

# THE FIX

## A TRADES CONVERSATION

HOSTED BY **Oatey**

**Guests:** Allison Grealis – President and Founder, [Women in Manufacturing](#)

**Run Time:** 21:15

**Questions or Feedback:** [thefix@oatey.com](mailto:thefix@oatey.com)

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00:00:06 **Katherine Lehtinen**

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.

00:00:45 **Katherine Lehtinen**

All right, Doug, we have a trailblazer and a leader for women,

00:00:51 **Doug Buchan**

not only in the trades, but in manufacturing. Absolutely. And they're live in-house with us today. Best kind. I'm going to be honest with you, I was reading Alison's bio before we got started today. Yes. I became so overwhelmed with her awesomeness, I had to take a nap. Okay. So I think, I think the audience is going to absolutely love her today. And once they hear about all the stuff she's involved in, I mean, you're not gonna, you're not going to be able to not to like her.

00:01:18 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah. Awesome. Well, welcome, Alison Grayless, who is the founder and president of Women in manufacturing here in Cleveland, Ohio.

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00:01:26 **Allison Grealis**

Yes, thanks for having me.

00:01:27 **Katherine Lehtinen**

You've got it. Well, if you wouldn't mind, we're gonna get started just learning a little bit about the, an introduction and the impact that you're making. So could you start by sharing a little bit about your journey and what led you to the career in manufacturing? And then also a little bit about Women in Manufacturing Association and how you've seen an impact in the lives of women in the manufacturing sector.

00:01:48 **Allison Grealis**

Sure, that's a lot. So I'll start maybe first with my background. So I, you know, I am Allison Grales. I was born in upstate New York. My dad actually worked in manufacturing. He worked for Firestone Tire and Rubber. So we made our way from Rochester to equally snowy Cleveland, Ohio, and more specifically Akron, Ohio, the tire capital and rubber capital, I think, of the world. Or maybe it's still denoted as such. So I grew up in West Akron. And while there, I went to an all -girls high school. And that was one of my first early influences as to seeing the power of community and women supporting each other. and it was a very small school in West Akron called Our Lady of the Elms. I graduated with a whopping 43 girls. And from there, I was really inspired to say, gosh, I wanna do something that is gonna make a difference and have impact in the school because it was so small. And as well, I think because of that gender focus, it really empowered us to feel like we could do anything. We could

00:02:42 **Allison Grealis**

change the world, we could have an impact. So I went to Ohio University, was an English Pre -Law Women's Studies major. And from there, did lots of things academically, But really I was most impassioned about doing community work and growing communities and working in the women's organization Student Senate and Women's Panhellenic while at Ohio University and then post college I was gonna go to law school decide quickly not to When I saw that there were tons of other attorneys who were gonna be kind of joining the ranks and

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instead I wanted to do something again that had impact sure so I found a not-for-profit to work for in Boston for a year I did that which was probably the best grassroots training ever for public speaking and how to build partnerships and how to gain allies and then went back to get my master's in public administration thinking I would apply those skills to doing something philanthropic or within the government and soon found myself at a trade association. So after

00:03:30 **Allison Grealis**

grad school never would have thought I would find myself with a manufacturing trade association but really felt like it was coming full circle with my father having had roots in manufacturing and then getting to again apply those skills with community building but with a trade association group. So it was with a metal forming trade association that was 23 three years ago, so I'm dating myself. And it was great. They were small to mid-sized privately held companies. Most of them were family owned and run. And I thought it was so amazing to be able to have the opportunity to work with these owners and to help them as they were looking to develop their family members to take different roles in the company to ideally create a succession plan for their companies. And then what I found is that through the course of my work with these small privately held companies, they had more and more women that were entering their leadership teams. So they were often daughters or nieces, but they were women

00:04:18 **Allison Grealis**

who were looking for, gosh, we're just a few of us, how do we find others like us? And so that is really what was the spirit of the start of the Women in Manufacturing Association. So this hunger for how do I find other people like me? And we as a trade association, obviously we want to meet our member needs. So at the time we started to create meetups and social activities for the small group of women in metal forming. And when I started to do research for what other resources are out there nationally, found that there were no such resources. So there wasn't a national group organization for women in industry. So we started with a conference, which was our summit. That was, we're now this year celebrating our 14th annual summit. Awesome. That conference really was the start of the Women in Manufacturing Association. So I created it in a

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very grassroots way. So taking those skills I learned, I was doing grassroots organizing in Boston and created a conference that was, you know, all different

00:05:06 **Allison Grealis**

women in manufacturing from all over the country in all different roles. 133 women showed up in Cleveland for the start of that conference. And what was really cool is that after we were done, they said, how do I join? How do I become part of this group and community? And so I quickly went back and created a business plan, created segments of membership by which people could join, and we started welcoming our first members. And so today we've grown dramatically. We're now almost 30,000 members strong. We're another US state. We're in 50 plus countries. And we though still have that same spirit of supporting women in industry, making sure they feel like they aren't alone and that they have this community. And ideally, our goal is to advance more women and then to industry leadership roles, because we want to change cultures, we want to change the ways that companies are fostering inclusion and diversity. And then as well, just to make sure women know that they have this other group of people

00:05:54 **Allison Grealis**

that want them to be successful.

00:05:56 **Katherine Lehtinen**

Yeah, oh my gosh, that's amazing. In those 14 years of what you've been able to accomplish with starting from your business plan to where things are today, 50 countries. I mean, that's unbelievable.

00:06:05 **Doug Buchan**

Now you know why they take a nap.

00:06:07 **Katherine Lehtinen**

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I, for sure, well, and over those 14 years, I'm sure then you've seen lots of challenges and obstacles. So can you tell us a little bit more about what are some of those biggest obstacles that you're still seeing today that women are faced in the industry? And then how does your organization help them with those obstacles?

00:06:26 **Allison Grealis**

So you know, I think the first obstacle is general career awareness. So I think it's great that you have a podcast as you do to talk about skilled trades and having a skilled trades career and profession because I think too few young individuals still know about these opportunities. I have a high school senior and junior and they're not talking about manufacturing. They're not talking about the skilled trades Especially in private schools and in public schools And I think it's really unfortunate because we're doing our kids such a disservice so many of them would be better suited perhaps not in a traditional four -year educational track and Because we don't celebrate and because we often you know, we don't often illuminate these opportunities So it's causing a lot of kids to make bad choices and to enter for your degrees unfortunately at the cost of their parents or lots of student loans when that wasn't the right fit for them. So you know first is career awareness so we as an organization

00:07:16 **Allison Grealis**

year -round really focus on how do we celebrate what modern manufacturing looks like because I know even when I started 20 some years ago the facilities are nothing like what they used to be or I say the majority of facilities. I mean there is an asterisk there are a few that maybe are still in the dark ages but most are more modern most are using new technology they're embracing smart manufacturing and so they look much different so if only we could better tell that story. And that's what we aim to do through our social platforms and channels is talk about what modern manufacturing looks like. And as well to celebrate the types of positions and roles that ideally even women and others could hold in the industry is really important. You know, other barriers include still some women feeling isolated and alone. So that's why we do have 33 chapters throughout the country where we try to provide women local access to having a network, to having people they can go to for advice and resources.

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00:08:04 **Allison Grealis**

And then I think that, you know, what we're hearing from our surveys and our research that we're doing is that, you know, we know that job seekers present day are hugely interested in flexibility. So manufacturers, unfortunately have been a bit slow going and a little less progressive as it's related to offering flexibility. And I think the pandemic was one of those blessings or one of the positive outcomes, obviously there were lots of negative outcomes. One of the positive outcomes was that it forced manufacturers and other companies and industries to realize how can we adapt to, to offer flexibility. So that has been, that was a challenge that I think now we're finding companies and manufacturers to find they've been successful in finding solutions, whether it be new shift schedules, job sharing. We've seen a lot of companies who are using technology as well to help enable that even for the front line. Sure. So that flexibility piece, I think was a challenge and barrier in the past,

00:08:48 **Allison Grealis**

but it's something that I think companies are overcoming

00:08:51 **Katherine Lehtinen**

in some creative ways. Yeah. Oh, absolutely. I know that we've adopted a more flexible, you know, work environment too, because we've, we've had to, we've had to shift. And I, we agree that with the pandemic, that was one of the positive things that came out of it was the ability to do that, for sure. So another question that I have is, you know, with your extensive involvement in educational initiatives, what strategies do you believe are the most effective and inspiring the next generation of women to pursue careers in manufacturing and the trades?

00:09:21 **Allison Grealis**

Yeah, so we ourselves and our Education Foundation, they really help power what are formal education programs. So we've got three formal education programs. Our newest was designed a few years back in partnership with manufacturing companies. So we had a focus group of about four manufacturing companies that helped us design a program specifically for women in production. Because what we heard from women,

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from leaders in manufacturing companies was that the women in frontline roles were the most difficult to retain and as well advance. So we created a program in partnership with a handful of companies that were engaged with our association. And it has been hugely successful. I've graduated almost 400 people from this program just in the last two years. Wow. And these are women who often have never had access to coaching, never had access, many of them to formal education or assessments. And so this is their first introduction and it's, it's reaped great rewards for the companies that have

00:10:10 **Allison Grealis**

participated. So I think formal education is critical. That program for empowering women, we hope, helps keep women in manufacturing at their companies and then with aspirations to rise into new roles. We also have a program for early career managers. So we know that often women, you know, they may have technical skills and And they may be really great, let's say, engineers or in more technical positions, but when it comes to management, they may not have had proper management training to understand how do I go from a contributor to a leader. So we have a program that's designed just for early career managers to help them be more successful. We also have a formal director or executive level program that we do in partnership with Case Western Reserve University. And then year round, we offer training and education through a virtual learning series that's on demand, as well as delivered live each month. So we have about 100 plus hours of learning that all of our members can go access at any

00:10:57 **Allison Grealis**

time again in different areas whether they be industry topics or professional development topics that they can tap into. So we know that professional development our members have told us is most important to them as it relates to things that their company can offer them and so we really try to offer that in an accessible and affordable way. So those programs have been effective and when we look at you know what helps women rise obviously things like professional development or critical and formal education but also just coaching and feedback and so we talk often about that feedback factor and that one of the contributing factors for many women not rising is not getting feedback in an honest and direct way throughout the course of their career. So

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we talk very frankly with our member companies to which we have about 450 to date in saying that we know that men still hold the majority of managerial positions. So we have to get men to be our allies and to feel more comfortable as they're delivering

00:11:44 **Allison Grealis**

feedback because so often that is keeping women from rising because they might not be aware of an area that they need to focus on or develop because that feedback was never given to them. So things like that are really important and we offer partnerships with coaching services, assessment services, all those things really help women be successful.

00:12:03 **Doug Buchan**

You know, you're already answering a lot of the questions that I was about to ask, so I appreciate that ahead of time. But one of the unique things I find is, you're helping create relationships, okay? How long do you follow those relationships that you create? I mean, is there a certain period of time where you're constantly checking in and stuff to see the development? And then what do you tell those young ladies out there? They're just afraid to take that first step, you know, to take a risk, take a chance and be uncomfortable.

00:12:36 **Allison Grealis**

So we definitely feel like we foster relationships for as long as people will have those relationships with us. So, you know, we are doing it, we're trying to do a better job, I'd say, in tracking the people that participate in our formal programs. So those early years of our program, we definitely try to keep people in touch and connected with us, often using social media, through our email communications. We've done some meetups with past classes and cohorts from some of our programs, which is really nice, and some of them are really tight, and they continue to be a wonderful support network for one another. As we talk about that first step, or how to get women out of their comfort zone and to get engaged, we hope we reach people through our podcast, which is called Hear Her Story. We also have a very active social channel, both on LinkedIn and on Instagram, where we

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try to share stories of how other women and have gotten outside of their comfort zone and how they've reaped the benefit

00:13:28 **Allison Grealis**

of those relationships that they fostered. You know, we try to share at many of our events, both local and national, it's all about those relationships. And it's about making sure that those things are thoughtfully fertilized so that you're not just making a connection and dumping a card in a bin and never talking to that person again. It's about having that kind of thoughtfulness and curating a relationship with people. Because those people, as we often say, are gonna be that next maybe mentor or that next person that thinks of you when an opportunity arises that they know about or is at their company. So we really tried to encourage people about those skills of networking and we actually train on it. We've talked about it in many of our learning sessions about the power

00:14:07 **Doug Buchan**

of a network and how to leverage it. Have you ever done anything where you'll take a group of interested women to a location and have them walk through and see what it's like to be in the manufacturing industry, you know, live.

00:14:21 **Allison Grealis**

Yeah, our chapters have been our best vehicles for exposing younger generations or potential people in manufacturing to local manufacturing. So our chapters this year, I believe it's about 350 plus programs we've produced. And many of those are plant tours. So they're opening up these opportunities to their community members, as well as our members of women in manufacturing to tour facilities to see manufacturing in action. They also facilitated things like career meetups, where they'll have manufacturers who have exhibits and can talk to individuals looking for jobs or opportunities about professions and what jobs may be like in manufacturing, but exposure is critical. So we've even done things like virtual plant tours where we've done a virtual experience of what does it look like in this facility? Again, to take, take away that mystique of what is

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manufacturing. Cause a lot of people, and unfortunately still present day, even in my kids classroom books a few years ago, when they had

00:15:13 **Allison Grealis**

sections about kind of the great revolution and manufacturing is all like steam stacks and there's not much talking about what modern manufacturing really looks like and you know how wonderful and we often say you know if we could have coursework that was designated at grade six or grade five because you know you have to reach people early and expose them early that was talking about you know the things that you that are made or how it's made and how you're touching it and using those things every single day and without that manufacturing you'd have little to no existence. So there's much we can do. There's lots that we rely on our corporate members and partners to help as well with community engagement. But we hope we're bringing through through our chapters many

00:15:52 **Doug Buchan**

people to expose them to manufacturing. That's awesome. Action plan, Katherine.

00:15:55 **Katherine Lehtinen**

There we go. I got it. Well, and every time I feel like we have someone walk through our manufacturing floor that's really hasn't spent time either in a chemical or mechanical plant, they just kind of go, I had no idea, you know, and just their eyes open up and like, this is really cool. So it's always really fun to see. But I wanted to jump back, you talked a little bit about your podcast. So can you tell us a little bit about why that started and why you felt the art of storytelling through a podcast was important to help with the initiatives that Women in Manufacturing is doing? Yeah so you know

00:16:26 **Allison Grealis**

we have for probably since inception talked about that you can't be what you can't see and so we first started with a blog series called Hear Her Story and what we had in part embarked on was telling the story of our

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members. So interviewing members through their own words it was actually you know a questionnaire we would send to them and ask them to, in their own words, share what a day in the life looks like for them in manufacturing. We would ask some questions about how did you first enter a manufacturing career, what do you like about your job, and as well why would you recommend a career, and then we'd ask them to submit their own pictures along with their expose that we had published and it was really impactful. We'd hear great feedback on it was really cool to hear about this person that has this very unique job at this facility in this location and you know I can now see myself maybe wanting to aspire to that. So obviously with the age and dawn of podcasts, we thought, gosh, this

00:17:15 **Allison Grealis**

is a great vehicle that we could use to expand what was this blog series into something bigger and ideally reach more people. So we started the podcast a few years back. We had, thankfully, a great, talented millennial who had her own podcast, and she helped us first get started on the platform. So we've done it in kind of a grassroots way that we've created the Hear Her Story podcast. I'm happy to report, I think we now have more than 10 ,000 downloads to our podcast. Awesome. We are being listened to from all over the globe. So we, as an association, we launched internationally last year. We now have more than a thousand international members. And that's one of the ways, again, that we're being more inclusive and accessible. So people can be inspired, listen to the stories. And we've had international guests as well as part of our podcast to again, talk about what does that trajectory look like? And, you know, sadly, you know, most of the people who have been guests, we've had 30, almost

00:18:05 **Allison Grealis**

40 guests, and most of them have not chosen a manufacturing career by design, and that's what we hope, in partnership with manufacturers, we can change. How wonderful if more and more of our guests that we are focused on highlighting actually said, I wanted to be in manufacturing or I knew wanted to be in manufacturing from an early age, and I designed my career roadmap that way. Most of these women found out about it by accident or it was through a referral. A few that we've had as guests on the podcast did come through a co -op

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program or a more formal pathway, but so many of them did not. And so the goal is to inspire people through their stories on Hear Her Story, and as well to ideally embark some wisdom on people. You know, we ask them what's the best career advice that you've received? What were some challenges that you've had to overcome? Again, to give people inspiration, and also ideas of how maybe they can also combat some of those problems if they're experiencing them too. That's

00:18:57 **Allison Grealis**

perfect, because it actually leads

00:18:58 **Katherine Lehtinen**

into my last and final question. So, and you touched on a little bit, but that was more or just directed right at the podcast, but in general for women in manufacturing, what advice would you give a young woman considering a career in manufacturing or the trades, and especially those who may not see themselves in that role?

00:19:18 **Allison Grealis**

So I would share to a young person who is not sure what they wanna do and or has some interest in the skilled trades to know that there are endless opportunities that they are sought after to be a person who's in this field. You know, when I look at the roles and responsibilities that were in manufacturing 20 years ago, they're so very different from those that are present -day offered. So I mean, we're enabling people to use technology and to be innovative, and you look at things like digital manufacturing and ESG, I mean, having companies that care just as much as the current individuals about sustainability and the environment, those things are critical to manufacturers as well as to, we know, young professionals. So I would just encourage them to explore manufacturing opportunities. We ourselves have a job board called Wimworks. So I just actually was sharing it with someone today who just graduated from school in Michigan and is looking for a job in supply chain. He said, hey, we have

00:20:11 **Allison Grealis**

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a job board. So I mean, there are endless opportunities. And as well, these are high paying jobs. I mean, we are often sharing statistics on the cost of a four year degree and the loans that you might end a four year career with and the alternative of going to a manufacturing opportunity and often having again the majority of manufacturers who invest in your development. They're often investing in you to get degrees, certifications, you're learning on the job. We also work with formal apprenticeship programs. So many opportunities. So I would highly encourage women and men who are looking for maybe a different pathway but an equally rewarding pathway to check out

00:20:44 **Katherine Lehtinen**

the skilled trades. Awesome. Well I really appreciate your time today Alison. It's been great to get to know you and learn a little bit about women in manufacturing and we will definitely make sure that we post information if people want to connect, that they can learn more.

00:20:58 **Doug Buchan**

It was a good episode, Katherine.

00:21:00 **Katherine Lehtinen**

I know. When you're speechless, I know, it's so overwhelmed with all the information, which is amazing. So thank you very much. Appreciate your time today. Thanks for having me.