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Always Do Your Best

Meg Whitman, Hewlett Packard Enterprise

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Hewlett Packard Enterprise's Meg Whitman explains how having some humility at her first job after earning an MBA from Harvard Business School helped her shine in front of supervisors. She recalls being given an assignment that, initially, she felt was beneath her and should've gone to someone else. But by committing to do the best job possible, Whitman says she came to understand a timeless lesson about business.



Transcript

- So I went to Procter &Gamble which was my first job out of college which was in Cincinnati, Ohio which was not exactly my dream city. But for what I wanted to do which was marketing, it was, it really is and still is in many ways, the best marketing company from a traditional perspective in the world. And I learned things at Procter &Gamble that I still do today. It was almost a graduate degree in marketing and product management. And I learned a tremendous amount there. One thing I learnt was, "Do the very best job you can "at the assignment that you are given." So, often when you come out of particularly MBA school, I think you have a bit of an exalted view about what you should be doing. (laughs) And my first assignment at Procter &Gamble after I'd gotten my MBA from Harvard was I was assigned to a test market shampoo brand called T4 which turned out to be Ivory Shampoo. You will notice that there is no Ivory Shampoo. So we know where this went. (interviewer laughing) But the assignment as a brand-new, newly minted Harvard MBA was, "How big should the hole on the size of the shampoo cap be?" (audience chuckling) I'm sitting there going, "Oh man, this is really not good.

"I'm sure they have people who know "the answer to this question. "Why am I being asked to do this?" And I thought very seriously about going to my brand manager, my boss, and saying, "This is really a dumb assignment, "and I'm not doing it 'cause there's someone "at this company who must know "the answer to this question." I decided that was not really the best strategy. (laughing) So I said, "You know what? "I'm going to do the very best job "that has ever been done at the Procter &Gamble Company "to figure out how big the hole "in the shampoo cap should be." I did quantitative research. I did qualitative research. I interviewed customers. I went nuts, and I wrote the best memo. Because that's, in those days, that's how P&G communicated. I wrote the best memo that's ever been written on this. And, (audience laughing) they said it was really fabulous. And then I asked my brand manager.

I said, "But you knew the answer to this question, "didn't you? "You must have known the answer to this question." And he said, "Of course we knew the answer "to the question, but we wanted to teach "our new folks how to get things done "in the environment. "And the key lesson that you got in this memo "was when faced with the choice of a consumer "who prefers a smaller hole in the shampoo cap "but that means the consumer uses less shampoo "which isn't as good for the company, "which choice do you make? "And of course, the answer is you make the choice "on behalf of the customer. "Because in the end, if you make the choice "on behalf of the customer, "it works out best, maybe in the longer run, "for the company."