



HEATHER KASTEN

INTERVIEW WITH

RISING TO THE OCCASION

HEATHER KASTEN RETURNS TO THE GREATER SARASOTA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
WITH A MEMBER-CENTRIC PHILOSOPHY AND OPEN MIND. **Phil Lederer**

FOLLOWING THE SURPRISE DEPARTURE of Kevin Cooper as president and CEO, the Greater Sarasota Chamber of Commerce could have flailed without the strong hand of a chief executive. Instead, it got to work looking for a leader and found a familiar face in Heather Kasten—the Chamber’s own vice president of member experience until 2014. Leaving her position at the head of the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance, where she has served that community for the past five years, Kasten returns to the Sarasota Chamber with a member-centric philosophy and fresh perspective.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE ROLE OF THE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE IN THIS COMMUNITY?

The primary role of a Chamber of Commerce is to connect businesses. We’re a business organization, and our role is to provide a platform for businesses in the community. There’s another part of it—economic development and governmental issues—and those affect businesses as well. The Chamber plays a tremendous role in being able to unite a message and stand behind it, making sure that we have a seat at the table—at a local, city, county and state level—and that our legislators are hearing the voice of business.

WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS AS THE NEW CEO?

As we go into the future, defining even more clearly what the Chamber can do, and continuing to build on the benefits that we have, to make sure we’re able to articulate the value of being part of an organization like the Chamber.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN IN YOUR TIME AT THE LAKEWOOD RANCH BUSINESS ALLIANCE THAT YOU KNOW YOU’LL BE BRINGING BACK HERE TO THIS COMMUNITY?

I am very member-focused. This is the members’ organization, and so being able to adapt and provide services that our members need is the key. We’ve listened to businesses and employers, and we’ve been able to address one of their biggest concerns and needs through Career Edge, which is our workforce initiative. If you talk to any employer in the region, the number one thing they are struggling with is being able to attract and retain quality employees.

WHAT ELSE WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE THE CHAMBER FOCUS ON?

Things have changed a lot. I’m very much still in the process of meeting with what I consider to be the key individuals—the staff, the board, our members—to hear what they want out of the organization. But education is a huge component, and rounding out programs

that we currently have, like the Young Professionals Group and our leadership programs.

WHAT RELATIONSHIP DOES THE CHAMBER HAVE TO THE EVERYDAY PERSON WHO IS NOT A BUSINESS-OWNER?

The Chamber has typically been viewed as kind of a go-to resource. When people move here, they’re looking for quality companies. You need a plumber, you need someone to cut your hair, you need someone to put on a new roof in your house. Those are all things that the Chamber can help provide the consumer with.

IN TERMS OF DEFINING LEADERSHIP, WHO HAVE BEEN YOUR ROLE MODELS?

My mom has played a huge role in my character—making sure that you promise only what you can deliver, and then deliver more than you promise. As far as local business leaders, I’ve got what I call my own personal Board of Directors—people I’ve gotten to know and trust. They have no problem speaking truth over me. Anybody can surround themselves with yes-men or yes-women. I want to be around people who will call me out. Iron sharpens iron. Being around people who are able to not only encourage you, but to also make you better, refines you as a person.

CRITICISM IS IMPORTANT.

It’s never fun or easy to eat some humble pie. But when you get over the initial sting of it, you really do appreciate it. In today’s world, truth is such a hard thing to identify and pin down. When someone does speak truth, to me it just validates the relationship. It’s someone that does genuinely care about you, if they’re willing to stick their neck out to tell you the truth.

WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE BUSINESS RENT TAX?

It is a tax that is completely unfair. I don’t know of any other state that is taxing businesses in that manner. I recognize it’s a large sum of money for the state to have to give up. It’s my hope, and we will keep pushing as a Chamber, to

see if we can’t continue to reduce that amount. Will it go away completely? My hope is that yes it will, but it will not be an immediate thing. It’s going to be gradual, over time, for the state to be able to replace that chunk of money.

FROM A CHAMBER POINT OF VIEW, WHAT ARE SARASOTA’S AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT?

Two big issues that, as a city, we have beat to death are affordable housing and the homelessness issue. And affordable housing, to me, means we have to find a way to be able to provide more density in living for people. The idea of building all these tremendous, large condos, which only a select few can live in? They’re going to be waiting on themselves, because we’re not going to have the manpower to accommodate those needs. We have to be creative, and I think it is an opportunity for Sarasota.

ARE THERE WAYS THE CHAMBER CAN LEAD THE WAY ON THAT?

We have a Governmental Issues Committee providing a platform for people to start the discussion, and half of it is just getting the right people around the table. As a Chamber, we have a really strong relationship with our county officials and our city officials. The Chamber’s role is to assemble people to start the discussion, and then leverage those relationships to move the needle on some of these things.

YOU MAGICALLY GET A DAY TO YOURSELF, WHO DO YOU READ?

I have lately been reading some of Gary Keller’s books. He’s got a book called *The One Thing*, which basically speaks to the fact that we’ve all got our to-do lists of 89 things. The main premise of his book is that you should focus on one thing—the one thing that you are going to be the best at. Steven Covey’s classic, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. I love that one. As far as non-fiction, Francine Rivers is one of my favorites. Of course, cheesy Nicholas Sparks. Can’t go wrong with it. A day at the beach warrants a Nicholas Sparks book. SRQ