Allison Siegel

An Engineering Mind

When a Baltimore engineering firm sent representatives to a local high school to talk about their work, teenage Allison Siegel didn't even know what engineering was. But as they discussed the field's analytical thought process, mathematical mindset, and marked lack of women, she was instantly hooked.

In defiance of the 1950's housewife archetype modeled by her mother, Allison was self-sufficient, independent, and modern, insisting on opening her own car door and paying her own

way when out on a date. "My parents had always told me I could do anything, and engineering was a challenge I was eager to take on," she recalls. "The logical, methodical thought process really clicked with me. It was the small part of systemic change I decided to take on myself."

Now the President of Next Day Blinds, a Baltimore-based company founded in 1993, Allison has enacted change far beyond that original goal. Applying her engineering mind to business

propelled her to success as a leader and entrepreneur, reminding the world that traditional concepts of men's work and women's work are antiquated beyond any usefulness. Rather, Allison embraces it all as her work, and work she is grateful to do. "As an engineer, I've never worked a day in my life," she affirms. "Engineering is more than just work. It's a way of thinking and a way of living, and I absolutely love it."

Next Day Blinds was originally launched by Steve Freishtat as a direct-to-consumer wholesale company with the goal of delivering custom products quickly: customers could visit a showroom, order a product, and receive it the following day. As time went on, he added a services aspect that included measurement and installation of the product. Today, offering a full manufacturing, sales, and install/measure suite of services, the company is accountable from the very

outset of the process through to completion. "Customers feel good buying from us because we're streamlined and fully responsible for their well-being," Allison says. "We're always going to make it right—not taking the cost to the company into account, but rather ensuring we deliver the promise to our customer."

Over the years, Next Day Blinds has seen their share of competitors trying to take market share. Most have come into the market selling a cheaper product and subcontracting out

installation. Instead of reducing the prices of Next Day Blinds products to compete, Steve made the definitive move to improve quality, further increasing the gap between the low-cost window coverings and the superior value of the Next Day Blinds product. "While at times, competitors looked for the cheapest possible components, Steve fully leaned into his business model and the company's reputation for selling superior products, searching for ways to improve and offer the best

products to his customers," Allison explains. "Quality has always been our top priority, and when we set ourselves apart on that point, we win because our customers value that quality."

Another test for the company came with the economic downturn in 2008. Through staff layoffs and salary decreases for the management team, the company persevered through the challenging climate and was able to build compensation back up over time. Its sales, however, remained stagnant.

Despite these challenges, by the time Allison joined the company in 2014 as Chief Revenue Officer, Next Day Blinds had achieved remarkable market share driven by premier marketing efforts that often gave the impression that the company had nationwide reach. They focused not on closing sales, but on educating consumers, winning business with their depth of

knowledge and commitment to excellence. "We are perfectionists about our product," Allison affirms. "We never, ever sacrifice quality for price. Our values are wholly-focused on delighting our customers with a uniquely superior experience at every touch point of the process."

With this outstanding business model and reputation at her fingertips, Allison set her sights on growth. Reviewing countless business analyses, she decided to revamp the company's e-commerce platform, dramatically improving its functionality and rolling it out nationwide. "We're setting up a common ordering platform across everything, from our showroom to our in-home consultation to our website," she explains. "The goal is to become an omni channel brand-one that allows and encourages customers to shop in any channel or multiple channels. This will allow us to offer them the ability to buy online, go into a showroom to start or complete their purchase, or start or finish their experience with one of our Shop at Home consultants. This also poises us perfectly to be able to roll out nationally, should we choose to do so."

Allison continued her work to drive the growth of the company in October 2016, when she stepped from the CRO job into the role of President. A results-oriented leader that has steered the 400-person company in averaging annual growth of six percent since she came onboard, Allison sets a high bar for herself and everyone around her, but works hard to provide her team the tools they need to succeed. In her relentless pursuit of excellence, she steers clear of toxic relationships but devotes her time and talent fully to those who are willing to step up. "I don't accept mediocrity from myself or others," she says. "I expect people to try their best, and I will be the first person to point out when someone isn't. My style is tough, but very honest and direct, and people respond very well to that. I value my team so much and always think of them as working next to me, not for me."

This approach to leadership stems in part from her upbringing in Baltimore, which was shaped first and foremost by the constant presence of family. One next-door neighbor was her mother's sister, and the other was her mother's cousin. Another aunt lived within a mile radius, and all three of her mother's sisters were like extra mothers to Allison.

Growing up the oldest of two children with a younger brother, Allison's father was an

attorney, while her mother stayed at home. "It was a quintessential 1950's upbringing, just not in the 1950's" she recalls. "My father was very strict, and we'd get into big trouble if the rules of formality were broken, but he'd show up to our softball games in his suit from work to show he loved and supported us. My mother was warm and nurturing, always available to help us with our homework or talk through a friendship challenge, and always with freshly-baked cookies ready for us and all of our friends after school."

Allison didn't realize it at the time, but in retrospect, the honesty and transparency displayed by her parents was formative. They didn't withhold information to spare someone's feelings, but instead embraced truth with a positive attitude, and always aimed to be open with their children. Allison's father always made it home for family dinner at 6:30-a priority that reflected his belief in working to live, rather than living to work. At the table, he expected her to say something good about her day and to relay something from the front page of the newspaper, in which she had little interest. "My father and I were like oil and water because we're so similar, both very tough on the outside but sensitive on the inside," she says. "His respect meant everything to me growing up, and many of the choices I made in life were because I wanted him to be proud of me."

Others, though, were self-driven, like a particularly defining choice she made during a kindergarten field trip to a symphony. At that time, she desperately wanted to be friends with several kids that had "mean girl" tendencies at that age. Sitting in the theater, one of the girls told her to put gum in the hair of the kid sitting in front of her. "I was a goody goody, and I knew not to do something like that, but I wanted to be friends with them so badly that I complied," Allison recounts. "Someone told the teacher it was me who did it, and as I lied and swore it wasn't me, something shifted inside of me. I knew this wasn't who I was or who I wanted to be. It was a definitive moment, and I resolved to never compromise my integrity again."

Growing up, Allison attended a small school, along with her brother and seven cousins. She enjoyed playing outside, swimming in her aunt's pool, riding her bike around the neighborhood, playing softball, and eschewing gender stereotypes whenever possible. "My maternal grandfather didn't believe women

needed to be educated, so only one of his four daughters went to college, paying her own way and going on to become a judge," Allison says. "I admired my father's mother, who was entrepreneurial and always out working alongside my grandfather in the stores they owned. I didn't want to be a stay-at-home mom, or a mom at all, and I didn't like the idea of getting married, which seemed to me just a conforming to social norms."

As life regained a sense of normalcy, Allison got her first job at the local bingo hall and snack bar, where her cousins, aunt, and grandmother worked. In school, she excelled at math but tried to get out of the gifted class by telling her teacher she couldn't do it. "I liked being the smartest person in class, and when I saw that I wasn't, I stopped trying because I didn't want to seem stupid," she remembers. "Fortunately, the teacher convinced my parents that I could do it. She refused to give up on me, and I finally got it. She is the reason I'm an engineer today."

By the time Allison applied to college, her passion for engineering had already been sparked, but she instead decided to pursue a liberal arts education to keep her options open. She chose the University of Michigan, where she transferred into the engineering school during the second semester of her freshman year, and had to work exceptionally hard to finish the year with a 3.95 GPA. "I had strong grades in high school, but the coursework wasn't hard," she reflects. "I wasn't prepared for the rigorous demands of college, so I studied nonstop."

Allison's father would only pay for four years of college, so she spent one summer taking classes to put her back on track to graduate on time after the transfer. She also set her sights on studying abroad in London, where she could take engineering courses in English. "Michigan didn't have any engineering course transfer agreements set up with institutions in London, so I offered to compare the syllabi and do all the groundwork to set up an agreement," she says. "They couldn't guarantee me in advance that the credits would count, but I decided to plow forward despite the risk. It definitely wasn't the easy way forward, but I was committed, and in the end, it worked out."

In London, Allison was again one of the only women in her engineering courses, and faced discriminatory treatment in some instances. But the experience was enormously positive overall, teaching her a new independence as she explored an unknown city and continued to challenge societal norms. When she graduated with her bachelors in industrial engineering in 1999, most of her peers headed to GM or other Detroit-based companies, but Allison instead set her sights on becoming a consultant in New York City.

When Allison landed her dream job offer from Accenture, her father advised her to happily accept it, but she instead decided to negotiate her salary—a successful risk that hooked her on the power of negotiation. With that, she dove into the world of manufacturing supply chains at a time when warehouses were beginning to explore automation, websites had just become a thing, and Amazon was in its infancy. One supply chain project launched her into the products division, setting her on a path of retail projects that led her to work with Radioshack, Sephora, Louis Vuitton, Toys R Us, and more.

After six years in New York, Allison still loved the work, but found it hard to always be on the road. She and her then-boyfriend, Josh, decided to move down to Maryland, with Allison transferring to Accenture's Reston office to focus on government sector work. There, in 2004, she was recruited by a former manager, Bethany Frick, to join the team at Total Wine & More, a small Montgomery County-based company. "I took a big leap, and my parents thought I was nuts," she recounts. "But I had always looked up to Bethany as a very smart and articulate manager. She was the only manager at Accenture who really mentored and developed me, and I trusted her."

As the first business analyst ever hired at the company, Allison became adept at wearing a million different hats. As Bethany rose through the ranks on the buying side, eventually becoming Senior VP, Allison worked alongside her, learning important lessons about how to achieve success as a woman in the workplace. "Due to the culture there, women had a hard time moving up, but Bethany showed me it could be done," Allison says. "She was the first smart and driven woman I'd met who also showed empathy and emotion, and I respected that. She helped me accept that there are different expectations placed on women, no matter how much I wanted to deny it. I saw that you can navigate those expectations and be yourself without letting them hold you back."

When she came onboard, Allison was one of thirty employees in the corporate office of the 20-store company. A jack-of-all-trades doing

anything that needed to be done, she helped shed old systems and led projects to make buyers more efficient. Several years later she launched and oversaw the Business Solutions Group, bringing on more analysts to design and implement solutions company-wide. "My specialty became hiring really great people, building up departments, and then handing them over to someone else to run," she recounts. "I did that for business solutions, and then for IT, and then on the marketing side."

As Allison learned and grew professionally, life outside of work came with its own challenges and opportunities for growth. When she was thirty, one of her beloved aunts passed away after a prolonged illness. "One of her last and best gifts to me was making it to Josh's and my wedding," Allison says. "Losing her was one of the hardest things I've been through."

When Allison's first son, Tyler, was born, she discovered the mother within she never knew she had. Several years later, her daughter Abby came into the world and immediately contracted pneumonia, landing her in the NICU for seven days with life-threatening conditions. "I can still feel the emotion and fear—the vulnerability I had never shown before, and the compassion of the people that worked there," she reflects. "Those seven days felt like an eternity, and deeply changed the course of my life."

Abby was so fragile that the doctors advised not to send her to daycare—a tall order for two hardworking parents. But Josh stepped up and offered to stay home with her, freeing Allison to succeed in her career. "That decision he made was absolutely pivotal for me, and has allowed me to do far more than I would have been able to do if we were both working," she affirms. "I've always been a hard worker, but I don't have to worry about after school sports, sick days, carpools, cooking, cleaning, or laundry. He allows me to clear those worries out of my brain and focus on work. Josh is my whole success, and he could not be more amazing at what he does for our family."

Through her ten years at Total Wine, as she helped grow the company to a \$1 billion tour de force, Allison most enjoyed the process of handselecting and nurturing a team. She would hire the best and brightest and then nurture them, providing the direct feedback they needed to truly excel—a skill that landed her the company's first People Development Award. "When I think about

what has truly made me happy in my work over the years, it's developing a successful team of people," she says. "Whether it's bringing in new talent or developing existing talent, I love helping other people be successful so we can all work together for the success of the business or project overall."

Then, in 2013, Allison was introduced to Steve Freishtat, who was looking to build up executive leadership presence at Next Day Blinds. They kept in touch, and when he first pitched the Chief Revenue Officer job to her six months later, she wasn't sure she was qualified. "I had good marketing experience under my belt at that point, but no sales experience," she recounts. "But he saw something in me and told me he was confident I could succeed in this role, so I forwarded the job description to my mentor, Bethany, and asked if she thought I could do it. She told me not only could I do that job, but I could run the company, which gave me the confidence to take that first step and later move into the role of President."

Now, in advising young people entering the working world today, Allison encourages others to work hard and step up. "Raise your hand for opportunity," she says. "Don't sit around waiting for things to come to you. I used to think my hard work would speak for itself and get me the promotion I'd earned, but it doesn't always work that way. You need to be an advocate for yourself."

Beyond that, Allison reminds us to value the people that make our lives special. From the team members she's nurtured over the years, to the loving family she comes home to each night, to the caring and close friends that have stayed by her side through the years, it's the human part of the equation that makes an engineering mind reach for more. "I consider myself most successful when I'm part of someone else's success," she says.

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