



Podcast Transcript | *The Fix*

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Guests: Katie Poehling-Seymour

Title: Navigating Success, Sustainability, and Diversity in Wholesale Distribution with Katie Poehling-Seymour

Show Notes: In the latest episode of The Fix, [Katie Poehling-Seymour](#), President and CEO of [First Supply](#), delves into her story of success within the wholesale distribution sector. She discusses First Supply's longevity and the issues and prospects within the trades industry. The episode also explores her commitment to diversity, inclusivity, and advocating for women in the trades, along with the importance of sustainability and industry innovation.

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Run Time: 28:33

Questions or Feedback: thefix@oatey.com

00:00:03 [Katherine Lehtenin](#)

Welcome to The Fix, the podcast made for the trades, where we sit down with inspiring individuals across the trades to discuss their unique take on the industry, including career paths, job site stories, overcoming challenges, and everything in between. I'm your host, Katherine, a marketer here at Oatey with my co-host and friend, Doug, one of Oatey's resident experts in all things trades. The Fix is more than a podcast. It's a community, a community built to support tradespeople and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation.

00:00:44 [Katherine Lehtenin](#)

All right, Doug, our guest today, I have been waiting to meet and talk to on the podcast. She is a leader in our industry, and I can't wait for all of us to learn a little more.

00:00:56 **Doug Buchan**

I'm extremely excited as usual, but in this particular case, even a little extra heightened. And because we're dealing with an individual who's worked through generations, proven success has been there for well over a hundred years. And they're at the front lines of where our contractors are purchasing the products. So I am very excited to have her in the studio today.

00:01:20 **Katherine Lehtenin**

Well, awesome. Welcome Katie Paling Seymour. She's the president and CEO of First Supply as well as this year's ASA president. Thanks for joining us.

00:01:30 **Kathryn Poehling-Seymour**

Thank you so much for having me. It's been such a whirlwind year for me, and I'm so excited to be here.

00:01:35 **Katherine Lehtenin**

I know. I'm so happy we were finally able to arrange it and get you here, and looking forward to our conversation. Could you share a little bit with us your journey of becoming president and CEO for Supply and some of that generation there that Doug alluded to, and what's kind of the motivation that you pursued in your career to be in the wholesale distribution industry?

00:01:55 **Kathryn Poehling-Seymour**

Well, I often joke that I've been in the industry a little over 10 years or a little over 40, depending on how you look at it, being a fifth generation family business, I grew up in it. So yeah, it's part of who I am. But more broadly, I had the really good fortune of seeing the opportunity and the genuinely exciting and interesting things that my father and my uncles were doing in leading the business. And I really wanted to do something just as exciting with just as much opportunity as they were. And here I am today. I found it. But one of the things I didn't expect and maybe I should have is the amazing people that I've really met in this industry and that have become so so much a part of my my life

honestly. As you mentioned Doug, our place in the supply chain is connectors between the manufacturers and our reps as well as to our customers has given me the chance to not only meet so many people but build so many relationships and friends with really incredible people and the American

00:02:51 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

Supply association presidency has given me even more platform to do that, literally from Boston to LA, I've been everywhere and it's just been wonderful to spend all that time and then not to mention the wonderful people at First Companies and our own people. And I'm so proud that our business is not only multi-generational for us, but for our employees. We have multiple families that have multiple generations, including one third generation family.

00:03:19 [Katherine Lehtenin](#)

Oh, that's awesome.

00:03:19 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

And what better testament to our culture that we've really built over generations. We're so proud of that.

00:03:24 [Katherine Lehtenin](#)

Yeah, that's amazing. So can you talk a little bit about, First Supply, as you talked to, has been operating for over 120 years. What do you believe are the key factors that have contributed to the company's long-term success?

00:03:40 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

I really believe longevity, like we've been blessed with, is part skill and part luck. What really makes all the difference, though is creating opportunity from the luck part. When we celebrated our 125th

anniversary last year my uncle wrote a book of our company history and just the amazing stories that we've experienced over this time. One of my favorites is about an opportunity my grandfather Gerhard Palin created. He became general manager of the company at only age 26. At that time we were only one location but still 26 and one of the first things he did was bid all the underground work for a 1,500 building expansion at Fort McCoy which is about 30 miles from La Crosse, Wisconsin where we were based, he hand wrote a thousand page quote. The story is it was four inches thick. And we were the smallest company bidding this. People told him not even to bother because one of the big companies out of Minneapolis would surely win this bid. Well, he won it. It was, in today's dollars, a 5

00:04:39 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

.4 million dollar PO. And what's even better, this is the real luck part, it shipped in 1940, which was the year that the base allocations for all Steel were set during the war. And so he had just set us up to prosper in an incredible way. So the 1950s were hugely beneficial to us. We expanded to two more locations. And we built a relationship with Kiwani Boiler, which we went on to purchase and own for a number of years and then eventually sell to American Standard. But it really was such an incredible story. It didn't make those wholesalers in Minneapolis very happy. Sure. Got their attention. So one of them opens up down the street from us, determined to drive us out of business. Well, we're still in lacrosse and they are not. Yeah, I love it. So it's creating those opportunities. It's just the history is so rich.

00:05:31 [Katherine Lehtenin](#)

Yeah, oh, that's awesome. I love that. Well, you know, first supply caters to a broad range of markets. You talked about even an acquisition that you made and making changes. And I'm sure over those 125 years, there's been even more. but including plumbing and industrial you know how does your company manage to stay adaptable and innovation to meet constantly evolving needs in these

00:05:52 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

variety of sectors? In some ways it's really simple we listen to our customers we stay close to them so we can really understand how we can work better together and so for example like when we're delivering to them is there a way we could do that more efficiently more effectively so they're

receiving is smoother so that they're set up to have success on the job site but we also celebrate the good stuff we're doing too. So if we find something that's working really well in a market, let's translate it, let's keep doing it. But one of the most fun things for me sitting in in this role right now is looking at what's next, what's coming, what's on the bleeding edge, if not only in our industry but across the board. We can certainly listen to what our customers need today, but part of our responsibility is anticipating what they don't even know they need yet. We might be able to solve problems before they even get there. So VR and AI are great examples of that. Where will virtual reality really

00:06:46 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

be relevant in our industry? I think we're all hearing about it already in terms of training and virtual reality goggles and glasses that are allowing people to get hands -on, on -the -job, quote -unquote, experience just without even leaving where they are. And so those tools can be used to not only train current tradespeople but attract new ones. If you're a young kid and you're thinking about an industry like plumbing where you're turning wrenches, well all all of a sudden, now I'm using robotics and virtual reality to get trained in this. It changes the concept, but we've got to figure out ways to do that. But I was in a meeting yesterday reviewing some potential automation solutions for us, and our team realized that this is going to be a lot of work. The VR, the AI, the automation, all this is coming. But I think if we do it right, it's also going to be a lot of fun, because it's going to change what we all do and in a good way.

00:07:36 [Katherine Lehtenin](#)

Yeah, and you really have to just look at it from a different perspective and not get in the way of thinking, how have we done it in the past? And just what are the possibilities of the future? And I think that's a great way as really, your business is evolving to be on that leading edge so that you can service your customers the way that they're going to expect it in years to come, too.

00:07:56 [Doug Buchan](#)

Yeah, absolutely. I'd like to expand on that thought process here for a second. So, I mean, I read about one of your first offerings when your company first started was windmills, for goodness sakes, right? And, you know, now with today's offerings in the industry from different manufacturers, how do you

decide what manufacturers to align with? You know, what products of theirs suit your contractor bases the best? You know, how do you go through that process?

00:08:27 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

Honestly, our goal is to win with the winners, right? We want to be aligned with people who are leading in the industry. We don't want to be aligned, aligned with anybody and everybody because it's the flavor of the day. We're looking like our customers and like our employees who have been multigenerational. Most of our vendor relationships are multigenerational, too. That provides just a ton of stability for our customers and the trade people who are relying on us to bring the best products to the marketplace. But even thinking back, as I was talking about that history, my great grandfather was especially, you know, he's the one who brought the windmills. OK. So he was really known for seeing what that next product was going to be. And he was also really good at realizing when that product had run its course. So we started off with windmills because nobody had windmills in Western Wisconsin. And we, the farms, it was a largely agricultural community needed to get the water to not only

00:09:18 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

the animals, but the homes. Well, as pumps were developed, he dumped the windmills and brought in the pumps because that was what was needed. That was really what was, was coming next. Um, and there, there's so many, uh, products just like that. my grandfather started off in high school installing coal stokers because in the home that was the latest technology. And when Jacuzzi introduced the portable Whirlpool pump, we were one of the first with it. We were one of the first to have Corian countertops available, Grundfos wet rotor pumps, and even A .O. Smith water heaters. We were one of their oldest customers because we saw a product that made a whole lot of sense and was going to be needed in the future. And here we are, 60, 70 some years later, still selling A .O. Smith water heater. So it's just, it's an incredible story. And all the way down to the technology, one of my favorite parts, we got our first computer in 1969. We were one of the first to bring in IBM computers, especially

00:10:14 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

for a company our size. So thinking about doing better, not only on the product side, but also behind the office on the AP and AR and making sure we're always innovating there.

00:10:26 **Doug Buchan**

Yeah. Fantastic. Katherine, I'm going to ask, so we talk a lot about women in trades, okay? You said that you have employees that are multi-generational also with your company, so what do you do to help promote, you know, the female in the trades, you know, in your space?

00:10:49 **Kathryn Poehling-Seymour**

We, anything we can, honestly. Okay, okay. It's so important. And it's important that we're attracting diverse people to our communities and our industry overall. Women especially just need a voice. We need a seat at the table. We need to make sure that we really were there in the room when decisions are being made. And it's been a lot of fun to see the change happening. There's still a lot of times when I'm sitting around a table and all of a sudden I realize, jeez, I'm still the only woman in here. How did this happen? But it's changing slowly but surely and I think there's so many amazing programs like the house that she built that you're so involved in that are changing the dynamic. It's now at the forefront. It's now something people are talking about and the first step to any change is awareness. So now we're aware, now we can start really promoting the opportunity that's here and we can start to attract people to that opportunity and really develop them. One of the things that I'm

00:11:47 **Kathryn Poehling-Seymour**

asked a lot about career advice for people and one of the things, no matter what seat you sit in in a company, is that you have to have an advocate. And women in the trades need to have an advocate, somebody that is their cheerleader. Somebody when they're staffing the next job, they say, how about her? I think she'd do really well at that. I think maybe she'd learn something. I think that'd be really interesting. And everybody can be an advocate. So you might be brand new into a role, but yet you can still go out on a limb and be somebody's cheerleader. I have a good friend who's never worked in our industry. She lives across the country now. but she she's always the person who's commenting on my social media. She's telling all of our mutual friends what I'm working on. Love it. And it just it makes

you feel good and anybody can do that. Sure. You'll always underestimate how much that means to somebody else. So I think when we think about anybody but especially women in the trades being

00:12:40 **Kathryn Poehling-Seymour**

advocates for them and cheerleading and making sure they know that what they're doing is important.

00:12:44 **Katherine Lehtenin**

That's great. Yeah and I'd even say and maybe you can elaborate a little bit more on this to ASA from an organization has done a lot with women in the industry and I believe you know through the conference that they have had over the years it's seen an unbelievable amount of growth and just even bringing that type of conference and I believe it was spearheaded by a lot of the next generation of family members in the in in wholesale distribution and in the plumbing space that really helped bring it to light so can you talk a little bit about that group as with your connection to ASA?

00:13:18 **Kathryn Poehling-Seymour**

Absolutely, I was the founding chairwoman. Oh, there we go.

00:13:22 **Katherine Lehtenin**

Why am I not surprised?

00:13:26 **Kathryn Poehling-Seymour**

But really, it was just what I was talking about. There was a need, and a couple of us got together, realized that there was a need here, and we could do something about it. If we think that there's an opportunity, let's put the plan together, and let's make it happen. And it was actually interesting. It was at a young executives event. So it was young people just like you're saying the next generation we were doing a video shoot for the next generation family members and businesses and there were two women Ashley Martin and I standing there and We started talking about There's nothing for

women in this industry. There's nothing going on So we we started small and we were in Chicago and we were I hope 50 people come it's now the fastest growing group and the American Spy Association and It's just been a fantastic journey. One of the most unexpected parts of it, we didn't necessarily say we're gonna attract executives or we're gonna attract marketers or finance people anything. It was whoever,

00:14:23 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

anyone could come and what we didn't realize is that it is attracted women just beginning their careers and women who are maybe in the twilight of their careers. But all of a sudden you have this amazing conglomeration of women sharing their stories and how they got from here to there. So for a young woman to see a woman who's been successful for decades in a career in a male -dominated industry and to have to look up to her and to see I can do that too. And for the women who have paved this path and really been the leaders for us, for them to look back now and see hundreds of young women excited to be in the in the industry, it's just magic. Yeah, it is a great

00:15:04 [Katherine Lehtenin](#)

event. I've been to a couple of them and it's it's always so much fun and it's nice to reconnect with people over the years too and to be able to see how

00:15:11 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

they're doing. We realized that all around the country we were the onlies. We were the only women sitting at these tables, we were the only women in our department, whatever it may have been and there was an opportunity to bring us all in one place and really build upon that and be each other's advocates. I think there are small pockets of women who have met each other at this conference in this meeting and now see each other in other places and celebrate

00:15:34 [Katherine Lehtenin](#)

each other on social media. It's awesome. Yeah, it's really fun. Well, I'm going to switch gears just a little bit because I want to go back to talking through, you know, kind of the business side and the growth that's happened. But you know, in the trades industry, what would you consider to be the most significant challenges and also really opportunities for growth in the years ahead?

00:15:53 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

I think one of the biggest challenges we're going to, we're going to face, excuse me, is this generational shift that we need to make. It's happening with the contractors and the trades people, it's happening in distributors, it's happening in manufacturers. As one generation is transitioning on to the next, the businesses look different. Our business looks a little different since I've taken a more active roll over from my father. It's just, it's what's going to happen and we all need to determine how we're going to grow and diversify. There's, you know, lots of private equity investments, especially in our industry and especially in the in the trades right now, plus the consolidation We've got to figure out how to manage that while we keep the core of who we are. Our industry is known to be a really positive one, an excellent place to build a very prosperous career. So how do we make sure that we stay true to that? But the opportunities are endless. There still aren't enough homes in

00:16:48 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

our country. So we think about needing to build that simple portion of infrastructure. We also have a deteriorating overall infrastructure, our roads and everything else. So we're going to need to innovate. we're going to need to do things better, differently, and really lay the foundation for our grandchildren's future in a very sustainable way, in a very responsible way that will build the platform for all of them to succeed. And holistically, so that there are more opportunities for more people from different walks of life throughout the industry and throughout

00:17:17 [Katherine Lehtenin](#)

the country. For sure. So can you talk to me a little bit about and provide some insights for our listeners on the strategies that First Supply employs to maintain robust relationship with of manufacturers as things are evolving and changing. And you talked a little bit about picking winners that have got new

ideas and innovation, but not only manufacturers, but also your customers in this really highly competitive market where people are going in a lot of different directions to purchase their product.

00:17:46 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

I think one of the most impactful things we can do is just be nice to each other. It goes a long way, doesn't it? It goes a long ways. When you think about when you wanna build a relationship with somebody, when you want to partner with somebody, you want to partner with people you like. So I say that a little bit jokingly, but at the same time, you do want to partner with people who want to grow and who have a mutual best interest. And people who want to innovate, we want to find ways to challenge each other for the better. It's not just about what's in it for me lately. It's about, hey, let's figure out where we can, where 1 plus 1 equals 3, that we can really work together and rework processes, rework opportunities that make us both better for it.

00:18:32 [Katherine Lehtenin](#)

Sure, yeah, absolutely. So we talk, you know, you hear a lot to sustainability as well as environmental concerns, you know, they're becoming more and more to the forefront and increasingly important, you know, in the construction industry. How does First Supply address that, you know, in the issues with the product offering as well as even your operation footprint?

00:18:51 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

different. We don't do it well enough today, honestly. Our manufacturers are leading in this area and we're learning from them as quickly as possible. And as technologies become more and more approachable, we're shifting towards more sustainable operations with things like solar panels and green building and simple procedures like paperless invoicing that can make an impact. But we were actually awarded the first LEED Gold certification in the U .S. under the new regulations for our Kohler Signature Store in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

00:19:19 [Katherine Lehtenin](#)

Oh, awesome. Congratulations.

00:19:21 **Kathryn Poehling-Seymour**

Thank you. It was only the second in the world after the Nike store in Paris when they changed all the regulations. Very cool. I would love for every single one of our buildings to be like that, up to that standard. But it's a hard barrier to hit. So we'll continue to improve and continue to get better. But it's really a luxury we have as a family business to make decisions that really might be best for the next generation, and the next, and the next. My father, Joe, and my cousin, Todd, and I talk a lot about being stewards of our business for future generations. It isn't ours. We're simply caring for it for right now. And sustainable best practices just make a lot of sense when you have that perspective. And I also remind myself that my most important job is mom to my three daughters. And their future and their grandchildren's future really make every ounce of sustainability invaluable.

00:20:14 **Katherine Lehtenin**

Yeah, that's such a great perspective. I appreciate it.

00:20:17 **Doug Buchan**

I love the fact that she mentioned about her three daughters, so I see more generations coming here. Yes, for sure. I love that. You know, I don't really have a question, but I just want to let all of our listeners know that I've spent a very short amount of time with you, Katie. I feel that I'm very good at reading people, and I'm going to tell you something. you have such tremendous passion but it's very controlled and it's so awesome because that's what leaders are made of. The passion but they can control it and I'm gonna tell you I I'm just happy to be in a room with you

00:20:55 **Kathryn Poehling-Seymour**

today I swear to God I am. I don't have anything else I mean I love her story I

00:21:07 **Doug Buchan**

I love her stories and I love her past. I love where she is today and I love your vision for the future, so yeah.

00:21:14 **Katherine Lehtenin**

Well, let's talk a little bit about being a working mom and how you have to balance between being a leader within your organization but also being mom too at the end of the day. Can you talk a little bit about how you have to balance that and how you do balance it?

00:21:31 **Kathryn Poehling-Seymour**

I like to say there's no balance. There's kind of, it's all a blend, right? there's one Katie and she's a mom, she's a CEO, she's president of ASA, she's got friends, I'd love to play tennis, you know it's all it's all those things all together and so finding ways where I can weave the two together. So I'm going from Cleveland out to Los Angeles to speak at my last ASA regional meeting and the girls are coming with me. We're gonna spend the weekend in Los Angeles and how can I find ways to not only introduce them to the industry, you know, they're the next generation, but how can we find ways to spend time together that makes sense? It's hard to turn things on and off. But at the same time, I got the advice or read the advice long ago about being present and being 100 % wherever you are. So that you're always tuned in to what that means. If it's a team meeting, they're for the team. If I'm at home, put my phone away, I'm home playing with the girls. And I really try as much as I can to

00:22:39 **Kathryn Poehling-Seymour**

stay true to that. It's near impossible sometimes. But I've also found fun ways just to, they keep things light, they keep things energetic, they make it all worthwhile. And finding ways to weave them into things. I love to use their, use them in my speeches. I mean, four year olds and three. Oh, yeah, there's no better content, right? They take great pictures. I mean, it's just a ball.

00:23:05 **Katherine Lehtenin**

Yeah, I mean, and I would say I'm right there with you. I have two boys and I think showing them to the what we're doing because they don't always have exposure to it. They did during the pandemic. And then now trying to still continue to show them what that looks like. My boys are joining me for the big build event down in Washington, DC. So they get to actually put on an Oatey shirt and they're going to be working for the day. So it's those opportunities, Lisa, too, that just give them exposure into what mom does at work, but also that mom is my mom, so that you can. We had another lady on named Doreen Cannon, who is a plumber here and a legend in Cleveland at the Local 55. And the reason she went into plumbing was for the flexibility with her son at the time who was in kindergarten. And I always remember that because she's like, this career allowed me to have the flexibility that I needed. So I think that it's great input. It is a blend. It is sometimes a balance. It's a dance. It's a being

00:24:06 [Katherine Lehtenin](#)

present and all those things, trying to navigate the world of being a working mom, for sure.

00:24:12 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

And I think it's holding to all of us that we create better spaces for more women as well. As leaders, as bosses, as mentors, we need to make sure that the young women and all women are able to create that space and that flexibility wherever it's possible. It's not always possible. If you're on a manufacturing floor, if you're a delivery driver, you can't work from home. But are there opportunities to have flexible schedules? Are there opportunities to work reduced hours for a period of time while your kids are home for the summer and then ramp back up and allowing our businesses to flex with women instead of simply creating a door out? Yeah. If we can figure that out as women in this generation, we will have won.

00:24:53 [Katherine Lehtenin](#)

I'm telling you for sure. One, as we talk about, you know, there has been so many articles that talk about the lack of people getting into the trades and it is that women should be the target for, you know, getting into the trades. If they continue to stay as a very rigid schedule and don't have that flexibility, they will never win over bringing women into the trades. And I know Eric from Mechanical

Hub has talked about this flexibility that needs to happen too. It is the job site just can't be what works for some. It needs to be able to work for all and I think you'll actually see things producing even

00:25:28 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

better from there. Good and on the back side of it there's care for parents and others as well. It's not only care for children, you know, you end up in the sandwich generation where you've got, you know, two different groups of people to care for. So not only it's making sure that we don't only have off ramps, we've got on ramps.

00:25:47 [Katherine Lehtenin](#)

Yeah, yeah. Great perspective. Well, it says we kind of close out today, you know, I would love to kind of get your vision of, you know, where do you see by the time that you are ready to off ramp out of this industry? Where do you hope to see it? What are the things that you hope to have an impact and a legacy on in the trades and in your business and in the wholesale industry?

00:26:13 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

Actually, we just created a couple of time capsules for our 125th anniversary. And one of them we created to be opened in about 25 years, and I'm hoping that's at my retirement age.

00:26:26 [Kathryn Poehling-Seymour](#)

Anyways, I just think that having a conversation about all of these things and creating a really authentic place for people to continue to grow and develop and innovate. Our industry is one that's long overlooked, especially in the distribution piece. So many people don't understand how products get from manufacture to installation, and there's an entire supply chain. The pandemic did wonders for that. It did not do wonders for many things, but when we think about the way that all the things that we learned after the pandemic, we learned a lot about leadership. We learned about bringing our whole selves to work, and we learned about how people can have various influences based on their geography, but also just based on the things that impact them. When you think about the pandemic,

you think about somebody maybe sitting there who lost someone to COVID -19 next to somebody whose spouse doesn't believe in vaccines, and they're right there next to each other with two very different influences

00:27:32 **Kathryn Poehling-Seymour**

on them. So I think that that taught me a million leadership lessons. And I hope to carry some of that forward in how we respond to crisis, to do it with an open mind and an open heart, and to be able to lead that way, and to be able to create an industry and an entire supply chain where people feel like they have the opportunity to create a really good life for them and their families and the next generation of their families.

00:28:01 **Katherine Lehtenin**

Yeah, it's pretty cool. Well I just want to say on behalf of Oatey, you know I thank you very much for the long partnership that we have had over the years and looking forward to many more as we continue. I know a lot of the company's vision and your business's vision is very much aligned so thank you for that and obviously if there's any way that we can support you know continue to reach out because we obviously are all in this together to make an impact into the trades. Thank you

00:28:29 **Kathryn Poehling-Seymour**

but thank you for what you're doing for the industry too and your advocacy.

00:28:32 **Katherine Lehtenin**

Got it. Thank you.