



**Susan Packard, Co-Founder  
and COO of HGTV**

# The Leader Within

HGTV's co-founder and chief operating officer grew the network around a strong corporate culture.

*BY LAUREN BOSTON*

I spent four hours of my last vacation watching episode after episode of “House Hunters” instead of exploring a brand-new city. I blame Susan Packard. As Co-Founder and Chief Operating Officer of HGTV, Packard helped create a niche in the lifestyle marketplace that has since exploded. But Packard’s vision and leadership extends beyond the entertainment that her home and garden network and additional powerhouse brands deliver.

Perhaps more important, she has also created a corporate culture that recruits and retains exceptional and innovative talent, promotes a healthy work/life balance and values diversity.

I recently spoke with Packard, who will be a Thought Leader at the 2014 NAA Education Conference & Exposition, June 18-21 in Denver, for a preview of her session.

**units:** You’ve mentioned “relentless focus” as one of the keys to being a great leader. Could you explain what you mean by that, and where you draw the line between constructive and all-consuming?

**Packard:** It’s the flip side of innovation. Every successful business must have an active innovation department. Innovation has to occur and evolve all the time if you want to stay one step ahead of your competitors and grow your business.

The flip side is that innovation needs some focus and

discipline around it. It can sometimes go a little haywire. Innovators are very creative, right-brained individuals who come up with brilliant ideas, but there also has to be a discipline—a relentless focus—around how you grow your company.

At HGTV, we had the “brand lens process.” While we were building the brand, we did this to make sure we were all on the same page and that there was a continuity in everything we were doing.

The other part of relentless focus is with your consumers, you need to be constantly communicating with them and be on top of what they love and don’t love. The most important thing you can do is to have the relentless focus on your customer. It’s sometimes easy to get bogged down in the day-to-day of running a business and take your eye off the customer, who is the core of everything.

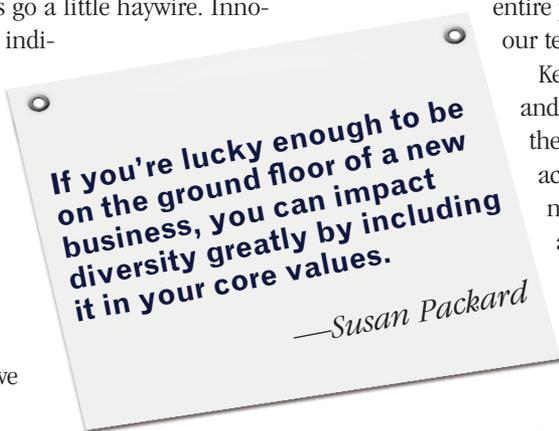
**units:** For all of your successes, what mistakes have you made as a leader?

**Packard:** Our HGTV founding team kept hearing that customers wanted to purchase the products they saw on air. With that in mind, we thought a great way to earn additional revenue would be to create something similar to QVC—a home-shopping network. We purchased a fledgling company and it was a huge disaster—and a great lesson.

We mistakenly assumed that because this idea used TV as its platform, we would be fine because we know that world. In reality, TV was a smoke screen for what the business really was—a store. None of us had any retail background. We lost a lot of money and liquidated the company, and now we license our brands.

The lesson was that in thinking about growing your business, you have to do some soul searching about where your talents really lie, what you’re good at and what best serves your consumers.

The second memorable failure was in fall 1997 when we purchased The Food Network. My first reaction was to decimate the



entire pre-existing organization and put all of our terrific HGTV people in place.

Ken Lowe, our CEO, kept urging caution, and rightfully so. Instead, we integrated the two teams, which took over a year to accomplish. We had to deal with a whole new team of people and I really matured as a leader during that process.

**units:** Could you share any insights you garnered from your time at HGTV with regard to diversity as a business practice?

**Packard:** If you’re lucky enough to be on the ground floor of a new business, you can impact diversity greatly by including it in your core values. We did it from the ground floor up with HGTV, but most people don’t have that luxury.

You hope diversity springs up organically but I’ve read a lot recently about “unconscious bias” that we all have. This unconscious bias suggests that we have to inject this diversity value into an organization; it’s not inherent.

We had a diversity counsel and put diversity into our goals that accompany the hiring process.

The key is that leadership has to live it. I did quite a bit of sponsoring and mentoring of women. You have to inspire these practices into the organization.

**units:** You’re currently writing a book for women, and often speak of your passion for helping other women who are trying to balance their career and related life choices. How did you personally come to terms with these challenges over the course of your career?

**Packard:** I was very lucky because my husband chose to stay at home. It’s happening more, but still fewer than 10 percent of households have a stay-at-home father.

I also had to set routines with my son when I wasn’t on the road. Bedtime, breakfast—much like a father who is the full-time worker in the family. I just read a book about how time spent with your children isn’t a numbers game because although a husband and wife could be spending



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the same amount of time with their children, the most stressful times are when you're putting your children to bed or getting them ready in the morning.

But I never found those times to be stressful; I loved all those routines because they were the only time I had with my son.

I was also able to balance everything thanks to the culture of my company. I had worked with NBC before Scripps and, in my opinion, they were not very hospitable in terms of work/life balance. HGTV's culture was just the opposite.

**units:** What can companies do to put family-friendly policies in place for its employees?

**Packard:** If, heaven forbid, you don't already have telecommuting and flex programs in place, that's where you start. When we introduced telecommuting we did it through a pilot program.

We sat down with our employees and said we have to figure this out together. The important thing is to be upfront and transparent with staff. Once those programs are established, you have to talk about them.

I often hear about companies that have work/life balance programs listed in their benefits packages, yet they don't adhere to them.

If supervisors aren't allowing their employees to telework or flex and you have those programs in place, you need to talk to them. It's not enough to have these policies—you have to live them.

Our CEO at HGTV, Ken Lowe, is a great example of this. When I was on the road 70 percent to 80 percent of the time during those building years with HGTV, potential business partners would frequently come to Knoxville [HGTV's home base in Tennessee] for meetings, followed by dinners

that went long into the night. Ken would always say, "I want to invite you to this dinner but I hope you say no." And I did. He understood that when I was home, I wanted to be with my family. If someone at dinner asked Ken where his COO was, Ken said he would tell them she's at home with her family. And that sends a message to the entire industry.

**units:** Has this notion evolved greatly since you began your career?

**Packard:** No. I haven't seen great leaps in work/life balance initiatives since I began my

career. There's certainly more awareness about it and it's become more of a shared issue between men and women, but we still have a long way to go, both institutionally and from within.

As women rise into senior roles, we are accountable to make change happen because we understand the need for it the most. I read a piece on a female CEO who acknowledged that she just kept her head down, did her job and then got out of there. She did nothing for the company to help women with work/life balance or help pull them up the ladder. Diversity needs to be on everyone's mind, at every sector, but I believe women have a special accountability to other women. 

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