



Stanford eCorner

Made Tougher by Politics

Meg Whitman, *Hewlett Packard Enterprise*

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Meg Whitman contrasts her 2010 campaign for California governor with her career as a tech executive. She explains how politicians must endure intense public scrutiny and have a much wider constituency to keep in mind when they speak. While she lost the race, Whitman says the experience made her tougher and deepened her understanding of government: “What the government does is it sets the environment for the rest of us to be successful.”



Transcript

- What the government does is it sets the environment for the rest of us to be successful. For Stanford University to be successful, for Hewlett-Packard to be successful, for the startup community to be successful, for the Red Cross to be successful and it matters who runs and so I would encourage all of you to think through your career aspirations, what you're interested in doing and where you can make a difference and think about running for City Council, thinking about running for School Board, think about running for Congress, think about running State Senate, State Assembly and my recommendation is that you start at an office level that you can work your way up. I mean, I actually went from zero to Governor of California which is, if it were separate state, a separate country, I think most of you know, it would be the seventh largest country in the world. California would be the seventh largest country in the world and that was probably a mistake. Ya know, if I had it to do over again, maybe you would run for Congress or you'd run for State Senate or you run for State Treasurer and you'd sort of, you'd get into this new arena because I would say campaigning is entirely different than being in business, entirely differently. We are trained in business when an investor asks us a question or a customer asks us a question, we answer it forthrightly, straightforward and that's not actually what Politicians do. (laughing) And there's a reason for that. That you have to be quite careful what you say because actually, depending on what you say, there's huge sections of the population that you may alienate. And you have to build and that sound really disingenuous in some ways, it's in fact not because you've gotta build coalitions that you can put together to win the election and then try to work on governing. So it's a, I'd say you all should think about it.

I mean, it was a remarkable experience and frankly, it made me a better CEO. It really did make me a better CEO and I'll give you an example. I have a much tougher skin than I did before I ran for Governor. And you can't help it, after two and a half years of being shot at, you end up getting a thicker skin. And when I was named the President and CEO of Hewlett-Packard, the press was not great. Some of you may remember this. Meg is a consumer technology gal. She doesn't know anything about the enterprise. Ya know, she ran a small internet startup to eight billion in revenue but this is 110 billion dollar company. And the press was really not good.

You should go back to Google and look at it. And it happened that the day I was named was a board meeting and so that morning, we all come into the board meeting and I'm reading the newspapers and some others are reading on their tablets and the board feels really badly. They're like, oh Meg, this press, we feel so bad. We talked you into doing this, we feel so bad for you. I'm reading the press and I said, this is the best press I've had in two and a half years. (laughing) This is all good, all the time. So it's just a matter of your, ya know, your perspective and. - That's great. - And I will tell you also that, communicating to large groups of people in a campaign or in a very large company like Hewlett-Packard is actually a skill. And if you watch Politicians, they do a number of things. They, it is not about the left brain.

It's not about the facts and the figures. It's about the stories you tell. And so when I came to Hewlett-Packard with 325,000 people, 80,000 contractors, seven major lines of business operating in a 170 countries, there's not way you're going to win hearts and minds by ya know, diving into the left brain and ya know, telling people about the cash flow and the operating income and the return on invested capital. Those are important but when you're trying to rally an organization to a mission, it really is about the stories you tell and I learned that campaigning.