

Ginny T. Lee

Excerpts from the transcript of a Video History Interview with Ginny Lee, Senior Vice President and Chief Information Officer of Intuit, recipient of the 2009 CA Leadership Award for Innovation in Lean IT.

The interview was conducted by Eric Knorr, Editor in Chief of InfoWorld, on May 18, 2009, at Intuit Headquarters.

The Laureate: Ginny, can you talk about the early, important influences in your life?

Lee: My family had a huge influence on who I am today. Just to give you some context, I am first generation, bilingual and bicultural—all of which has its benefits and its implications as well.

My parents emigrated from China in 1959. They had two little children and a third on the way, and they had less than \$100 in their pockets. They came to Boston and my dad started out as a waiter in a Chinese restaurant. My mom started out sewing piecemeal at a sweatshop factory. Needless to say, we came from very, very humble beginnings.

I was the youngest of 8 children and grew up for most of my life in a government subsidized, low income housing in Boston's Chinatown. My family had an incredibly strong work ethic as they worked 7x24x365 to provide a better life for all of their children in the U.S. They believed in hard work, focus, discipline and the importance of education, even though neither one of my parents finished high school. That is the essence of who I am, and what has made me become who I am today.

In terms of other things that have influenced me early in my journey, it starts from living in Boston in general. It's a huge education city. I lived within miles of Harvard, MIT, Northeastern University, and so forth. I went to Boston Latin School in high school. It was the first high school in the United States. It was erected in 1635. The first graduates of our high school went to Harvard undergrad. In fact Harvard was made for the first graduates of Boston Latin School, so that school has lots of tradition.

One of the early influences for me was my headmaster, Mr. Michael Contompasis. He had a philosophy around tough love and the Pygmalion effect. He believed in me, sometimes more than I believed in myself, and he instilled in me a mindset that I have a bigger role to play than just being a good student. He always told me that I had a higher purpose of being a role model to others, whether it's based on the background that I have, my education, or the journey I've been on. So he was a heavy influence for me in my early days as well.

Likewise, I played a tremendous amount of sports in my life. So if there's a common theme of who Ginny is, it's team. I played volleyball as a sport for over 15 years. I was all-city, all-state, all-New England and all-national. I even played several years of Junior Olympics. Along with the many lessons that come with excelling in any team sport, such as the discipline, the camaraderie, etc, there is the biggest lesson of all that I learned from some wonderful, wonderful coaches and that is: it's about the team. It's about knowing your role on the team and how you can make it perform better. It's about ensuring that you'd rather be a player that makes a great team than being a great player. I really, really

believed that in my heart of hearts. That's what I espouse, and that's what I want to stand for.

In terms of other things that influenced me early on, it was never giving up. I share the Nike tag line, 'There is no finish line.' In sports and in work, if you put enough effort into something, and you set your mind to something, you can accomplish anything. And you've seen that in my history as well—from my very humble beginnings and my bilingual and bicultural background to where I am today in the workforce. So that is also an essence to who I am.

The Laureate: What were your first jobs out of college?

Lee: My first job out of college was working on Wall Street for an investment-banking firm as a mergers and acquisitions analyst. It was by far one of the best jobs for someone coming out of undergrad for three primary reasons: one, the training that you get and the exposure that you get to big business issues is phenomenal for someone who is 21 years old. Two, you get significant grounding in numbers and what makes a business tick through the financials. Then to be honest with you, why I went into investment banking is because it's one of the few jobs that enabled me to pay back all the student loans that I took on when I put myself through school at Brown University.

I spent two and a half years in investment banking. Then I went on to work for PepsiCo International as a marketing analyst. That was also a wonderful training ground in terms of how to commercialize consumer-based products as well as how to start to think about what it means to be a manager and a leader, because Pepsi is renowned for developing great managers and leaders.

After Pepsi, I went on to get my graduate school degree in business from Stanford University. After earning my M.B.A., I went into management consulting. I worked for a company called CSC Index, which specialized in process reengineering. That was again, a very pivotal part of my life. Consulting was a great training ground to get a variety of experiences across multiple industries and multiple business problems. And again, it had the practical nature that afforded me the ability to pay back yet another set of student loans that I incurred while putting myself through business school.

With CSC Index, I gained a tremendous amount of learning around process reengineering. I learned to think about things from the customer point of view—to think about things from end to end, not just your part. One of my favorite Harvard Business Review articles is 'Staple Yourself to an Order'. The customer cares that they get their products from us in XYZ days; they don't care that the products had to traverse 10 different organizations. It's about having a customer outside-in perspective vs. an internal inside-out perspective. I also learned to think about things holistically, not just about the business processes themselves, but also about the culture, the individual jobs needed, the technology and, the reward systems that surround and enable the business processes. That was great training and I've carried that with me to this day, and in every single job that I have had since then.

The Laureate: In your professional experience, was there a particular mentor who inspired you?

Lee: In my work experience I've been very, very blessed with a tremendous amount of mentors throughout my life, both personally and professionally.

On the personal side, one of my biggest mentors is Jim Collins. He was my professor at business school. He taught an entrepreneurial class and has since gone on to write great books called *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*. He taught me to always have your own personal board of directors, where you want to surround yourself with people that know who you really are and who you really want to be. These people should keep you honest versus telling you what you want to hear. In my opinion, your board should represent your total self, not just your professional self. For example, the chairman of the board of my personal board of directors is my husband, who makes sure that I am not just a professional, but a mother and a wonderful wife as well. He provides wonderful checks and balances to stay very grounded on my total self.

Another mentor for me was Bill Campbell, who was the CEO of Intuit when I joined back in 1996. First and foremost, he is a wonderful human being and a phenomenal leader. He taught me a tremendous amount about what it means to manage and what it means to lead an organization. He taught me that sometimes it is best to take the road less travelled because on that road, you can most often learn and grow farther and faster than taking the road travelled by many others. Also, he taught me that in everything you do, you must lead with your mind, your hand, and most importantly, with your heart. Having the mind means being smart by surrounding yourself with the best people with the best ideas. The hand means making sure that you are decisive in the things that you do. Then, obviously, lead with your heart because at the end of the day, the organization is made up of human beings and all the dynamics of that.

So those are some key mentors to me throughout my years that I have been so incredibly blessed with.

The Laureate: That's a wonderful personal philosophy. How does that dovetail with the culture of Intuit?

Lee: Jim Collins also taught me another valuable life lesson. He told me not to think about the specific job, title, or industry because that that doesn't define who you are. But instead, focus on what the company stands for and ensure that is aligned with what you stand for. Intuit was just that place for me. The culture of Intuit is wonderful. It stands for ensuring you solve big customer problems in innovative ways. Sometimes they're problems customers don't even know they have. Scott Cook, the founder of our company, exudes this type of innovation. It's in his DNA. If you read one of the books that was written about him and Intuit called *Inside Intuit*, it talks about the passion that he had back in the early 80s developing a product called Quicken. Through a lot of customer-driven innovation, Intuit was founded with Quicken and subsequently other products like QuickBooks and TurboTax.

The Laureate: So during your tenure at Intuit, what achievements are you most proud of, and why?

Lee: I've been with Intuit for over 12 years, and I've played 6 completely different roles in that time period. The consistent theme has been that I can be deployed across multiple business units or functional groups to solve many different business problems. What I am

most proud of is the fact that I can consistently deliver significant business outcomes whether I'm the subject matter expert or not, and I can lead an organization through a tremendous change management and business transformation journey from point A to point B in a short period of time. Leadership to me isn't about being the smartest person in the room with all the content expertise, but rather your ability to assemble and develop a great team, create a vision, and inspire others to deliver and realize that vision. I have been truly blessed with a rich and varied set of experiences that I will always take with me to become an even better leader tomorrow.

The Laureate: Geoff Moore in *Dealing with Darwin* talks about learning from the past and transforming your internal dynamics to overcome the inertia that threatens every bold innovation. Is there truth in this for Intuit?

Lee: I believe there is a tremendous amount of truth in that for Intuit. What has made us tremendously successful yesterday could easily be the very thing that threatens our innovation for the future if we don't learn from our past. For example, we have a very proud heritage of making easy-to-use consumer-based desktop products. The world is moving to the Internet and to mobile devices and solutions hosted on the Internet are becoming more and more prevalent everyday. How do take our customer-driven innovation approach in our desktop products and transform that into a new technology where our software is a pure 'connected service' (SaaS) that delivers revolutionary benefits and costs, or a software-advantaged service where connecting our service to our software, or where our vast ecosystem serves as a platform that connects people to people? You need to pause, take a step back, and learn from what's happening and not happening to determine why a business result is being achieved or not. It's not just about the execution. It's about the culture. It's about the people. It's about the social architecture. And if you dissect it all and really internalize those learnings you can overcome the inertia and then lead great change.

The Laureate: How have you kept innovation at Intuit going, personally and professionally? And is it the people or the events?

Lee: At Intuit we have wonderful sets of innovation that happen at both the individual level and at the company level. I think you need both.

At the individual level, we have unstructured time for our engineers—who are very precious to us because they are the ones building great products for our customers. We give them the freedom to dream and to create. Ten to 20% of their time is what we call "unstructured." There isn't a deliverable. This is a way to foster their creativity.

Then we create programs we call 'Idea Jams.' Idea Jams are events where these engineers can showcase their innovation, and pitch those ideas to senior managers for funding. We also have wonderful innovation galleries to showcase these ideas to others and bring the spirit of innovation to the rest of the company. If you want great innovation, leaders must create and encourage an environment in which their people can dream and be creative. So I would say innovation has to occur at both levels, at the company level and the individual level.

The Laureate: What other innovators do you admire?

Lee: Other innovators that I admire? I admire Scott Cook, the founder of our company. He thought about creating a product that no one else did early in our journey. We're 26 years old now as a company. And his vision was tremendously innovative.

Take QuickBooks, for example. Then look at many of our competitors' products that require you to be an accountant to use their accounting packages. At Intuit we try to take all that complexity away to make it really simple and easy to use so that a non-accountant can do your books. That's innovation to me: creating that simplicity. And that comes from Scott. He's still very active in our company and we are a better company because of that. I get a lot of inspiration from him. I think he's one of the best innovators.

At the same time, innovation isn't just about the idea, but it's about how do you assemble all those things together? Someone like Steve Jobs would say to you, 'It's not about the actual product that I innovate, but how do I take pieces from others to then create a better product assembled?' That's innovation too.

The Laureate: Another of our leadership recipients this year said leadership is 'Not a personality trait. It's about wanting to make people not let you down.' How do you define leadership?

Lee: Leadership to me is about creating a simple living strategy, and inspiring others to make it real. It starts with the people, knowing who to get on the bus, who to get off the bus, and making sure they're all in the right seats. That's something I learned from Jim Collins. Then, once you find and develop the great talent that will follow you to deliver that vision, as the leader you must be able to make difficult decisions when necessary and remain human and humble all along the way. My view on leadership is that I serve the people that work for me, and I use that word 'serve' very, very carefully. A leader's job is to remove the barriers to its people so that they can execute and in that sense, I serve them.

Likewise, you must decide what 'brand' you want to have and be known for. For me, it's about having the utmost integrity in all that you do, and it is about having what I call a high 'say/do' ratio. People will remember you most by your actions, not by your words, and the more aligned the two are, the better the leader, I believe.

Finally, I definitely aspire to Jim Collin's theory of 'level 5 leadership' from his book Good to Great. In there it talks about how a leader builds enduring greatness through a combination of professional will and personal humility. Professional will to create superb results by putting those foundational elements on which an enduring company stands; personal humility where you act with quiet, calm determination and rely principally on inspired standards (and not inspired charisma) to motivate. I particularly love the analogy in the book where great leaders look in the mirror, not out the window, to take responsibility for poor results; and in turn, great looks look out the window, not in the mirror, to give credit for the success.

In terms of whether leadership is nature or nurture, I think it is both. You have to have the passion for making a difference and leading others and that's the nature part of it. If you don't have that innate passion then it's going to be difficult for you to be a wonderful leader. Then of course there's the nurture part. To be a great leader, you must be open to learning from others to then internalize those learnings to teach others.

The Laureate: Your title is Senior Vice President and CIO. Your background is primarily not technical. So, how do you fill this leadership position as the CIO without that technical background, although obviously you have worked in the technology industry for quite a long time?

Lee: It may come as a surprise to most people that being the Senior Vice President and CIO of Intuit, I don't have a deep technical background. I wish I could tell you that from the age of 5, I always had a deep passion for technology. On the contrary. For me, being a CIO (or General Manager for that matter) is more about leadership than it is about technology.

Prior to this role I was the general manager of a large business unit within Intuit. And my CEO, Brad Smith, knocked on my door and said, 'Ginny, you're doing great in your role, but you can have a larger impact on Intuit by being our CIO and transforming our technology infrastructure from enabling great desktop software products to enabling and hosting connected services.' And I looked at him and I said, 'Hmmm, I don't know what that really means because I don't have a technical background.' Sixteen months later in the job, I know it isn't about that. It really isn't. The CIO's job is about delivering business outcomes, delivering those business outcomes for your customers, whether they're the customers that buy your products, or the internal customers, the employees that you have to deliver processes and tools and systems to make their lives easier. If you have that outside-in perspective, and you can manage a rich set of portfolios to get things done, and you're a strong leader, I think you can be anything that you want to be.

So I break the stereotype of being a CIO with a tremendous amount of technical background. In fact, what I've done is I've hired for that. At Intuit we are very business-unit-centric. Thank goodness for that because unless you have that you won't really have wonderful customer-driven innovation inside the business units for the different customer segments that we serve. As the CIO, what has helped me in this role is balancing the strengths that I bring to the table, which are my collaboration and my partnership with the general managers. The fact that I was one of them for the last 10 years at Intuit makes me understand what makes them tick, how better to communicate with them, and how better to be transparent with them in the solutions I need to deliver. It's about my running IT like a business with products and services I provide that solve important customer problems effectively and efficiently. At my level it isn't about whether I know a particular technology, or how the data center is operated, or a particular set of code that needs to happen. It's about business transformation.

Today Intuit is undergoing one of the largest transformations it's ever seen. What has made us historically great in our first 25 years is not going to make us great in the next 25. We're great at shrink-wrapped desktop products; the Quickens, the QuickBooks, the TurboTaxes, but technologies have changed. The environment has changed. Our sophistication as a consumer segment has changed with our Gen-Y'ers. We're transforming from a desktop, shrink-wrap software company to what we call connected services, where it's both software and services, both desktop and on the Internet. It is that transformation, to enable the business outcomes and my ability to understand and direct and portfolio manage the work that we do, and the resource allocation that I was put into this job to do.

If I was just a technologist, I could easily fall in love with the technology and solving the technical problem before I fall in love with solving the customer problem. And for us, it's about delivering an awesome customer experience and solving that unmet need for the customer through effective and efficient use of technology and infrastructure.

The Laureate: Can you talk about how being closer to the technology has impacted your leadership, your style of management?

Lee: Being the CIO and coming from the business side of the house, what is important to me is to surround myself with very strong technologists. So I have hired some key people with that deep technology understanding, and in turn, we meet each other in the middle. I help my direct reports explain the technology issues in a language that the business community can understand; in turn I learn in the process how better to leverage the technology. Technology can solve any business problem. The question is, which ones are the right ones, and which ones have the best and biggest return on investment? So it is important to hire and surround myself with deep technologists and balance that with ensuring that they have the business acumen by which to deliver the business outcomes with the most effective return on investment. At the end of the day, that's what this is about. This is about delivering for the customer, and making sure it's a wonderful customer experience, because those are the people who are using our products, who are paying for our products, and we've got to make sure it works.

The Laureate: I want to shift gears a bit to current challenges in the business environment. We're living in very difficult economic times. What do you think in terms of your leadership is key to these times? Do we need a different kind of leadership in this environment? What is that leadership at Intuit, or leadership for the country for that matter?

Lee: We live in an interesting time right now. The macro-economic conditions are very hard on all of us. I think at times like these, leaders have to be a little different. They have to take the fundamental things that we have in our toolkit but emphasize some things more than others because of the situation that we are in. The tougher the times, the taller the leader has to stand. My philosophy is that when times are really good, that is when the leader takes a step back and lets the team shine. When the times are really hard, that's when the leader has to step forward and stand really, really tall, and over-communicate, because it's a very uncertain time for the people. They say over-communicate by a factor to 2 to 3X so that you ease the troops. So you take all the fears and uncertainties and doubts from the people so they can focus on just delivering for the customer.

So there are some things that leaders in these times have to do differently. I have this analogy that I often share with (Intuit's CEO) Brad (Smith), and that is that it is very easy to be a peacetime general. It is much, much harder to be a wartime general. It rings very, very true. Not that we're at war, but it's a very hard time that we're going through. So if you can stand tall, stand calm, stand self assured, you will alleviate a lot of the uncertainty that the people have, and therefore continue to inspire your troops to deliver.

The Laureate: And would you say that's a part of your brand, the Ginny Lee brand?

Lee: I pride myself very, very much on having a very high say-do ratio. You don't have anything else to rely on but your own personal brand. Every single behavior, every single

interaction has to be aligned with what you say, what you do, and the actions that you take every single day. It all has to be aligned. And if they don't see that, the troops start to think that you're disingenuous, and that's not at all who I ever want to be.

So I believe in aligning the words that I use, the actions that I have, so that the individuals can feel and touch that, to be one and of the same. And I hope that universally anyone that comes in contact with me, has that same experience, because it's about that integrity of a high say-do ratio.

The Laureate: There's a saying, 'The biggest room in the world is the room for improvement.' How do you view your own room for improvement?

Lee: I absolutely agree with the biggest room in the world being the room for improvement, and boy do I have a mansion for that. If you stop learning, if you stop believing that you can get better, you're not a very good leader. So I espouse that the biggest room is the room for improvement. I love that saying. As I said before, my motto which I take from Nike is that there is no finish line. I believe that in everything that I do. There isn't a point that I will ever want to stop learning and stop getting better.

That brings up another thing that I love about Intuit. We're a very open and honest and communicative culture. You get feedback every day. Brad Smith, our CEO, a wonderful CEO for us, talks about feedback as a gift. He says that there are gifts that you have, and there are gifts that you receive. And I am so very blessed with all the gifts that I receive each and every day that help me become a better leader, each and every day.

The Laureate: This CA Leadership Award is for your outstanding achievements with Lean IT. Can you tell us what that looks like at Intuit, and its unique value?

Lee: One of the initiatives I have at Intuit is to create a leaner IT organization. Why does that matter? It isn't about cost cutting and it isn't about right-sizing IT. We have a philosophy within Intuit called resource allocation and making sure that we have effective resource allocation. I've worked very closely with Geoffrey Moore. He wrote the book, *Dealing with Darwin*, and he has this philosophy of looking at the core and differentiating what is context, or those things that enable your core. He has this 2-by-2 matrix of core and context, what is mission-critical or not mission-critical. And the theory of the case is using that 2-by-2 matrix to figure out those things that are absolutely core, absolutely critical as to why a customer would choose and differentiate you over some of your competitors.

We are not a company that sells IT services. We're primarily the context which defines mission-critical, because if our servers went out on April 14th and millions and millions of customers couldn't file their taxes, that would be a problem. That's why we're mission-critical. My job is to figure out how to optimize as much of that context so that we as a company can resource, reallocate funds back into what we call the core; those things that really make a difference for our customers. That's where the initiatives of Lean IT come in. It asks the questions, what are those programs and projects that we can do that enable us to automate, create self-serve, go to the cloud, and what are the things that will help us be leaner, so that we can resource allocate back into those things that will make us core and value differentiated by our customers?

The Laureate: How do you take that leadership forward and create that alignment so you can serve those customer needs and concentrate on the core values that differentiate you?

Lee: At Intuit the CIO job is structured a little bit differently. There's about 50% of my organization that serves the internal customer, or the employees. Serve, meaning we deliver process and technology solutions for employees to do their jobs better, whether it's a help desk on the desktops, whether it's using enterprise applications on which Intuit transacts its business in, for example, the call center or finance organization. There's another half of my organization that delivers for the end customer, because we have to keep these customer-facing products up and available, and what I call, 'always on' when the customers need them.

Let's take the Turbo Tax online product. The application itself is developed by the business unit, but they rely on me heavily to make sure that it is always on and highly available.

So having that is both a wonderful challenge and in some regards a curse. My job would be enormously easier if I just enabled the internal customers. But because I have both internal and external customers, it makes my job that much more fun. It is about making sure I have the right portfolio management capabilities to deliver for all those customers, and it takes very much strong tops-down prioritization and leadership to make it all happen.

I know it's a cliché to say you want to be close to the business, and have that business unit partnership, but at Intuit I really mean that. As a prior general manager, I knew how much I depended on IT to deliver for my customers. So one of the first things that I did when I became the CIO was to put these business unit IT functions and roles into my organization, and I'm running IT like a business. I have what I call product managers that sit with each of the business units and are double solid lines to the general manager and me. Each internal product manager's job is to determine how best to execute the business unit strategy through the usage of technology and infrastructure. So I have groups of product managers. Then I have a group of what we call product development leaders that deliver the technology to enable the business outcome. I have a product development leader in the enterprise applications space, in the infrastructure space, and in the business intelligence space. Finally, I have a service delivery leader to ensure we deliver the services for our internal and external customers for my business called Intuit. That organizational structure enables me to align to each business unit and functional group alignment and then from there I drive a rigorous and transparent process to make sure we prioritize that work that we do, to make sure we can adequately allocate to the biggest levers that deliver for Intuit as a whole.

The Laureate: That's ingenious, but it sounds like what they brought you in to design.

Lee: Yes, I am sure many other companies have similar varieties of flavors of that, but it's very critical for me to have that strong alignment of each of the business units because we are business-centric at Intuit. These product managers spend 90% of the time with that general manager and his staff. That's more time than they spend with me. They play this hybrid role so that I get a pulse of all the things that need to happen for each of the business units, and that we get the transparency across the two teams. Having that hybrid role again, is a hard skill set to find, but something that I think is critical to our

success, and critical to ensuring that we truly do have that business unit and IT partnership. Particularly in a software as a service (SaaS) model now, the lines between where a product development and an IT role begins and ends have become so very blurred. That's part of the transforming that I am putting IT through right now. In this shrink-wrapped software world it was very easy to say, 'Okay business unit your product development team should write a bunch of code, put it on a disk and we'll ship it out to the supply chain.' In the SaaS world it's very, very different. Where does the business unit product development person begin and end, and where do you say the IT person begins and ends?

We house these war rooms during the last two to three weeks of peak (tax season) activity. In the first two weeks of April, before April 15th, we man a cross-functional team to ensure that every customer has a wonderful experience using our products and that our products and services are always on. I can now close my eyes and attend the war rooms, and I would not know what function is what, and who is from what function. And I think that is the beauty of this business unit, this IT partnership that we have developed. It's having that partnership coupled with wonderful sets of technologies that enable us to keep these products always on and highly available. That's our secret sauce.

The Laureate: Ginny, in closing I want to get your perspective on what role technology can play in enhancing life for future generations. We sit here in Silicon Valley where ideas for the future become valuable reality.

Lee: I think in terms of technology enhancing life for humankind, the sky's the limit. The technology has changed so rapidly. We could use that technology to bring down the borders so we can connect and learn from each other. Not just business to business, but more importantly, globally. If I look at the technology that's out there, you could access anything, anywhere, any time.

I started with Intuit in 1996. That was just when the Internet started to come about. I can't imagine my life without the Internet today. I look at my children. My daughter is 9. My son is 5. They can't imagine life without a computer. I compare that to my father who is in his late 70s, and he's never even opened a computer. That's how quickly this technology is changing.

When I think about all the social things that come out, and what I mean by social, the technologies that enable me to connect with others globally. It's phenomenal! Gen-Y'ers are learning to grow up in this and don't know anything other than this. It's phenomenal! So if we can harness all of that into something that makes—and I know this sounds very lofty—but harness it into something that makes the world a better place because we're creating better things and because we're learning from each other, that is great. Then the variation across the globe will start to reduce, because right now we have a fair amount of variation. Being in the heartbeat of Silicon Valley I am skewed towards the far right. But if I think about the things that are out there, iTunes, and how they are changing music; the iPhones, the PDAs where you can connect anywhere, any time; it's truly outstanding. So to the extent that we can continue to leverage technology to bring the barriers down, to reduce the variation across the globe, it'll be a far better place in the future.

The Laureate: Ginny Lee, thank you very much for this interview and for participating in The Computerworld Honors Program.

Lee: Thank you, it is both an honor and a privilege to be part of this program.