

SWE STORYCORPS INTERVIEWS

James Porter and Deborah Grubbe Interview

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Society Of Women Engineers National Conference

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Jim Porter and Deborah Grubbe

Jim Porter is the founder and president of Sustainable Operations Solutions and a principle consultant at Sizemore & Company. Prior to that he was a chief engineer and vice president of engineering and operations at DuPont. In 2008 he received the Society of Women Engineer's Rodney D. Chipp Memorial Award.

In his 2007 SWE StoryCorps interview with his wife, Deborah Grubbe, Porter described his work at DuPont; his early acquaintance with women engineers; his work mentoring women engineers and advocating for greater diversity and gender equality at DuPont; and his thoughts about the future of women in engineering.

- July 2016

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Deborah Grubbe: My name is Deborah Grubbe. My age is fifty-two. Today's date is October 26, 2007. The location is Nashville, Tennessee. I am interviewing James B. Porter, Jr., who is my husband.

James Porter: My name is Jim Porter. My age is sixty-four. Today's date is October 26, 2007. The location is Nashville, Tennessee. And my relationship to the wonderful person who will be interviewing me, Deborah Grubbe, is she's my wife.

DG: So Jim, let's talk a little bit about how you came to study chemical engineering and how you found yourself at DuPont as you started your professional career.

JP: I had a wonderful chemistry teacher in high school. His name was Charles Shimlever (???). I always saw him as a wonderful teacher and it wasn't until twenty years later that others were able to help corroborate that, in that he was elected the most outstanding teacher in the state of Tennessee. And I loved chemistry and one day I expressed to him my interest in becoming a chemist, and he looked at me and said, "Oh, no, don't do that." He said, "Unless you get a Ph.D.," he said, "You'll end up washing test tubes, for one." He said, "Be a chemical engineer." And that started

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it all off, right there. I said—he knew, he had a good sense around career development. He helped young people in school to get a good focus.

And I entered the University of Tennessee in chemical engineering and enjoyed it. Graduated. And I started the interview process, and I interviewed several companies before I interviewed the DuPont company. But I took an interview trip to Wilmington [Delaware] and spent some time with some of the people who I would work with, and found them to be absolutely wonderful people. And I called all the other people who had made offers to me for employment and told them I appreciated the offers but that I had made a selection and that I was going to work for the DuPont company. And that was in January. I started to work for them in January of 1966. With the exception of two years when I was in the military, from March of 1966 until March of 1968, I've worked for the DuPont company, roughly forty-one years.

DG: That's really wonderful. Can you talk a little bit about those early years with DuPont and how you came to be acquainted with women engineers and how those women engineers affected you, and sort of made impressions on you

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around what was happening to them and what you saw happening to them in the workplace?

JP: My memory of my early career in DuPont really was one where there were no women engineers. In the middle sixties, to the best of my recollection, there were no women engineers in DuPont engineering when I first came to work. I'm certain there may have been some somewhere, but they weren't in the organizations that I was personally a part of. I had the opportunity shortly after coming to work for DuPont to be a campus recruiter. And while at the Louisville Speed Scientific School [University of Louisville J.B. Speed Scientific School] I had an interesting experience, in that a young woman walked in and she walked into the interview room and my first assumption was that she was a secretary. Turns out she was a chemical engineering student. And so I got a very early education in something I probably should have learned much earlier and that is, you can't tell the book by its cover. She turned out to be an outstanding student. She turned out to be an outstanding interviewee and she ended up being hired by the DuPont company that year.

So I sort of learned a lesson there in terms of my early years around paying close attention and understanding that

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people can be different than what they might appear to be. We began to hire a number of engineers, and over a course of time we hired a number of women engineers. And during my early career I think one of the first things that I noticed, that the work environment that we had was one that was adapted to the way that men tended to think and how men tended to do work. And I think a number of the women found it difficult to do work in that environment and to contribute to the maximum that they were capable of doing. And as a consequence of that, the organization that I was a part of took upon itself to begin to understand more about how the work environment could be changed and how it could be made more inclusive so that everyone who worked for us—women engineers, men engineers, people of all types—could contribute to their maximum.

DG: Could you give us a sense of the first inkling that you saw that the thing, that you know, the actual environment was starting to shift, and that people were starting to see what you saw?

JP: That's an excellent question. I would say that it occurred when I was in our design organization. When I was assigned to our design organization it was with our textile fibers businesses. And their workload had gone up dramatically and

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we had reduced force to an extent in the engineering organization and there weren't many engineers really available for reassignment. And as it turns out, a number of the engineers that were available for reassignment were women. And so I readily accepted them into my organization because I needed good engineers and they were good engineers. And one of the things that I began to see as these women worked on some major projects —and these projects were, some of them outside the U.S., some of them were in the United Kingdom, and they were very complicated, very large projects—I began to see more of the engineers and designers, primarily male, began to see that these women were not only capable of being good engineers, but were also capable of being good leaders. And began to form teams around them and began to support them so that we could see things be done in a much more efficient way, and the women be a completely integrated part of what was going on.

I also think that during that period of time that some of our organizations, such as our construction organization, began to be willing to, quote unquote, Let women work in those organizations. And a number of women who did work in those organizations again showed that they could handle

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that environment and they could accomplish what was necessary to have outstanding contributions to the company. So as a result of that you could begin to see the shift and you could begin to see the change. It was subtle. It was not something that was very dramatic, but it was something that I think was truly the genesis of the future that we can look at today, where we can see that people in DuPont are accepted for who they are, regardless of their background, regardless of their gender, regardless of their sexual orientation. And they can truly contribute to their maximum because it's a respectful work environment.

DG: That's really, you know, really a good story. As you fast-forward, that timeframe was when? If I recall, early- to mideighties kind of timeframe.

JP: That was roughly the timeframe, was early- to mideighties. There was one other thing that may have had some influence over my interest in being strongly supportive of the development of women in the environment, or women in general, and that was that in 1979 my daughter Alyson was born. And I would have to tell you that that probably was the most spectacular thing that had ever happened in my life. And the fact that when she was born—I'll always remember that my wife asked me, since I was there when she

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was born, "Was it a boy or a girl?" and I had not stopped counting fingers and toes. I didn't care what the gender was, just that she was healthy. And so I think I came away with a sense that it was important for the environment to begin to change so that everyone could have an opportunity.

I remember shortly after that period of time in the early eighties, I'm driving the car and my daughter is sitting in the back seat with two of her young friends. And both of them, or they're all discussing politics, believe it or not, at the age of four or five. It was during a presidential election period. And my daughter said, very clearly, she said, "Well, a woman could never be president." And I look over the back of the seat and said, "Well, what makes you say that." And she said, "Well, there's never been one." So her logic was absolutely perfect and it again increased my sense that the environment was actually acculturating a four- or five- or six-year-old to believe that there were things that men could do and things that women could do. And that's just not the way the world should be or the way things should work. So I think that also kind of helped jogged me a little bit to be much more focused, that working with

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people in the environment and trying to make the environment such that everyone could be successful in it.

DG: Well, and I have to come clean a little bit, here, by saying that you were—as a colleague of mine, you at that time, you were someone that a woman engineer as myself felt very safe going to talk with about some of the situations that we would find ourselves in. And one of the questions that I would really like to ask you would be, you know, what did the men say to you when you took these women engineers into your organization? Because I heard what was said, and I was just curious if it made it back to you?

JP: I think a lot of the—initially at least, I think a lot of the other organizations, which were all headed by men at the time, sort of found it amusing. I think that particularly since there were four or five women and one in a managerial role in my organization at the time, and there probably were not more than two or three other women in the entire organization. And at the time the organization had probably four thousand people in it. When I say “other women” I mean women engineers.

DG: Right.

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JP: We had a number of women who were in designer roles and technical roles, but as far as the engineering staffing or particularly the project management staffing, there were very few women at the time.

I also think that they looked—they had some curiosity. I was asked more than once, you know, how the women were doing. I think people wanted them to be successful. I don't think there was any natural tendency to not want them to be successful. But I do think that people felt like, that it was sort of a man's world. Project engineering, building things, welding machines, digging holes. I don't think they had quite the same feel that the reality of the world really was, and that is that the women were not only competent based on their educational background, but they were capable based on their leadership skills.

DG: Well, and that's really good to hear. Because the comments that the women would hear coming back were affectionate kinds of comments but had, you know, innuendo in them. And they were, you know, one of the comments that I had heard came back was blah, blah, blah, "Well you're part of Porter's harem," so to speak. And I saw that as—and it wasn't said in a negative way, just as you said. It was not a, this was not a negative thing. This was something that

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was—people were trying to get a grasp of it and trying to understand what it really was, because it was so novel and so different at the time.

Well, let's fast-forward now to the nineties. And you know, you're coming in as, in your role as vice president of engineering. And so now you have, you know, risen to the top of the organization that you've worked so long in. And you are setting up a staff and you have a staff of, you know, women as part of it. You know, you have a number of women on your staff. Can you say a little bit about that and talk a little about your thought process there?

JP: It's interesting because at one point in the last five years, of the top eight slots in my organization at the director level, five of those were filled by women. And I would get specific comments, particularly from corporate organizations such as HR [human resources] that, Well, you don't have any problems with your diversity metrics. And people might ask me, Well, you know, why did you do that? Or, How did you do that? I think the simple answer in every case was, "I needed good people."

I had a wonderful mentor. His name was Bob Miller. Bob was vice president of engineering a number of years ago, and

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he's passed away. But he was a great mentor. He not only understood what was the right thing to do, but how to do things right. And he was free with his advice and guidance, and I hope I've been able to follow a little bit in his footsteps around that area. But he made a statement to me early on in my career working for him, was that "If you have good people let them work." The key being you need to have good people. And all of the people that I had in my organization—regardless of their gender, regardless of their background, or their ethnic heritage, or anything—is they're all really good people. I selected them because they were capable, not because of their gender. And it just worked out that the best people at the time when I needed someone in one of those roles turned out to be a woman. So it's been an interesting experience. Some of that has turned over now. We have moved some of the people into other jobs. They've progressed and they've moved on into other roles.

It was interesting initially, I think, that at least three of the women were a little hesitant initially to move into the organization because they wanted to stay in a quote unquote, Business role. They didn't want to move into a functional engineering role. But once we got them in and

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they understood the organization and realized the contributions that we were making it was very hard to get them out.

So I think that's—it's been a very positive thing for me. But it's also been, I think, a very positive thing, again, for not just for my organization but for DuPont in a way. We've been able to move a number of women from middle management roles into more senior management roles where they could not only be role models—which is something that I really do require of them. I think it's important for all of us as we get further along in our careers that we reach back and we help others so that we can continue to move forward, and move forward in a supportive way. So each of them, I encourage them strongly to participate in organizations such as the Society of Women Engineers, to participate in professional groups and to work with people within their organization and within DuPont to help that career development need and to do some mentoring of people.

Particularly, I think, in the case of the women, the younger women. Because there are not enough role models in our company, nor do I think in the engineering profession in general, for younger women to be able to aspire to what their real potential can be. And as a consequence of that

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I've always worked with my staff and encouraged them to realize they have an accountability in that area, too. The fact, they've gotten ahead does not allow them to not help others do the same thing.

DG: That's excellent. I think that the notion of mentoring is really very special. And thinking about that, and thinking about, you know, our early work relationship was one of that. In a way that, you know, the reaching out and helping. Knowing that there was a safe place to go to have a conversation, to make sure that there was a good understanding going on. Something that's really very critical. And was wondering if you ever noticed any dynamics around those kinds of conversations that you would have? Would the mentoring conversations that you would be having with women engineers be any different in any sort? Have you ever sensed or noticed a difference from the conversations you would have with, you know, male engineers who would seek out your guidance or, you know, input?

JP: I think yes. A couple of thoughts about that. First of all, about mentoring. I think mentoring is a wonderful thing for people to be involved in, for two reasons. One, it's an opportunity to potentially be able to help others. But it's also an opportunity to grow yourself. I think

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people consider mentoring sometimes as a one-way contribution, and in reality anyone I've ever been involved with in a mentoring relationship has always helped me grow. And they've helped me, even today when I have mentoring relationships with people, it helps me grow in terms of perspective. It helps me grow in terms of my ability to think differently about things and to, and quite frankly help continue to grow my notion of inclusiveness. You've never got it right. And at DuPont we're very focused around, you can have no injuries, zero safety instances, incidents. But the fact is, is that you've to stay focused on that at all times and personal growth is a key. Mentoring has helped me to do that.

The difference though that I guess I have found is that men have a tendency to be much more "what" focused while women have much more of a "how" thought process around things in general, when you talk about mentoring. A man—

DG: Can you give us an example of that?

JP: Yes, I can. A man in a conversation about a project-type of role, let's say for example. And they're looking to understand how they could grow or they could move on to higher-level types of assignments, would be asking more

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about, What were the kinds of things that they should do better. Should they be better at making estimates? Should they be better at organizing staffing? Should they be better at interfacing with contractors? Whereas the women would be much more interested in, How can I work better with other people so that I can improve the overall performance of the team? I think men have a tendency to be much more individually focused, at least early in their careers. Women have a tendency, like I said earlier, to be much more—to be broader, have more of a leadership sense of themselves, and I think also to be focused more on how can they work with others better so that the whole can come out with a better outcome. That would be sort of the general feeling that I've had over time about that.

DG: You know, we've never talked about that, but in—I've had that very same kind of insight. And it's unique that we find ourselves having that conversation.

JP: I also think that men—I don't think that there's much difference between men and women, by the way, in the aggregate. If you look at the big picture and you average us all down, we're all pretty much the same. We have different acts. For example, I would tell you that the men are going to always be very—they're never going to show

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their emotions. We're all afraid at sometime, or concerned at some point in time, and the men will try to hide it. You'll kind of have to work it out of them, or understand it through the way they say things. Whereas the women will generally be much more open with you. And if they're concerned about something they'll lay it out there. And you can actually have a much more efficient dialog with a woman about an issue in a mentoring role than you can a man, because in many instances you kind of have to dig it out of them because they don't think they're supposed to be that way. Whereas the women aren't nearly as afraid of their emotions, I think, as the men are.

DG: Hmmm. Interesting. As you look forward to the future of the engineering profession—you do a lot of work externally to DuPont and you're looked at as a leader in the engineering construction industry in the world—how do you, or how have you thought of transferring some of what you've learned with respect to women in engineering at DuPont into the broader engineering community? Could you tell us ideas and stories? Because I know you've been active in this area, especially with the Construction Industry Institute. Can you give us some sense of some of the progress there?

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JP: Yes, I can. The progress there continues to be pretty slow. My belief is, is that large owner companies are likely to be more progressive in general, and larger contractors, than a lot of the smaller firms and smaller organizations that make up the huge construction industry in the U.S. For that matter, around the world. As a consequence of that, the thing that I have tried to do the most frequently is to articulate what I consider to be the best way for us to improve the industry overall, and that is to get as much of a diverse perspective as we possibly can into all of the decisions, all of the processes, all of the work that goes on.

I've done that in a number of ways, by telling stories that are personally favorites of mine around the value for diversity. Because when you get to the bottom line on a lot of things, people say, That's fine, but, you know, show me the money. Well, the money's there. I can guarantee you that over the course of my forty-one years in DuPont there's a number of instances where having a diverse group of people helped you decide what to do next has allowed a much richer decision to come out of the process, and for the DuPont company shareholder to be much better served than it would have been if me and two other old white guys

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sit down and decided the answer. So the business value does actually exist in terms of that bigger picture.

I also think, though, that the other significant contribution that I hope I have made and will have an impact in the future is that we have included a number of the key women in my organization in key roles in these organizations. The Construction Industry Institute—Judy Passwaters, who runs our [DuPont] facilities services and real estate organization, is a director. She is our Board of Advisors representative [for the Construction Industry Institute]. She's one of the few women at that level that are in those roles. But Judy's a very aggressive person, in terms of helping support [women], and she's making some impacts there. Jocelyn Scott, who's the director of our DuPont engineering—project engineering organization. Jocelyn is also our key representative to the Construction Users Roundtable.

So by having these people—and I could name others, but without going into a lot of greater detail—it's my belief that by encouraging them, supporting them into these roles—and putting them in places where they're not real comfortable either, I might tell you—they have to grow in

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those roles themselves, not only to represent themselves and the DuPont Company, but also to represent the difference that they bring to the party, if you will. And those are some other examples of the kind of things that I'm trying to do, that I will leave something in place that will enable things to continue to go forward.

DG: Fair. Really, really strong. You know, people would say that you walk your talk, and that's probably the biggest and best kind of credibility that you can have. As you look, though, forward, if you take this time now, 2007, moving forward—what would you look to, and how would you think that we need to do more? I mean if you had to project, if you could sort of wave a magic wand over things, what would you say could be some things that could be done if the world was a perfect place, which of course it's not. But you know, if the world was a perfect place, what do you think would be some big gains that would try to help?

I mean, if you look around right now, there's many things. There's many women deans of engineering around the United States. There's women presidents of universities in, you know, MIT, Purdue, other schools. I mean there's lots of—University of Iowa—I mean there's lots of females that

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are in technical roles and are achieving greater things.

Where do you see this going and what do you think can be done from your standpoint looking forward?

JP: Well the first thought that I actually had was, tracking back to my daughter and her friends sitting in the back seat, is it's not outside the realm of possibility that we might have female president in a year or so [Hillary Rodham Clinton running in Democratic presidential primary]. So maybe that changes things in terms of a bigger context.

But to the point of the engineering profession itself, the biggest problem that we have is getting more of the young women involved in technical subjects, getting them interested in math and science, and getting them when they're in the grade school levels and junior high school to want to be engineers. A perfect world would be that the demographics of those practicing the art of engineering, the technology, would be consistent with the demographics of society in general. That would be a perfect world. But that's not happening because, again, I think there's a general acculturation of younger women to not get involved in math and science. And so it's important that we do those things today and support those organizations that help that really get more traction.

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I'll give you a classic example: the Girl Scouts. The Girl Scouts in the Delaware Valley area every year have an Explore Engineering Day and a number of us, including you, have been very involved in that over the years. Just to get the young women a chance to see what they could do if they became an engineer, and see how much fun it is to understand how things work and how to improve them and how to make new things happen. So it's critical that that piece of it actually happen. And it can't stop there. We sponsor a FIRST [For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology] robotics team in DuPont engineering, and a number of the young people that are a part of these robotics teams are women. And so we're constantly looking at ways to get them involved, get them excited, and get them into the profession. Got to get them in first.

Once we've got them in, we have to continue to work on the work environment. The work environment, even though a lot of changes have been made, still is not as inclusive nor as accepting of difference as it must be in order for us to be able to have that vision of parity around the demographics to occur. In order for that to happen, I believe that the women that do reach the high levels—the women that do become the deans, the women that do become the presidents

of the company, the women that may become the president of the country—have got to reach out and have to become role models in an active sense. They can't sit there and look like a figurehead. They've got to help by going out, actually touching, talking, and helping people move forward. Because I truly believe that nobody should get anything simply because of who they are. They should get it based on effort and contribution. But that requires help to understand how to do that and to do that in the best way. So that would be sort of my general sense of that bigger picture.

The men have a key role in this, also. They have to spend the time now trying to help those people who are already in the system to get to those higher-level positions. Because there's just not enough women role models at this point—particularly in the engineering, and particularly in the project engineering side of things—to provide that level of mentorship and provide that level of support to move forward and to understand what they can do, and help them get to the point where they can.

DG: What would you tell your peers—I mean, your male peers. What would you tell them if you, you know—? And I'm sure

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that this kind of conversational line has come up and I'm sure that the, you know—I'm assuming. Let's say this. I'm assuming that the conversational line that comes up among two or three men sitting down and talking about this is a little different dynamic than when there's possibly, you know, two men and a woman having a conversation. Give me a sense of you know, what is the dynamic? What would you either offer to them as something they might choose to do or, you know, do people talk about that with you?

JP: I don't ever remember, other than formal conversations that were related to things around demographic types of metrics, ever having a couple of men sit down and engage me in a conversation about that particular subject.

DG: Hmm. Okay.

JP: And I think that you've probably touched on something that's another area that should be considered, and I should consider. Because there are times when I could have had an opportunity to have initiated a conversation with others, as opposed to waiting to have them come and initiate it with me. I've always operated on the basis of trying to establish a model or a role model role as opposed to necessarily engaging people. It's part of my personality.

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My personality is more one of doing than trying to convince. It's probably the best way for me to phrase that. Having said that, though, I think you've opened up an area for me. See, in all of these types of conversations you learn something. So there's something that I've learned. I can spend more time engaging and doing it in a way where I can help support them in their learning, but at the same time help them understand actions that they need to take in order to be able to improve the work environment.

DG: The reason why I ask that is that many times when I find myself in situations of being one woman in a room full of men, whether I like it or not what get foisted upon my shoulders is to have to speak for the women or to have to advocate for the women. And that in itself creates a situation of a burden that I wouldn't necessarily always want to carry, but find that if I don't it never, you know, the subject never comes up. And so I was just curious if it would—since if I'm in the room the situation changes and the dynamic changes, I'm just curious if in a room full of men the conversation will come up, and my sense is that it most likely wouldn't. But I can never say that for sure.

JP: Interesting that you brought back a memory that may well be worth sharing here, because I think that there's a tendency

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on all our parts to try to see things in a very digital world. Things either are or they're not. My view is that the world is excruciatingly analog. Nothing is always the same, and things aren't yes or no in most cases. And I remember a time, and I believe you were there too, where I was a single male in a room full of women.

DG: Uh-hm.

JP: And there must have been fifteen or twenty women and we were to go around the room and we were to introduce ourselves. And as we went around the room, when the woman to my right introduced herself the woman on her left immediately introduced herself and they left me out. It was like I wasn't there. And so I had the interesting experience of being invisible, so I could appreciate the feeling that some of the other women would have. But piece that was the most amazing to me was they didn't notice it either. So it works that both groups need to spend time understanding each other so that we can do the right things right all the time, in terms of how we manage in that area around those types of relationships. I always remember that. I remember it with a certain smile because it was so typical of what happens in a room where they're all men and one woman.

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DG: That's true. You've brought that up on certain occasions, too.

JP: Right.

DG: Let's sort of take a trip back to, and dig in a little more around this notion of mentoring. And if you could give advice to a man who wanted to help some women engineers, what kind of advice would you give him.

JP: Learn to listen more. I think, again, one of the big differences lies in the fact that in mentoring relationships between men and women the men have a tendency to want to talk, to tell, as opposed to listen and understand and then communicate. And I think that's an area that I've probably learned more. And I've learned it through the hard way, in many instances. And that's through mentoring relationships that didn't work out well, largely because I did not handle my side of it very well. And in a couple of instances where finally the person looked at me, because the person and I had a relationship over a long period of time, and started to become almost angry with me. And I couldn't understand why she was getting angry with me, and so I finally—we had to have that conversation and she was able to find a way to communicate with me that that

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I was not listening. I was not hearing her. I was processing her input through my set of filters so that I was hearing it in my world, as opposed to being able to feel it and understand it in hers.

So I would tell them to spend time listening more and try to feel about things a little more than just think about them. There's nothing wrong with feeling about things in the work environment. It sometimes makes things happen in a much more business effective way if you're able to create an environment where people all feel like they are able to be open and they are able to be able to be who they are.

Not that—they don't have to be somebody or something different. So that's probably the bottom line in terms of that area.

DG: Well that is certainly, I think—the feeling piece of who you are certainly is one of your really strong suits. Let's take that same question and say if you were going to coach a woman to become a mentor for women engineers, how would you—what you do? What would you say?

JP: Coach a woman to be a mentor for women engineers.

DG: Uh-hm.

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JP: Be honest. Tell it like it was for you so that they can understand that it's the same for everyone. I think there's times when anyone reaches a level of authority or a higher level in an organization where they feel that they somehow have to operate in a different way. And my experience, largely from observation, has been that sometimes when women get into higher-level positions they feel like they have to be more like the men than be like themselves.

DG: Uh-hm.

JP: And so I would offer the thought there that they should be open and honest with the people they're mentoring about how they felt, how life was for them, so that they can have shared experiences. And then they can share what worked so that the mentee can begin to see things they can do differently that would help them get ahead faster.

DG: That's great. I appreciate that. That's a wonderful response because I think that's—based on you know, just my life experience—is really spot on, based on the recipient's viewpoint of it. They really do want to hear sometimes the more difficult things, that honesty. And it's sometimes hard reliving some of that and working through it. But I think that's a great answer. Thank you.

James Porter and Deborah Grubbe Interview

END OF INTERVIEW