Joan’s 7 Guiding Principles to Break Barriers + Lead the Way...

1) Realize that there are people who make a real difference in your life. Identify who they are and maximize those relationships.

2) Unexpected opportunities could be right in front of you. Have a natural sense of curiosity and be open to considering new paths and possibilities.

3) Challenge yourself to think differently—think of ways you can innovate.

4) Everyone faces adversity—set goals, learn from failure, and push past challenges. The steps you take can change the trajectory of your life.

5) Don’t let setbacks define your steps forward. Be grateful for the opportunities you do have.

6) If you don’t try to improve your chances, you are doing yourself a disservice.

7) Try not to compare yourself to others. Instead, compare yourself to the person you were yesterday and be a better version of yourself today. It’s a comparison you can win!

HANS: You are in a number of organizations outside your industry and profession. What value do you get by participating in the organizations you are involved with?

JH: The organizations I am involved with are very much community service organizations. The reason I gravitate toward these types of organizations is because I think it would be a shame if I did not take the opportunity and give back to help others. I sit on a number of nonprofit boards, which also helps me build a range of skills and growth areas such as my business acumen or different aspects of finance and management. It is fulfilling to give back and learn new things. And, hopefully I’m making the world a better place at the same time.

JH: EMA members have been challenged with an unprecedented amount of change and uncertainty over the past 2 years. What advice would you give to them about managing stress?

JH: There is always stress in life. I try to look at it objectively. I fall back on my training as an astronaut and an engineer, which is to remove the emotional component, identify the problem, and start thinking about what possible solutions there are to alleviate the stress I’m experiencing. But I would say ongoing self-care is monumental to reduce stress—both mentally and physically. Don’t be afraid to take care of yourself first. If you can’t take care of yourself, you can’t be productive.

HANS: You mentioned in your AC21 Keynote that you had many important influencers in your life. Was there a particular teacher or administrator that you looked up to growing up?

JH: Two women that influenced me were my biology teacher and my chemistry teacher. They were both so self-assured, dynamic, and women in science—all of which really resonated with me. I knew they had made an impact in my life when fifteen years later they were some of the first people I thought of inviting to my first launch.

JH: So much has changed regarding the way we are now living and working. What opportunities and challenges should leaders be thinking about now?

JH: The biggest challenges leaders face (and opportunities actually) will be the ability to evolve as things continue to change. For you to be an effective leader, you need to be evolving as the world evolves. If you don’t, you will risk the possibility of being less competitive and not being relevant from a leadership perspective. It’s critical I used to think treating my team as I would want to be treated was effective. I learned that was not the case the hard way. I think the better way is to treat your people how they want to be treated, meet them where they are, and appeal to their specific needs. I know this is a high task and a lot of hard work. But the best leaders I’ve ever been around are the ones that can lead the masses that are very different. +

JOAN HIGGINBOTHAM is a retired NASA astronaut, electrical engineer, and the third African American woman to fly into space. She is a trailblazer who was among the seven crew members to fly for nearly 13 days aboard space shuttle Discovery mission STS-116 in December 2006. After leaving NASA, she held roles as senior technical consultant and corporate social responsibility manager at Marathon Oil, multiple director positions at Lowe’s, and director, corporate social responsibility at UTC Aerospace Systems. She currently serves as director, Open Innovation at Collins Aerospace.