

Be yourself, everyone else is already taken

An interview with Amber Wynne, QVC



Amber Wynne is Global Head of Diversity and Inclusion. She is responsible for introducing and executing global D&I strategy across all Qurate brands. Previously Amber worked as a Senior Manager D&I in QVC – one of the major brands from the Qurate family. Qurate Retail Group comprises seven leading retail brands, reaching approximately 370 million homes worldwide via 16 television networks and multiple ecommerce sites, social pages, mobile apps, print catalogs, and in-store destinations.

One sentence that had the strongest impact on your career and your choices concerning professional career?

I wish the sentence that came to my mind was more eloquent or more well put but it was “be yourself, everyone else is already taken”. The reason why it had such a strong impact on me was because early on in life I spent a lot of time trying to be what I thought made sense. So I went to university, I studied business - I was not sure if that was what I really wanted but it made sense because there were a lot of career options in business. Then when I was finished with my undergraduate degree I went right into studying from my graduate degree to my master in business and administration, not because I really had a lot passion for it but because it made sense. I thought that if I wanted to make more money or I wanted to have even more opportunities to advance, I would need to get an advanced degree. So that’s what I did.

But it was only your imagination telling you that it makes sense?

Yes, it was what I saw around me. I started up my career in financial services and everyone there had a business degree, everyone there went back for their MBA. That’s just what you did. I was not really sure what I wanted, until I saw a job that was in the D&I field. I remember showing it to my mother and her reaction was like: “You can’t take this job, it’s not a real job. You go for accounting, you go for finance, you don’t do this job because these people get laid off or let go from the organization when the business gets stuck.” Thankfully however, I had a mentor at the time who reminded to me that I cannot do what my mother did and I can’t do what the people around me have done, because that is what works for them. You have to figure out what works for you. It was a really tough decision for me to go for this role. I was really fearful of how stable it would be. But this is a job has ended up giving

me more growth and opportunity than I could've ever possibly imagined. In addition to having the opportunity to travel the world, I've also just learned so much about myself and this space I'm so fortunate to work in each and everyday.

D&I is a field that has grown in terms of what it is and what we are trying to do. People understand how critical it is to business and thanks to that I am still able to be in the business world even though I am not necessarily in a core side of it. I am actually supporting businesses in a way that to me is much more aligned to my authenticity.

Who was that mentor who told you that?

She was someone who worked in the Diversity and Inclusion field, someone I would eventually work for. She was like me in a lot of ways, but she was much more senior in the organization. She had seen a lot more in terms of her career and she helped me to understand the importance of having mentors that are like you and also who are not like you. So she would tell me: "Here is my opinion on this but I think you should go and ask another mentor. Like Scott". He was an older, white man, who I had less in common with on the surface but he ended up being one of the most amazing mentors I've ever had. He saw potential in me and he understood me - what my fears may be, what my opportunities are. I think that's important to have many mentors. Those who are like you and those who are unlike you because the balance of opinions it gives is really helpful.

The breakthrough moment that brought you where you are now.

I had a lot of breakthrough moments. The most recent one would probably be when I decided to join QVC. Where I worked previously had been doing D&I for quite some time and I felt very comfortable with it. At the same time, I was ready to grow - I truly wanted to be in an organization that was global and was in a more of a building phase of diversity and inclusion strategy. Back then, I knew I wanted more. It was still a tough decision though. When you have been in one place for 9 years, the idea of going into new industry, building new relationships, starting a new program is daunting and so it was for me.

Sometimes we know our potential but just this fear of the unknown keeps us back. The breakthrough moment for me was building the confidence in myself - knowing very clearly what I was capable of and valuing that. I realized I want more out of my career than I can expect from the organization where I'm with at this moment so I decided to take a chance. I'm a single mum, and that made my decision even harder. I knew if I didn't succeed, my family would be at risk. I'm a sole breadwinner, meaning if I don't get the bread, we don't eat. That was something that was tough, but eventually I did that even for my son. I wanted him to see an example of a woman who has a successful career, took chances and believed in herself. I want to raise a man who is a feminist, who understands the importance of women in the workplace and has a healthy respect for women. It was a lot my motivation.

Do you perceive yourself as a role model?

In some ways I do. But it depends on where your strengths are. There are some women who are younger than me that I see as role models just because of their fearlessness. I do struggle with a certain amount of fear of the unknown. So when I meet women who don't have that, who are completely fearless, in terms of getting what they really want, who have no hesitation about that - these are role models to me. I think I'm a role model in certain ways, because I developed comfort and confidence in my own story. There were times in my life where I wouldn't share with you that I was a single mother. In the beginning it was something that I was not comfortable with yet - I'd be thinking how you may perceive me or what you may think about my commitment to my career. Right now I am at that point where I'm not only very comfortable with it but I'm proud of it. I'm proud to be a black woman in

the field that I'm in, doing what I'm doing, being able to create this environment that accepts the difference. I'm really proud to be a working single mum. This is something I can be a role model for. Demonstrating being comfortable with myself and encouraging other people to be more comfortable with themselves and their stories.

What's your advice for others - how to be more self-confident?

Give yourself more credit for the things that you've done. It's really a matter of taking a step back. Sometimes we are so focused on the next win, next accomplishment, that we don't take enough time to stop and reflect on the things that we've already accomplished that we should be proud of. It could be a woman thing. We're always aware of what we haven't accomplished yet. And it's a shame, because there is so much to be grateful for. I think back about my story and I need to admit that it was pretty incredible. I was a single mum, I was working full time, I was doing my MBA - that is a lot for one person to manage.

When you give yourself that moment to reflect you start to build some of that self-confidence. You realize some of the things that you have lived through, or some of the adversities that you were able to overcome were huge, and if you managed to do that, you certainly are able to cope with whatever the future brings.

The key thing is also surrounding yourself with the people that you admire and who value you. My mentor that I mentioned earlier told me about a concept - your personal board of directors. First you think about yourself like about an organization or a brand. Then you identify the people that are your circle, your network, and the closest people around you. The clue is to start thinking about them like you would a board of directors that can comment on decisions that you are making and share their opinions. Whenever there is a decision that you are facing, these people would sit down with you and just ask: "what's your goal, what are the things that you want to accomplish, how does this decision match your values?" - those sort of questions. I think that having folks that value you and know you well, can give you some of that confidence to think that you can totally go for it, whatever "it" is. Or maybe they will say some things that you should consider. Also, ensuring you give yourself time to identify those people that are a role models for you, whether you know them or not, was also very helpful for me.

Who is role model for you?

Michelle Obama, Beyonce - I have been a fan of her from the time of Destiny's Child. It was amazing to see that growth that she has achieved - being also very comfortable with herself, with her femininity, with her power as a women, as an entertainer, as an activist. I'm amazed by her. There are also some business leaders who I admire. Definitely Tiffany Dufu - she is very active in the women's empowerment space. I continue to be a fan Sheryl Sandberg - I find her to be a fascinating women. I think she is someone we can all look up to, because not only had she achieved massive success in her career, but she's she has lived through some pretty challenging adversities. I think it's important to find inspiration wherever we can.

So for you they are people that you don't know personally. Women need some examples to follow. Do you have an authentic example to identify with? Do you have any role model who is closer to you?

I agree that you have to have somebody who is personally identifiable, that you connect with whom you consider to be a role model. I had an aunt who recently passed away. Before she died she told me these incredible stories about my great-grandmother. It was about everything she did as a matriarchal women who was responsible for whole family. Everything she lived through was so unbelievable to me - intensified by fact that it was MY great-grandmother, which was my legacy that I was born from. It gave me so much inspiration, probably more than any

role models that I mentioned before. My aunt was telling me that my great-grandmother moved from southern area of the US, from Virginia. She moved up to Philadelphia by herself, with 5 kids, no job, no family and worked to support all of them. She supported her kids until she got them to the point that they were able to support themselves. It was so powerful for me. I thought to myself, if she could do that, I can certainly do this, especially with only one child, it is so attainable.

Dark sides of being woman in business.

The darkest side for me – revealed with the #metoo movement. I can say I did not know it has been this bad for women - I thought that we had made more progress than we actually have. Being in the Diversity & Inclusion space it hit me even harder. It was really difficult for me to realize that there were so many women who felt like they could not speak on some things that they were experiencing – that was the dark reality. Though, the flip side of this story is that now it brings us all together in what we are doing in this space. It is very intentional and we are sure that the stories we share and the work we are doing are very meaningful and bring people and their experiences to life.

In your opinion, what do women compromise on when entering the business world?

It's personal. You have to decide for yourself what is comfortable. Every environment is going to require you that you to flex in some way on something. It's very important for any of us to figure out what our boundaries are. What in our lives is non-negotiable. There are certain things about me and what I bring into an organization and how I feel comfortable, that I am not willing to bend on. How folks make decisions, how they speak to one another, what's valued here, how they recognize people, what's acceptable in terms of sharing opinions. All those things you have to figure out for yourself – what's comfortable for you. I've done it. I'm very clear with my values. I couldn't be in an organization where people don't respect one another.

Does QVC respect it?

Absolutely yes. It is a respectful organization, it goes even beyond the respect. QVC is a culture in which people genuinely care for one another, almost in a family type of way. If I ask you "how are you", I really want to know how you are. This is genuine sense of belonging and community and it is definitely something that is important to me. But for some folks it may be something that is not important and I think that's fair too.

Which way is better for women, which way would facilitate women to be in leadership? To adapt male type of leadership - it means to change yourself. Or to change the leadership model? To make it more feminine, more inclusive? What do you think?

We need to encourage women, as they are constantly being discouraged. Part of the issue certainly is unconscious bias. We have to work on men and women, who are already in influential leadership positions and help change their hearts and minds to be able to see the landscape for what it is. Women have been trying to change to fit this masculine model of leadership and it only shows how much more productive, how much more inclusive we could be if women just could be themselves, if everyone could be whoever we are. If you are a woman and you're aspiring to a leadership position, the only thing you are constantly being told or what you're seeing is that you have to spend all of your efforts to be something you are not. In the result, you are not really contributing all your efforts to your job, you are contributing it to pretend that you are something. And it does not make sense. You are not paying someone as an organization to play any character all day long, you're paying them to give results. And it's just not only the women's problem. It's everyone's problem. We all have to come to the table and be able to have an honest conversation with one another about what people are actually

experiencing. And we do that. I think the most powerful role models are the men who can show vulnerability and who can serve as champions and advocates for women in the workplace. It cannot be just women talking about women's issues to other women. It should be a conversation that is a partnership among men and women. And that's what we are trying to focus a lot, making sure that men are part of the conversation, they understand, they don't have so much fear around this topic.

How to build the career and be yourself / remain authentic?

It's a very good question. I've struggled with that throughout my career. We grow, all of us grow. Comparing what was my authenticity at 19 or 20 when I started working formally versus what it is now at 33 - I've grown and I've changed. My perspective has changed – I have become a parent, I have grown in my career. Remember about being flexible with yourself – you have to remain true to who you are and what's important to you, but allow yourself to grow in that as well.

I think working in D&I has allowed me to be even more of myself. This is what I am passionate about. The whole purpose of my role is to help create a sense of belonging for other people to be themselves, so for me it really has not been super difficult to remain authentic. Having said that, if you want to build a career and remain authentic, you probably have to make sure that whatever you are doing is something you are truly passionate about. That has been a key thing for me – which I am always very passionate about the work that I am doing. When I was not really passionate about what I am doing it seemed more like a challenge – now I am, and that's allows me to be me in every way.