



Evren Tipi Akben
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Bio:

Evren Tipi Akben is a Systems and Support Engineering Director at Lowe's Home Improvement and she owns the Distribution Warehouse Management and Labor Management product roadmaps, maintenance and enhancements of existing products, and new Distribution product implementations on the Business side. Evren has over 15 years of combined Industry and University teaching experience. Evren started her career at Bosch as a Customer Service and Quality Engineer, she then joined Lowe's and held multiple roles in Demand Planning, Network Optimization, Research, Finance, Program Management Office (PMO), and Engineering-Systems. She also worked for Williams Sonoma Supply Chain as a Supply Chain Solutions Director, Apple as a project manager, and UNC-Charlotte Business School as an adjunct professor. Evren holds a Bachelor's degree in Industrial Engineering from Bilkent University, Turkey; and Masters and PhD degrees in Industrial and Systems Engineering from North Carolina State University.

Intro:

In this episode of the Supply Chain Careers Podcast, we are joined by Evren Tipi Akben, Systems and Support Engineering Director at Lowe's Home Improvement. Evren shared her supply chain career journey, starting from bachelors, masters, and PhD degrees in industrial and systems engineering, focused on her love of operations and supply chain, to positions at multiple companies and teaching operations management in a business school. She spoke about mentors vs. sponsors, about diversity, and lessons learned when building and working within great supply chain teams, as she shared her thoughts about team dynamics, where a toxic lemon can affect entire teams, plus making sure you have the attitude to have fun every day along with having a thick skin. She emphasized the values of trust, integrity, dependability, and communication, on top of continuous learning of the latest technical tools,

especially unstructured data and project management tools.

Mike Ogle: [00:01:47] Evren, we're happy to have you with us today. Welcome.

Evren Tipi Akben: [00:01:49] Thank you for inviting me.

Mike Ogle: [00:01:52] And how did you get started on your supply chain career journey? What were some of your greatest influences that got you started and helped you along the way?

Evren Tipi Akben: [00:02:01] It's a long story, but I'll keep it short. I came two years for my PhD education in 2002 to NC State. Three years into my PhD education, my advisor told me that I need to change my topic. So, I cried in his room that day. But he was right. I wasn't making progress. And this kind of started my supply chain career because I joined Lowes to find that thesis, to find the topic. Then I started in demand planning, and it was wonderful. Like I have that job was created for me at that time because I have I E background I'm really good at Statistics, problem solving, maths, some type of coding, not like a computer science major. And I love the people. I love them, the team, the culture, and that got me going again. I had another role in supply chain, then I moved to other different roles in the company.

I love supply chain. And operations, right? Those are my two favorite areas that I love because I know with the systems that my team builds, with the capabilities that I provide to business, I make an impact to the associates on the floor, to the corporate employees, or to the customer. I know if their product is delivered on time, so that's keeps me going. I get bored easily. But supply chain always things change, so supply chain is perfect for me. I had opportunities to do other things, but, I'm glad I landed in supply chain.

Rodney Apple: [00:03:44] As I was looking through your profile I saw the network optimization roles. You mentioned demand planning. I'd love to hear more about some of the key roles you've held, and some of the lessons you learned along the way.

Evren Tipi Akben: [00:03:56] Yeah. Lots of positions, it might be because I get bored easily, and I have some lessons learned related to that. Currently I serve or lead a team of individuals who owns distribution centers system maintenance enhancements, and new system implementations. On the business side, I have a new team who is responsible from engineering standards, time studies at the distribution centers. So still a very diverse team because I serve the entire distribution and we have multiple distribution centers and different types.

Prior to that I built a continuous improvement culture for another company. And at the time I owned the sourcing logic and also network optimization efforts. And prior to that, I have many positions including that program management, managing distribution center continuous improvement projects, system implementations, enhancements, and also demand planning, forecasting for lumber, and appliances, in using my crystal ball, appliances are always tricky because of the promotions. So, I have many positions I also held for a quick amount of time, some analytics roles, that helps me in my control as well.

I moved, I think every one and a half, two years. There are advantages. There are

disadvantages. So, one of the lessons learned, for me, is if you are joining any company that will require you to move to another location, do not rush that decision. You might be getting a wonderful compensation package, but you need to do your research. Meaning like if you have kids, school, home, traffic, all of that, plus your new manager. That relationship is super crucial. So you need to get to know your manager a little bit more to learn about the company culture. Think about those. Do not rush that decision. I've never had a career map. In my twenties, my early thirties and things change. I came to U S for my PhD. I was supposed to go back to Turkey. That never happened other than my PhD. Right. So definitely having a career map, things will change, but at least, you know the direction. Are you going north? Are you going south? And of course, you might change your direction out of it, but this will help you. That's maybe one of the reasons why I changed multiple roles. And if I had known what I know now, I probably wouldn't move supply chain from supply chain because in my career I moved and it took me years to be able to come back.

So that's another lessons learned for me. And also staying at your role at least two years, right? Personally, myself, even though I learned really fast, like I have to stay in that role one on one and a half years to be able to contribute, to be able to be productive. I know the other opportunity might look shiny, but I have a lot of other things that I need to improve. So those are two or three things that come to my mind.

Mike Ogle: [00:07:03] What kinds of internal team skills, both hard and soft skills matter to you the most as you work within your teams and lead projects?

Evren Tipi Akben: [00:07:12] So before I directly answer this question, I want to actually share a story. I got my first master's certification years ago. And at the time, I was a program manager and I knew the importance of team dynamics and the impact of toxicity. I specifically gave a speech on this topic. It was called lemons. You might be like why lemons? For that speech, I intentionally left one lemon outside, made it spoiled. It took like seven, eight days. And when I put that lemon back in the bag of lemons, it took only two or three days and all the lemons were already spoiled. So, I literally actually brought the lemon back to the speech as well, but my point is like hard skills are important, but soft skills to me are also super important. If you have a toxic team member in the team, in the project team, or your own team, that would be contagious. So I definitely look at in terms of soft skills, is this person a good person, right? Do they have the universal skills? Can I trust them? Do they have integrity? Are they a team player? Like the basics? And I am super thankful. My current team rocks. So I don't have that challenge, but I I've experienced in different companies, different roles. In terms of hard skills, there are different roles. And in my current role, do they have the system knowledge? Do they have the business process knowledge? Can they do user acceptance testing? Can they manage projects? Those are the key skills that I'm looking for. For supply chain role, it's going to be different, but like also universal skills, like communicating, can they communicate right? Can they influence people? Those are like universal. It's definitely not rocket science, but, the toxicity, integrity, those are super crucial for me. It's can be hard, technical skill during the interview, you can definitely ask and assess that individual's knowledge, but soft skills, it's a risk.

Rodney Apple: [00:09:15] In supply chain, in particular, being able to work with other functions and partner with stakeholders both internally and externally as well. When you're connecting suppliers, you're working with, whether it be software vendors, hardware vendors, material handling equipment and your world, what are the keys to success from your vantage point?

Evren Tipi Akben: [00:09:34] It's like any relationship, any partnership? I always look for trust, integrity, and also in this case, transparency. Can I trust this third-party person? A partner, a supplier. Can I depend on them? And are they sharing everything that they need to share with me on time? Because again, in my role, it's a little bit different. I partner with software vendors and consultants. So if there's a delay in the project, or if we have a defect in their release, I want to be the first one who hears about that, if it's going to impact my company, I don't want to hear it from my team member. Also, delivering results. Like once we have an issue, are they really investing in the relationship? Are they prioritizing my asks? To deliver the results based on my expectations. It's not like a six-month relationship it's like for years to come. So, definitely having strategic partnerships is important, not a transactional relationship.

[BREAK at 10:45]

Mike Ogle: [00:11:08] You've also taught students in university classrooms. Can you tell us a little bit about that experience? What you'd been teaching, some of the most important points that you think they need to know and your impressions about their abilities.

Evren Tipi Akben: [00:11:22] I love teaching. I actually miss it. I cannot do that anymore. But that was my hobby. I definitely didn't do it for money. It was a lot of fun and hopefully when I retire, I want to teach full time. I taught operations management in the business department, the topics are like forecasting, inventory management, inventory planning, material requirements, project management. But also supply chain topics. When I did my undergrad, it was more operations research related. I did not get a lot of industry experience from our professors because they were all academic and don't have the industry experience. So that was something that I was bringing with me when I was teaching. So at the end of every semester, I spend at least an hour to discuss about my lessons learned, because I'm going to prepare them for the real, real life. Most of them were not planning to have their masters or planning to teach. So, some of my lessons learned with them is definitely be a continuous learner. And it's super easy to access data like LinkedIn, Ted talks, even like Google, if you type in about a topic, you get a lot of information. I will probably repeat this multiple times, but the importance of networking. I can't stress this enough. I learned the lesson, very hard. I will not go into the details, but networking is super important in supply chain or any role in the industry.

The work is super important, but you need to also take the time for yourself or your family and friends. Brian Dyson, you probably know the five goals speech, and I will not go into details, but he talks about five balls and everyone needs to balance that. And if it

is you, your family, friends, if we drop the ball, it cracks, right. It is super hard to repair that. But if it is work, it will bounce back. You can figure out a way, maybe leave the company, get another role. So my moves, multiple rules taught me that very well as well.

And also the students, I think, as the instructors or educators, like they are super capable. We are the ones who can help them be more willing to learn. Capability is there, but with engaging the students, if they are willing to learn, if they are willing to study, then they will get great grades. So it was fun. Yeah. I miss those days.

Mike Ogle: [00:13:55] On a related note, if you had the chance to go back and advise yourself, as you were getting started, what kind of advice would you give yourself as you're preparing to learn for a supply chain career? Both at the very beginning as you're entering school and the things you should concentrate on as you're leaving school.

Evren Tipi Akben: [00:14:15] Oh, I'm like an elephant. And I, I remember like the old advices and lessons learned. As I mentioned, my school, undergrad and grad was super technical. I wish I had taken more management courses or more MBA courses. For me, it was free in NC state. And I didn't write because I had no idea my plan was to teach. I think everyone needs leadership skills, communication skills, influencing skills. I wish I had taken the time to understand the human nature more. Also again, this is not my native language, so I wish I had focused on my English a little bit more early in college, even NC state.

In my role, especially at the leadership roles, communication skills, as well as influencing skills are super critical for success. I wish at NC state, there was a heuristic course, that taught the details of artificial intelligence machine learning. And because it was tough, I intentionally didn't take it. And I wish I had taken it now I would have known more about those topics. At the time we weren't calling them that, it was more heuristics optimization techniques.

Also the internships, I was definitely checking the box. When I was doing the internship, I wasn't even paying a lot of attention and, my second internship I was studying for GRE, like they were okay with me doing that. I was going there and studying GRE. So I wish I hadn't done that. So definitely leverage those internships, understand the entire operations, not your specific area. So I interned at Bosch and I looked at the database, but I wish I had gone back and looked at the production, like everything end to end. Those internships are super valuable.

Rodney Apple: [00:16:01] Networking. I'd love to come back to that. And I'd love to hear your philosophy on mentorship as well. Especially as a student, what would you advise to someone that's coming out? Any advice or perspective?

Evren Tipi Akben: [00:16:12] Yeah, it's never late, but if you don't have a mentor or mentors, definitely look for one. It shouldn't be again, like checking the box, right? There is no formula, but this is my own formula. At least should be a level or two up. And ideally, if you are early in your career, maybe in the same organization, like for instance, supply chain, if I missed transportation, maybe I should pick someone for transportation, but if you are at the management or leadership level, definitely then look for other opportunities within the supply chain or maybe merchandising, maybe store operations,

maybe HR. And then this mentor ideally should know you, because let's say someone asks me to mentor them. Should be someone you trust and you at least have a basic relationship.

If you are new to your company, you don't know anyone, right? Ask your manager, ask your leader who the best person or the best people would be for yourself. I mentor people and I am still a mentee as well. When I was mentoring people, like they were my mentees, right? The relationship is mutual. So if I was having a bad day, which happens rarely, but it does, they were trying to motivate me. They were trying to engage me. So as the mentee, you can also help your mentor. People are super busy, but there are people who want to help you grow.

We usually don't talk about it, but I want to also mention sponsors. They are different. Have sponsors as well because when the doors are closed, when you are not in the room, when there's a promotional opportunity, the person will speak on your behalf. So try to also get some sponsors at the executive level, so that they can speak on your behalf. That is also very important.

You talked about LinkedIn. When I was teaching, some of my students didn't have any presence on LinkedIn and I'm like, no, you definitely need to do that. So I helped them with their CVs, LinkedIn profiles, things of that nature. Things have changed drastically, so we have to be very visible on LinkedIn or other pages. If I am the hiring manager, I always look at their profiles. If they don't have a LinkedIn presence, I'm like, Hmm. Interesting. But I also look if there are any references, I read those. If this is a candidate that I'm interested in.

Well, looking ahead, what are you seeing in terms of how careers are evolving, whether it be hard skills. What do you see in the future?

A lot is going to change. And it's already changing in supply chain. And that definitely impacts the careers in supply chain. For instance, we talked about COVID right. That insane disruption in our lives, in the supply chain, definitely changed the way we shop. I love going to the stores and spend some time. That's not the case anymore. I tried to order online. I expect that to be delivered to my home based on my expectations. There will be a lot of positions in supply chain and I already see them, even at Lowes being posted, like the e-commerce manager, e-commerce project manager market delivery manager. So those areas will be super hot in the near future. In addition to the core functions in supply chain, Also like automation, robotics, like analytics. It used to be called operations analysts when I was in college. Now it's called like the data scientists. So those positions, it's getting better. We have a lot of unstructured data in supply chain, like end to end supply chain. So now, companies are hiring for those resources that has advanced skills in statistics, like data scientists. Well, we can consume that data and help provide actionable insights, right? So there will be a lot of technical positions and also, the typical supply chain careers because of this advancement in technology, in analytics, we'll be expected to learn and know about those topics. So my recommendation is, if you are in college and thinking of being a supply chain professional, take those courses. I'm pretty sure most of the schools are offering them now. And get used to how can you consume the data. How can you analyze the data? If

you will be in distribution, robotics, automation, even like schools offer those courses as well. So take those courses.

Also something, I'm a minority, right? I came here as an international student, something, I think the companies need to pay more attention and things are changing in a good way is like diversity and inclusion. We have a talent pool and because I came from that talent pool, I know many people who are super knowledgeable, competent in their positions and they were given a chance, by a company in the US in terms of sponsoring them. So if you are a supply chain company, if you are not sponsoring individuals, if you are not giving them a chance, I think you are missing out on that, especially with the technical needs in supply chain. Companies need to consider that big pool of candidates because workforce is changing. The demands of the payers are changing. So those are, I think, two, three things that I am seeing in supply chain careers.

Mike Ogle: [00:21:46] You'd talked about people needing to become continuous learners and so related to continuous improvement, how do you keep up with the changes yourself and what do you advise others to keep improving?

Evren Tipi Akben: [00:21:59] So compared to when I started my journey, things are much easier in my opinion. If you really want to learn about something, most of the time free, right? The videos, the articles, LinkedIn, there are a lot of articles about companies. I definitely follow those Ted talks. Early in my career, I knew I had opportunities with my communication skills and leadership. I have watched many, especially like being a female leader. I watched many Ted talks to improve my communication and influencing skills.

I am super fortunate. We have some really good training and advancement programs at Lowe's. So, last year I was nominated for one of them and I know I still have a portion is on the strategy. I'm good at execution, but strategy portion that course helped me with that. So, if you want to learn about something, it's nowadays much more easier.

Rodney Apple: [00:22:54] You touched on leadership there for a moment, like to circle back, to hear your philosophy when it comes to seeking out talent and building a high performing team, what do you look for to get the most out of your employees as it relates to development, coaching, mentoring, and so forth?

Evren Tipi Akben: [00:23:13] Similar to our conversation about team dynamics, what do I look for? My answers will be similar for the individual contributors. Like typical soft skills, trust, stability, right? Integrity, team player, communication skills, like delivering results. And also you mentioned about passion. So that is also because in our roles, it can be stressful because we have multiple projects and programs. Without passion, an individual will not be able to succeed. Right. Do they have the drive? Do they have the grit? Do they have the passion to deliver results?

And hard skills. For my team, it's a very technical team. They need to have the warehouse management system, they need to have a labor management system knowledge. They need to know the business processes. They need to know about both the technical and also the business plus like project management, agile methodology, waterfall methodology, depending on the project. They need to be Jack of all trades as

well, right. With all the different projects that we lead or support. But in my leaders, if I'm hiring for a manager role, empathy is important. Because if they are team members come to these individuals, my managers, I want them to be understandable, approachable, to these individuals. Empathy is really important. Supporting the team. Influencing skills is very important as well.

I think your second question was about how do I bring the best out of the team members? Even though you might think I am, I've talked too much. I'm listening. I really am. Like I had many people come to me for advice. I listen. So, I think that's a good skill to have and being approachable. It's serious business, but I like to have some fun. I think if I'm feel happy, if I'm engaged, that's definitely contagious on the team members. Again, I always think about what do I need from my management? It will be probably similar needs for my team. I try to provide exposure to their work. And I recognize them. Those are the two things that are super crucial. If they do any like quick wins, right, I share that with my leadership. Are shared with the entire team actually our team meetings. This is something I'm proud of. That we start our meetings with some fun questions, like, what do you like to cook? What is your favorite restaurant? Things like that. And also, every team meeting, we recognize each other. It doesn't have to come from me. Anyone in the team can recognize anyone. That's also super helpful for a team engagement, and bring the best out of the team members.

Rodney Apple: [00:25:59] You've moved around the supply chain and have held many different roles, do you encourage building out their personal or career development plan, to look into this career path or that career path or broadening your experience?

Evren Tipi Akben: [00:26:14] Again, I was super fortunate, including my current leader. I was able to speak to them and I was able to move up or had a lateral move. So, I prefer whatever is best for them. And I am super transparent. There is one team member who is a top contributor and we talk about these openly, because I want to know if they are interested in other positions, I want to know. So that, first of all, I can support them because I have different connections. I can connect them with the right people. Also, I need to prep the next individual who can take their role. I was super happy because I was able to promote individuals within the team. That's even win-win right for the individual and for me as well.

And you talked about career roadmaps. Recently we started, for the entire team member, making sure everyone has a solid career roadmap. And of course, if he or she is a top performer, I can easily be selfish, but I don't want to do that. So I don't blame anyone for thinking about their careers, their families.

Mike Ogle: [00:27:19] What advice do you have for women that are considering a supply chain career or for women who are already in their supply chain career?

Evren Tipi Akben: [00:27:27] Overall women in the industry, we should all have a seat at the table. I intentionally, when I see women that are not sitting at the table, like literally, physically I invite them. Because it makes a difference. I bring something different to the table. I have a lot of experience and knowledge, so why not share it with others, so that we make the best decision for the company. Definitely don't be shy, speak up in the meetings.

I know we will talk about this and that networking is very crucial. I recently read an article, the way women network is a little bit different than men, men are more strategic about their networking. On the other hand, for instance, I like, I love people, right. I get to know about everyone, but I think having a strategic reason when you network is also helpful, right? Let's say I'm in transportation, but I want to move to distribution. Should meet with the leader in distribution prior to any openings so that, that person knows, oh, I know Evren, she's good, she communicates well, she has good work ethic. I will consider her right. Worst case that will be the impression for the hiring manager. So, women, we don't do really well in my opinion, networking, being strategic about networking, that will be something that I will advise the women in the supply chain. And if you are early in your career or you have like 10-years experience, knowledge is power. As long as of course you have to share it. Learn, learn, and learn. If you have the knowledge that gives you additional power. And if you are a leader, executive leader or a leader definitely have other women. I know I was super fortunate to have mentors. So definitely asking for mentors and also help other women and empower them. So those are the two or three things that comes to my mind.

Rodney Apple: [00:29:32] You've covered some wonderful advice today and you mentioned the word empower. Can you think of maybe one or two of the most important or most impactful pieces of advice that you've received throughout your career. And is there anything that you would like to share as we wrap up the program with our audience that can help them impact or empower their careers?

Evren Tipi Akben: [00:29:54] I will not mention this individual's name, but this executive leader had a picture of a rhino at his office. And I asked why? He said have a thick skin. This is especially true if you are early in your career. It's business. It's all about business. It's nothing intentional to you.

If you see some issues, speak up with that individual and be bold. Don't let that impact your emotions. Because I am super passionate. And I care a lot, early in my career, I was getting a little bit emotional. Why did this happen? Why is he this way? Why is she this way, right? Don't worry about those and definitely be bold, be strong. I think that's definitely an advice that I will give, especially if you are early in your career.

And also, adaptability. I went to science high school away from family, very strict rules. And I was super overwhelmed. Our math teacher said, the sooner you adapt the less painful it's going to be. Adaptability is key to success, key to happiness. I was 14 years old, but I remember him saying that adapting to different situations, different expectations is super key.

So back to my advice, I'm usually really happy. I have a very cheerful personality. We spend a lot of time at work. And I had many people who come to me like you are always so happy. I love it. How do you do it? It's super easy. Right? I think anyone can do it. Every morning when you wake up, you have two choice, you can be miserable or you can be happy. It's just what happens, how we behave. Especially if you're a leader, this is contagious. Definitely think about the impact or your emotions on your team, or on your family, right outside work. Everyone is battling different problems, be happy.

Mike Ogle: [00:31:59] Evren, thank you for a great conversation and your insights about

supply chain careers.

Evren Tipi Akben: [00:32:05] My pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

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