

Leadership Profile of Elizabeth Lucas, Executive Director and CEO of Soroptimist International of the Americas

Hannah Muckle 20 January 2020



Photo Credit: Soroptimist International of the America

Elizabeth Lucas is many things. A visionary, a leader, a strategist, an executive director and CEO...the list goes on; but as I spoke with her over the phone -- her work had her in Chicago at the time -- it became abundantly clear that another word could be added to her list of descriptors, busy. Soroptimist International of the Americas, according to their website, is a global volunteer

organization that provides women and girls with access to the education and training they need to achieve economic empowerment. Under her leadership, and its' impact growing by the year, it is easy to understand why Elizabeth's schedule is so full. She oversees the non-profit's operations in 20 countries and territories and ensures the security of support and resources in order to advance the organization's continued impact via its programming.

I believe that Elizabeth's secret weapon to success is that she has extensive experience in both the nonprofit and for-profit sectors. She started her career in retail merchandising and sales before transitioning to marketing, helping to expand the efforts of the National Safety Council. Her next large career endeavor landed her at the American Massage Therapy Association as their Director of Marketing and Communication, eventually becoming the Executive Director of the organization. Next, she held the position of Senior Consultant at Ideas for Action, LLC, a consulting agency that specializes in organizational strategic growth, before arriving at Soroptimist International of the Americas where she has been for the past eight years.

It is clear that each step in Elizabeth's career equipped her with the tools and experiences that built on top of one another in order for her to achieve maximum impact in her current role. With a BS in Marketing, Retailing, and Advertising from Drake University and an MBA in Global

Business and Organizational Behavior from Lake Forest Graduate School of Management, she knows and is able to identify industry trends. This is something that many non-profit leaders struggle to do. Understanding sustainability and the flexibility to ebb and flow with the rapidly changing climate of the non-profit sector is not typically at the forefront of most non-profit director's minds.

Elizabeth looks for results. And in order to know the impact that is being made by the programs that Soroptimist offers, it is crucial to measure the input and output, something that the organization was not necessarily doing before her arrival. She introduced them to the dashboard concept, which is a method of monitoring an organization's goals and performance over time in order to determine impact. Taking a look at Soroptimist's annual report makes it clear that having a dashboard has done them nothing but good. Their impact and output reporting is clear and concise and, I would imagine, an effective way to steward donors. Stakeholders are able to see the exact number of women and girls affected by the organization and the ways in which they were impacted. Not every nonprofit patron is privy to such specific information.

How is Soroptimist's mission different from others? What makes it unique? "Everyone has sliced and diced the issues so finely, that it's hard from a collective impact standpoint, so we're specifically focusing on the target

population to give them a hand up and out of poverty so that they can be a role model for their family as a single head of household woman," Elizabeth says. "We refer to our target audience as women who face obstacles such as trafficking, domestic violence... but what they all have in common is that they are below the poverty level, have decided they want to go back to school and lift themselves up, and all we do is give them a hand to further their efforts." An organization without a clear mission or target audience can hurt its own impact by spreading themselves too thin. Soroptimist knows exactly what demographic they wish to cater to and therefore are able to maximize their impact and specific reach as a result.

How will Elizabeth know she has achieved success?

Simple, she says, "We have measurements in place, a way to measure what we're trying to achieve. For example, some program objectives are to improve the standard of living for woman and her dependents or to increase a woman's self-esteem. Another one is to increase the number of women who receive the resources needed to access education and skills training...so we measure those and we know how we are doing." Having the facts and figures sets a clear path and tells a concise story about the work that is being done through an organization. This way, there is no need to guess or predict -- only set goals based off the data and trends that have already been measured by previous years. "I

know our organization will achieve the impact we planned because we track our results and we adjust the programs for greater impact."

When I asked her about any industry leaders she strived to emulate, she expressed that there was not necessarily anyone in particular she had in mind. "For me personally, I think ultimately that leadership is about knowing where the organization is trying to go and helping to get it there. Emulating other organizations doesn't necessarily mean it will help your organization get to where it wants to go." In other words, by carving out a unique and niche group of women and girls who require specific assistance, Soroptimist itself becomes the example and can possibly set the standard regarding certain practices. That is not to say that Elizabeth does not seek to continue to grow and learn in her role. She adds, "Are you out there looking at best practices, are you talking to other people about the issues they might be having? Yes. Are you looking at people's leadership style and saying, 'Oh I really like that about them' but maybe it is not germane or reflective of my values...we emulate being a charitable model that has a global impact."

Their biggest challenge? "Doing more with less. Having capital to invest and scaling our impact. Resources are always needed when scaling a concept. Of course, you can look to donors...[but] breaking into the corporate world for donations or grants or foundations all takes resources to do that. So in my time I've encouraged our

board to invest in major gift programs to raise funds to help us address larger program needs." This is a challenge that non-profits face across the board. How does an organization strive to optimize their impact with the limited resources at their disposal? Sometimes the public views non-profits as service vehicles with 100 percent of its funding only going towards its public services without realizing that expenses towards administration, overhead, and staff must be paid in order for the non-profit to succeed. As a result, these organizations are put in a difficult situation and may end up aiming lower when asking donors for support.

Under Elizabeth's leadership, Soroptimist International of the America's has seen exponential growth. "Over the last seven years we have increased the number of women that our Live Your Dream Awards reach by 39 percent...we've increased the funding we give by 71 percent." There seems to be no sign of slowing down. Their Dream Programs continue to help and enrich the lives of women and girls across the globe to provide education grants, facilitate career mentoring, and empower and inspire others to action in support of their mission. I would encourage fellow non-profit leaders to keep an eye on the mission and impact of this inspiring organization to see how its reach continues to grow under the direction of Elizabeth Lucas.

Author bio

Hannah Muckle currently serves as the Assistant Director of Development at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries where she works on broadening Penn Libraries' outreach and impact. Hannah's role has a special focus on finding and engaging potential new donors, managing the Gifts-In-Kind process, and further promoting the work and visibility of the Penn Libraries mission and influence.