

EMPOWER AWARD WINNER

CELESTE STEVENS

Seeing People's Potential

By Rebecca Patrick

Celeste Stevens can trace her path from an hourly warehouse job to the executive suite through people who saw something in her before she fully saw it herself. Now vice president of human resources for Do it Best Group in Fort Wayne, she has made it her work to do the same for others.

Two decades after joining the company, Stevens is the Indiana Chamber of Commerce's 2026 Empower Award honoree. Presented at the recent Indiana Women's Collaborative Luncheon, the award recognizes leadership and service that advance women in business, the workplace and the larger community.

Her rise is compelling, but her leadership philosophy is the larger story: "Leadership is really about recognizing untapped potential in others and helping them get there – supporting them, stretching them, investing in them, giving them feedback that sometimes is hard to do, sacrificing your own comfort to help them get better."

From the ground up

Stevens' path began in Do it Best operations and took her through assignments across the company, including helping lead an order fulfillment team in Woodburn, Oregon. When her general manager suggested human resources, she initially was not sure what to make of it. He saw that the qualities she brought to operations – an eye for talent, a commitment to development and a belief in accountability – could strengthen HR and the business.

A conversation with Dan Starr, then vice president of HR and now Do it Best president and CEO, convinced her to make the move. She relocated to Indiana in late 2011 and has held a succession of HR roles since. "My career is cool because who would've imagined an hourly warehouse team member to the VP of HR?" she reflects. "That doesn't happen almost anywhere other than something like in our industry," she adds, pointing to the value the industry places on hard



2026 Empower Award honoree Celeste Stevens celebrates the moment with Indiana Chamber President and CEO Vanessa Green Sinders (left) and 2025 honoree Janmarie Connor, president and CEO of Connor Painting.

work, openness to feedback and putting others first.

Her operations background still shapes her thinking about how work moves through an organization and why people strategy cannot sit apart from business strategy. "The people go get the business. The people are the culture. It's not the words on the wall," she stresses.

That perspective became especially important after Do it Best acquired True Value in November 2024. Returning from maternity leave, Stevens stepped into the work of stabilizing and integrating the business, first as vice president of HR for True Value and then in her current groupwide role.

Andrea Killian, HR people and culture manager at Do it Best Group, captures Stevens' impact succinctly: "Truly exceptional leaders change organizations. The rare ones change people. Celeste Stevens does both."

"She demonstrates every day that strong leadership and compassion are not opposing forces; they are inseparable," Killian praises.



Celeste Stevens (right) brings her people-first leadership to the company's 2026 Fall Market, a trade show and buying event for Do it Best and True Value co-op members.

Making growth feel possible

Stevens begins by telling people plainly what she sees in them, then giving them opportunities to take on greater responsibility.

"People don't generally resist growth; they resist feeling unsafe while they grow," she explains. "So I think one of the important things … is giving people that safety while they're in stretch assignments (work that challenges and helps them advance)."

That means checking in, explaining when she is delegating to develop someone and defining success up front. "It's just giving them the confidence and the trust to carry forward on really meaningful projects and initiatives," Stevens says. "That's one thing I really focus on – seeing that potential and helping people get there."

Stevens also looks beyond individual development to building strong teams. She brings together people with complementary strengths and creates opportunities for them to learn from one another, collaborate and connect their work to the larger business.

Lindsay Boccardo, owner of Lindsay Boccardo LLC, has seen that approach firsthand through her work with Do it Best on leadership development. "Celeste is rarely the one speaking up in a room. She is not loud. She's busy listening. Paying attention in a way that most people aren't," Boccardo shares.

She also sees Stevens create conditions in which women can lead authentically rather than feeling they must prove their way into every opportunity. "I've watched her build environments where women feel safe to speak up, grow and take ownership. Not because she's telling them to, but because she's modeling it. There's a steadiness to her leadership that makes people trust themselves more."

Stevens offers this advice to other women: "Take the work very seriously, but do not take yourself too seriously," she recommends. "Sometimes I think we have something – or we think we have something – to prove, but we've already proven it. It's why we're in the room. It's why we have been afforded the career opportunity that we have. It's why we're asked to lead a team."

Her counsel is demanding and freeing: Know the business. Know yourself and your strengths. Take on hard assignments. Mentor others, even peers. Leave things better than you found them. And have fun along the way. "Every challenge is preparing you for a future that you cannot yet see," she asserts, "but don't get ahead of yourself. Enjoy everything that you're leading. Enjoy the people that are surrounding you."

"It's never the delivery of something that is the most fun. It's all the work – sometimes the messy work – to get there that is the fun," Stevens contends. "Enjoy that journey. It's a really important one. Don't miss it."

Serving with purpose

Stevens' concept of leadership extends beyond the company. At Do it Best, she says, a servant-led culture means "we don't clock in and out of care." She has served on the board of Questa, which helps people fund postsecondary education – a mission that is personal. "I myself returned to school as an adult student and, with Do it Best's help, got a degree years after what the normal trajectory would be," she shares. "I'm a big believer in upskilling the workforce and investing in that, helping create opportunities for people to do that."

Cancer has also given Stevens a deeply personal reason to serve. Her husband, Elijah, is a stage-four cancer patient. In his name, she led a 10-week fundraising campaign that raised $100,000 for what is now Blood Cancer United. Her family also has supported other cancer-related causes, including Relay for Life.

More recently, Stevens has worked with Greater Fort Wayne Inc. on childcare affordability and accessibility in Allen County. For her, the issue sits at the intersection of family well-being and workforce strength, affecting parents' ability to pursue opportunities and employers' ability to attract and retain talent.

Her sons bring that connection between home and work into even sharper focus. She describes her older son, Tony, as curious and positive – "a light in every single room he enters" – and her younger son, Neo, as "stubborn, smart and sassy," as well as extraordinarily strong. They also remind her to see every employee as someone's loved one. "Everybody I interact with at work is somebody's baby; that's somebody's child," Stevens reflects. "They deserve my respect, my hard work – they deserve my best."

"Celeste does not simply advocate for women. She invests in them, walks beside them and creates measurable opportunities for them to grow and lead. I am personally a testament to the lasting impact of her leadership," attests Angela Nevers, development and support manager, Do it Best.

That commitment to recognizing and developing others gives the Empower Award added meaning for Stevens.

"At Do it Best, I am fortunate to be part of a servant-led culture where leaders recognize potential, invest in women and believe every person has intrinsic worth," she emphasizes. "I accept this award with gratitude and share it with everyone who has been seen, supported and empowered, and who has chosen to do the same for someone else. ■