

# A Conversation with Denise Messier, Managing Partner, The Wheels Group



*Questions for this Executive Interview were prepared by members of LQ's Board & friends of LQ: Jacquelyn Barretta, CIO, Con-way Inc; Pamela Benkert, General Manager & Vice President, World Wide Operations, Consumer Digital Imaging, Eastman Kodak Company; Karen Cooper, Senior Communications Specialist, FedEx; Linda Hothem, CEO, Pacific American Service (PAC-AM); Diane Mollenkopf, Ph.D., University of Tennessee; Angela Mondou, Creator of ICE Leadership; Ellen Voie, CAE, Board of Directors Chair, Women in Trucking, Inc.*

**LQ:** Have you found gender-based resistance to your leadership, given the predominantly male mix of most of the transportation and logistics providers? *(Jacquelyn Barretta)*

**Denise Messier:** My business partners and I work as a team. We are supportive of each other and we have had a good understanding. I think that made it easier to transcend any resistance in the organization. Even if we didn't fully agree, there was an unspoken rule that we would support each other until we re-addressed the issue. In the past 20 years, if one of us made a decision without the other, it was common knowledge that it would be supported. So I can't say that I had resistance at that level. If there was, I did not notice.

From a customer standpoint, an approach from a woman may work a lot better than an approach from a man, and vice versa. Some men do not like to deal with women, and that's truly not a battle worth fighting. In that case, you should ask a male colleague to take care of the client in your place. I would like to think that our culture led to that sharing of responsibilities for solidifying relationships. Our gender never mattered, and it shouldn't.

**LQ:** Do you see a career in logistics as being significantly different than one in any other business field? *(Pamela Benkert)*

**Denise Messier:** Absolutely. You don't do this just to have a job. You either love it and you give it your all or you shouldn't pursue a career in this field. Most people in this field, men and women, feel a sense of accomplishment that keeps them in the industry.

**LQ:** What unique communication system can you bring to the field of logistics? *(Pamela Benkert)*

**Denise Messier:** Everybody's different; in my case, I'm very hands on. You will always find me in the trenches.

**LQ:** How do you select mentors to help you in your logistics career? *(Pamela Benkert)*

**Denise Messier:** Every day I meet people who add something to my perspective. I wouldn't call them mentorships, I would call them relationships. Mentorship is a little more refined and dedicated; it's an agreement. I like to think that you can be mentored just by meeting someone for an afternoon. You may never see that person again, but you have connected and you walk away with something new.

**LQ:** How do you achieve a work/life balance? What advice would you give to women who are considering a career in a logistics/transportation environment? *(Karen Cooper)*

**Denise Messier:** When I entered the field and started this business, there was no time for networking because I was working in the trenches. I did not do a very good job of balancing. I didn't feel that I had to work that hard, but I wanted to because I wanted the company to succeed. Looking back 20 years later, I'm very glad I did, but maybe I didn't have to do it all.

Women in our company have been able to leave and raise children while still keeping in touch with the workforce; they have come back and worked flex hours until their children were older and then they have pursued their career full force, aiming for those executive level positions.

**LQ:** When you consider the women you know in the industry, is there any unique characteristic of women that go into this field? *(Linda Hothem)*

**Denise Messier:** They are all strong-minded and they have common sense. Most of the women I have talked to in this industry over the last 30 years came upon logistics by accident and turned it into a career. Many of them recognized the strength they brought to the table and leveraged it.

**LQ:** Do you expect to see more women in top leadership roles in the logistic/supply chain field in the coming 5-10 years (or will it take longer)? What will this mean for the field? *(Diane Mollenkopf, Ph.D.)*

**Denise Messier:** I would like to say yes, I have this expectation, but initiatives will need to be put in place to make those opportunities available. There is a certain level that women can get to without too much fuss. They do a good job and it's recognized and they often remain in these kinds of positions. However, for women to get to the executive level, there are still some barriers.

There's always a difference when you have a group of executives made up of men and women. Sometimes it's still an old

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