for 15 years and can tell you as far as a supply chain are concerned that there's been a great trajectory from women when I [00:17:00] started in supply chain to now. So, if we look at everything from women in leadership roles to women influencers, to women in actual in across the supply chain from planning all the way to execution, it has grown quite significantly. Like I said, when I started, there were very few women in supply chain, and now there's a variety of very much of a mix between male and female, et cetera, in supply chain today. From everything from entry level roles in the warehouse, to factory roles, to picker roles in the

warehouse, to planners that are doing all of the forecasting and planning for the applications themselves, as well as leadership roles.

So, women that are actually leading full end-to-end supply chains in, in roles like chief supply chain officer roles. So, if you go to different companies, again, you're gonna see a lot more women in the boardroom moving from everything from, you know the shop floor to the top floor, right. So, a great trajectory in the last 17, and I think a great [00:18:00] strive from moving to, you know, very few women in supply chain to now where it's a very much a good mix of women in supply chain. So.

Mindy: Well, I have a great anecdote to add to that because I started off my career in logistics right out of school. I was manager of a warehouse team, and literally I think there I was running first and second shift and my first day I walked in and this creamy yellow suit and heels and very quickly changed into warehouse boots and jeans.

And now look at me today, I'm an executive in the boardroom who really has a seat at the table. And it's nice to see the number of women who have grown in their careers. I've definitely seen a change. You know, supply chain has typically been centered on a man role in, in the organization. And like Lori, I have seen the trajectory of many, many women who [00:19:00] have grown their careers in supply chain. So, it's an exciting place to be and exciting to see women grow and pursue their careers in supply chain.

Zoriana: Disruptions have become the new normal in supply chain and we've been talking about that a lot on this podcast. But Mindy what leadership qualities do you think are most critical in navigating uncertainty. And we've already been talking here about the resiliency, but how do inclusive leadership styles contribute to resilience?

Mindy: Yeah. I will go back to many moons ago. I've had many mentors along the way, and I think the number one thing that you can do as a leader in supply chain navigating uncertainty is to provide appropriate context so that everyone has a seat at the table when making decisions, right? Whether I'm [00:20:00] communicating a lot with senior executives and interns you know, the spectrum of expertise is broad. And the number one thing I do when I go into any conversation is set context for the team about you know, what do I know and what does everybody else know so that they can contribute to the conversation in the most impactful way?

And I think, you know, it's funny when you walk into a meeting and as a leader, if you can set the context, you can literally see the vibration in the room everybody kind of calm down and start thinking "okay, what can I bring to the conversation to make the most impact" as opposed to driving blindly, if you will. So, I think it's just about providing the most context about processes, insights, information, stakeholders, everything that you know about any given decision that's put in front of you at the given time.

Sin: [00:21:00] Yeah, actually to connect the different generation is always important. And if you share all the information that you have and bring on the table so that everyone can contribute to what is now the question, what they should think of I think that's also very important and we hear a lot about, like in the past we hear a lot about the lack of workforce. People are looking for new employees, for new talent. So, this is also a key topic in the ongoing development of this industry which is also targeting promotion and recruitment of new talents.

So, with that view, to the next generation of leaders in supply chain. Lori, what do organizations need to do differently to attract more talents in supply chain leadership roles from early careers to senior management in terms of what I read in the newspaper a lot, that there are a lot of young people who doesn't want to take any leadership roles [00:22:00] anymore.

Lori: Yeah, I think it's about starting out at the core level of when the education is taking place. So I think companies really need to invest in academic programs for individuals that are starting their career and also be present in that academic journey. So for instance, being able to show up at a university that focuses or has a focus on supply chain is always important, and then carrying that through to the internship program so that it's not only just the academia that they're getting or the academics that they're getting, but also the real life experience of working in supply chain, whether it be in a factory, in a warehouse, in a software company, et cetera.

So, growing that competency from conception to fruition. Also, it also helps to as they're projecting in their career, giving them the opportunities, new talent, especially the opportunities to move throughout different departments.

I think companies that really do this well usually start individuals in the software space in consulting or in roles like sales or consulting where they actually get to learn [00:23:00] the product or it could be in support or professional services, and then moving them through the company.

That's in my own personal experience how I started my career, I started in support, moved into management, moved into product management, and ultimately into product marketing leadership and then as well as internal candidates.

It's growing those internal candidates competencies and actually helping them grow their career in the areas that they wanna focus on to lead into a leadership role, 'cause we know not everyone wants to be leaders in a company. But the other kind of twofold part of that is making individual contributors also in their own way, right.

So there are people in the organization that don't necessarily always wanna be leaders. But they can be leaders in subject matter experts in what they're focusing on today. So, and the last part would really be to expose or look at talent from the outside. So, you're growing young talent, you're promoting internally and then bringing in people from the outside that maybe have a best practice or a skillset that doesn't exist in your corporation today. And maybe building that, that [00:24:00] expansion of that competency out by leveraging internal, young talent, internal growing talent, and then external areas of expertise as far as best practice is concerned.

So, that when you're positioning what does good look like in a particular competency? You have that variety of input coming in from, again, the the younger talent or talent to the company, existing talent that is growing and then outside expertise.

Zoriana: That is so interesting because when I was in the university and somebody would be talking about supply chain, the first thing that comes to your mind is like, oh my God, it is so boring because it's never been introduced as something so interesting. And you know, it's like as a woman, you don't even think to go and try it out.

And after, when I joined supply chain again in marketing, but still I found out how complex it is, how much more it is to supply chain than just like that boring [00:25:00] stuff I knew beforehand. So, I think it's not only presenting supply chain from the new perspective, but also talking about how complex it is and how much more it is to supply chain than just the common stuff that everybody already knows

Lori: A hundred percent.

Zoriana: And that actually leads us perfectly to the next question because I would really wanna know your personal advice for young women who are just starting their career or even considering career in supply chain. So, if you could give a piece of advice to young women considering to start their career supply chain, what would it be? And Lori, maybe we can start with you.

Lori: Sure. I think the biggest piece of advice that I would have is be open to change. Not only is our market and our dynamics around supply chain changing at all times, so are our roles and responsibilities. And so if I take a step back and early in my career, there was a much more [00:26:00] consistency in what we were doing. And so year over year consistency in some cases can lead to non innovation, right?

So, I would say be open to change our dynamics within supply chain are changing every day. Our customers and partners are dealing with disruptions every day. And in our world that we work in, we're also dealing with change every day.

So, be very open to change be flexible with an open mind and come into it with that change can also lead to opportunity. So, I would say that would be the the key advice I would give.

Zoriana: Thank you Lori. It's great. Mindy, do you have anything to add?

Mindy: Yeah. I think the number one thing is find your passion in supply chain, whether it's domain expertise, like exploring a product or capabilities or if it's functional expertise, like we're all in marketing, but maybe it's development or sales and be willing to take risks, right.

I know that [00:27:00] oftentimes when I'm interviewing a woman or a man a man will look at a job description and say, I can do all of it, no problem. Where a woman will look at a job description and pick the things that they can do and they can't do.

And I think if you can approach any opportunity with this mindset of, to Lori's point, you will change but really you can take risks. You will surprise yourself because women are much more capable and driven than they think oftentimes think they are. So, I think it's find your passionate and take some risks and you'll see how you'll grow.

Sin: Oh, I love it. I love both of your answers, like being flexible, taking your risk and be open to change, be open for a challenge and take it as opportunity. I

really like it. But as we are now approaching the end of our podcast, unfortunately, because [00:28:00] I would love to talk more about this with you to both of you. What is actually the future of supply chain in your opinion? Maybe Lori, to start with you.

Lori: Yeah, I look at the future of supply chain as really an ever ending transition. So again, as we just talked about from a change perspective, I mean it continues to change disruptions where we talk about disruptions being very volatile in today's environment. But if we take a step back in history, supply chains have always had to address and adapt to disruptions, right?

So, I would say some of the areas in where we're investing in innovation are going to help remedy some of those short-term disruptions. The continue trajectory from our AI perspective is key. And where we're headed with helping our customers innovate quickly, respond to change quickly, respond to disruptions quickly, and to also be helping 'em throughout the continuum because there are certain pieces of the supply chain that are bigger obstacles to address [00:29:00] and that we're providing the tools, the technology, the AI, the data, et cetera, to address those particular mid to long term activities, as well as the short term disruptions.

So, the future of supply chain in a nutshell is consistently changing, consistently being disrupted, but moving from efficiency, resiliency to autonomous is really how we're gonna help our supply chains grow.

Mindy: Yeah, I would just echo that, right. I think the word that came to mind for me is transformation. We're helping a lot of our customers transform their business through the supply chain. And I think the more that we can make sure that we're helping our customers adapt to the world of AI and agentic AI and to like Lori said, becoming more autonomous in their actions where they can make change and really transform their business.

But I think going at [00:30:00] it from a supply chain angle, you know, a lot of customers that we're working with now we have typically gone after or spoken deep conversations with IT and finance. And now we see COOs becoming CEOs.

And so I think the more that we can develop those relationships with senior level supply chain executives and making sure that we're having those conversations at the board level about how supply chain can transform your business using AI, the better off we we'll be in the long run in helping businesses transform.

Sin: Wonderful statements, really. Lori and Mindy, thank you so much for this great conversation. And thank you all for listening. Please mark us as a favorite and you can get regular updates and information about future episodes. Until next time, from Lori, Mindy, Zoriana, and I thank you for discussing the future supply chain.