

How to Inspire Sustainability Throughout a Large Construction Company with LEED Fellow Theresa Lehman

Introduction ([00:02](#)):

Welcome to Green Building Matters. The podcast that matters for green building professionals learn insight in green buildings as we interview today's experts in LEED and WELL. We'll learn from their career paths, war stories and all things green because green building matters. And now our host and yes, he has every LEED and WELL credential. Here's Charlie Cichetti.

Charlie ([00:33](#)):

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Charlie ([01:01](#)):

Hi, everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the green building matters podcast. I really appreciate you listening every single week where I get to interview green building professionals. Today I've got Theresa Lehman. She is a LEED fellow, WELL AP, and has a lot of credentials after her name. She's the director of sustainable services at Miron Construction in Wisconsin, how are you doing today?

Theresa ([01:22](#)):

Good morning, Charlie. I am doing well. Thank you for asking and I really appreciate the time and you inviting me to be a part of your podcast.

Charlie ([01:33](#)):

What I've learned about Miron . I know we've done some education work together. You've got a lot of LEED professionals for example, but I want to talk about you and your journey because there's some listening right now that are just now getting into this movement. There's some others that

maybe have been doing it awhile, but take us back. Where'd you grow up and where'd you go to school?

Theresa ([01:56](#)):

I grew up in a small town in Northeast Wisconsin called Clintonville, and it's a very small 4,000 person conservative community. I grew up farming with my parents and obviously between farming and my parents both also working full-time they installed a very strong work ethic in me, again, growing up in a small conservative town, the focus was always not to be wasteful with anything. After I graduated from high school there, I went to college at Milwaukee School of Engineering and earned a bachelor of science in construction management. After working, or I guess living down in Milwaukee, I moved back to Northeast Wisconsin to be around my family. I've worked here ever since.

Charlie ([02:51](#)):

The farming and the resourcefulness Tell us about making that decision for your undergrad engineering with a focus in construction. Were you around that also growing up? Did you know buildings, engineering systems and ultimately construction?

Theresa ([03:04](#)):

I did. In full disclosure, my parents built a house when I was four years old and my mom works nights and my dad worked days. So they would swap us off before my mom went to work and we would be with my dad building a house all night. I think construction was just something that fascinated me growing up and to keep a four year old busy, my dad just gave me nails and a hammer and let me do what I wanted to do. All throughout, I guess, junior high and high school, I took the engineering classes and the construction classes rather than the home-ec classes. I know that's a little non-traditional, but it's just, I think part of my DNA and I've always loved designing construction. Obviously, I'm very passionate about making a difference and I know that the built environment makes a huge difference on the health and wellbeing of people.

Charlie ([03:57](#)):

Absolutely. What a great early apprenticeship there. Did anyone else have some influence? Clearly your parents they're building that home, but has anyone else opened some doors for you along the way? Anyone you might call a mentor or just someone you looked up to as you were building your career?

Theresa ([04:13](#)):

I have had the fortunate opportunity of being around some really incredible design and construction professionals my whole life. Honestly, I just happened to be in the right place at the right time in my career. As I was going to school at MSU, one of the first graduating classes of their construction management program. I focused all my research papers on waste in the construction industry, just because everywhere I looked, I just saw opportunities for improvement. Back when I was in college, back in the day, the US Green Building Council had just formed and Rick Fedrizzi was the CEO and founder of the US Green Building Council. He's a dear friend of mine to this day and he just profoundly impacted my life. I went to one of the very first Green Builds way back and had the opportunity to listen to him speak and talk about a future where construction could be sustainable. Where there didn't have to be landfills of construction waste everywhere.

Theresa ([05:25](#)):

I was just really inspired. Again, I just had the right opportunities in the right places. I worked for a construction company in Wisconsin, whose CEO wanted to build a new regional office and asked me about what green building rating systems were out there and if I would recommend one. LEED had been newly formed, and I said, Ali, I think this is going to be the one that's going to take off in the US and fortunately I was right. I had done that project and then that project sparked the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to build their very first state of Wisconsin's LEED building. I worked with them and a woman by the name Jean Romback-Bartels who's now a very well respected person within the DNR. Her and I just hit it off really well.

Theresa ([06:23](#)):

We created this amazing building and that kind of was the spark or the start in Wisconsin. Aldo Leopold Legacy Center was the very first LEED project

that was carbon positive. Joel Krieger with The Kubala Washatko Architects became a really good mentor of mine. I got to meet Nina Leopold Bradley, who was Aldo Leopold's daughter. She was just a very great inspiration, too. I've just been in the right places at the right time with the right team members and the right clients. It's just been an amazing journey

Charlie ([07:04](#)):

Great folks and early influences there. You're right as LEED in the US GBC was even growing you were right there around that. Connect the dots and tell us how did you get into this role at Miron Construction to be focused on sustainability? Where you project manager for several years, and then you were like the green person, and then you were tapped for this role. Tell us about that.

Theresa ([07:27](#)):

Okay. I had my own consulting company back in 2007 and Miron was one of my clients. They had asked me to come in and help them create a sustainable program for them. They wanted to green their business practices, and they wanted to green their construction operations. They were embarking on a journey to recreate their brand. They were expanding their corporate office in Nina, and they wanted that to seek LEED certification. They wanted to take a leadership position in sustainability. I consulted with them for a couple months and then I was asked to come on full time and lead their sustainability program. At the same time, they asked me to also consult on what was the Time Warner Cable Building, which would have been the pilot program of LEED projects for Time Warner Cable, which is now Spectrum. Again, I was in the right place at the right time. I came on full time with Miron in 2008. In the almost 13 years that I've been here, they have grown their LEED, Fitwell and park smart project portfolio to 64 projects valued just shy of \$905 million. I think that they've made some pretty great strides and have done some amazing things within their construction and business practices as well.

Charlie ([09:05](#)):

I know you're getting a lot of that. Now with this role, do you present a lot of the different rating systems and options to clients? Give us a peek into those conversations or does it happen that a lot of your clients tend to be

environmentally focused? How much strong arming these days do you have to do to at least go for a rating system?

Theresa ([09:29](#)):

It really depends. My role at Miron is kind of tri-fold. I'm just going to start off with what our mission statement is. Our mission statement is to lead by example, to demonstrate the benefits of the triple bottom line, which is enhancing the health and well-being of people. Minimizing waste and obviously that goes with enhancing anything to do with making a positive difference in the environment. And of course contributing directly to the bottom line in a positive way. We do that through education, throughout our corporate culture. So actually practicing what we preach and offering practical construction solutions with the keyword being practical. We have seven offices throughout Wisconsin and Iowa with our corporate office being in Nina and all of our offices that we own and or lease for 10 years or greater are LEED certified.

Theresa ([10:27](#)):

So that gives us the opportunity to showcase our craftsmanship of construction, because that is what we do. We're able to demonstrate to our clients how we're able to integrate sustainable solutions into our facilities, as well as talk firsthand about the cost. The initial capital cost plus the life cycle cost of things. So that's kind of one focus, practicing what we preach. Obviously I'm responsible for sustainability being one of Miron's six key core values, and then focusing on making changes within our business practices and our construction operations so there's that piece of it. There's also the piece of understanding what our clients sustainable goals are and helping project teams achieve those goals and that can be anything from energy efficiency to helping find incentives, to offset the capital costs of the energy efficient equipment and systems, to helping our clients select strategies to increase the health and well-being of their people.

Theresa ([11:38](#)):

It could be that they want to pursue a third-party green building rating system, and they just don't know what that means. For example, I have had clients who wanted to pursue LEED initially because they wanted to reduce energy use and reduce water consumption and things like that. But they

also wanted to focus on their people first culture and people were the center of their goals. So, FIT Well or WELL certification would make them a better rating system for them. Educating them and explaining that, and then obviously using the (inaudible) requirements to also integrate those into the project so that the clients met all of their sustainable goals. I do all of that. I actually do the presentation to achieve those third-party green building ratings and certifications for our clients. Miron does have a team of over 150 LEED Prudential professionals on staff.

Theresa ([12:43](#)):

My job is to provide continuing educational opportunities for them and that means staying abreast of the latest and greatest third-party green building rating certifications and changes and technologies and materials that are on the market. I tend to become an educational resource, especially as a well and a WELL and a LEED faculty member. Our design partners and build partners are fully aware of that. I spend a lot of time educating them as well not just Miron people and from a community standpoint because giving back is one of Miron's. Other core drivers are spending a lot of time in colleges and universities, community colleges, high schools, helping to create sustainable knowledge programs for students and in general, as well as those that are pursuing interests in the design and construction industry.

Charlie ([13:47](#)):

I know you're a big fan of the credentials, the education programs tell us about few of the credentials you have. You even mentioned Park Smart, of course, even before we started our podcast today, Theresa, we talked a little bit about WELL and Fit WELL. Can you speak to how it's encouraged within your company if you want to get some letters after your name?

Theresa ([14:09](#)):

You do. I think having a credential is a significant thing for other industries or other organizations to have faith and trust that the people within your organization are well-educated. If anything, it gives the people with the credentials, the ability to have that conversation in general about sustainability. If they come to a subject that a client is very particularly interested in that they need a little bit more knowledge and they will definitely pull me into the conversation. I think having a strong team of that

many people demonstrates that our team is knowledgeable. It demonstrates Miron's commitment to sustainability, and quite frankly, in construction, there aren't that many opportunities for continuing education to stay up on the latest and greatest technologies and materials. Unless you have a credential, you don't have a need for that because you do spend the majority of your time doing education on safety, such as OSHA 10 and OSHA 30. And obviously safety has to be the number one priority in construction, but having a credential requires your people to pursue continuing education credits outside of safety.

Charlie ([15:36](#)):

I love it. Okay. Thank you for going there. Next let's look into the crystal ball, Theresa, what should we be reading up on now? What are you excited about that's coming around the corner in this green building and healthy building movement?

Theresa ([15:50](#)):

Well, I think we can look at current events and the political climate and that always is a good indicator of what's to come. If there is such a thing as a silver lining in COVID, it is the fact that health and wellness has come front and center to all organizations and it impacts everyone, not just a select few. I think that schools are understanding the importance of proper HVC systems with a focus on ventilation and filtration systems that can go on and on. I think in this next stimulus bill, you'll see a lot of money, as in billions of dollars for K through 12 schools and colleges and universities to upgrade their mechanical systems and that will be something really good. To kind of go on a tangent here, but when you look at what impacts human health, it's your sleep quality and quantity, your movement, quality and quantity.

Theresa ([16:56](#)):

It's what you eat, what you drink and what you breathe. When you look at what you built, the last three years, you breathe 26 pounds of air. You drink four pounds of liquid and you eat two pounds of food a day. When you spend 90 plus percent of your time indoors, the indoor air quality and the built environment has a significant impact on human health. I am really happy to see that there is going to be a new focus on proper ventilation and filtration systems. I think you're going to see human health and wellness be

the forefront, the center of attention, especially as the price of energy is low. You're going to see a lot of buildings renovated, and you're going to see buildings expand because you can't have that four by four cube anymore and pack a million people into a space, a small space.

Theresa ([17:54](#)):

Anyway, I think you're going to see larger spaces. I do think you might see more people start to work from home, but for organizations that want to maintain relationships and culture, it's going to be critical that there's going to be a balance between that work from home and work in the work in the facility. I do think that you're going to see a lot of healthy building materials come to the surface. People are going to get and understand a little bit more how building materials impact human health from a respiratory standpoint. So there's a huge rise of allergies and asthma as people are spending more time indoors. You're going to see a focus on healthy building materials and then of course, you're gonna see a huge focus on renewable energy and carbon neutrality. I believe the new Biden administration is going to sign again, thankfully, with the Paris accord, you're going to see a federal push for renewable energy.

Theresa ([18:57](#)):

You're going to start to see states, for example, Wisconsin's governor has signed an executive order that Wisconsin will be carbon neutral by 2050. We're seeing local municipalities, such as Dane County in Eau Claire County and the city of Madison and the city of Eau Claire are all having those same carbon neutral 100% renewable energy by 2050 goals. And then of course, you're seeing the big fortune 500 companies, especially this last quarter have made huge investments in renewable energy and purchasing clean energy. I definitely think that is going to become one of the top industry sector,

Charlie ([19:40](#)):

Theresa I agree with all those and it's great to see that where you're at also in that region with the healthy building movement. I love the way you described it because green buildings, LEED buildings are saving energy, saving water. We're less of an impact on the environment, may reduce operating costs for the building owner operator, but healthy buildings and

the way you described it just got personal, it affects all of us. Those were all of these buildings. Let's talk a little more about you, a few rapid fire questions here, Theresa. What would you say is your specialty or gift?

Theresa ([20:12](#)):

My passion for sustainability and my strong desire to make a difference. Anything I do, I do 110% or I don't do it at all. When a client says, I want a healthy building for my students, and I want to make that building be a teaching tool so that they are educated and they understand the importance of healthy high-performing environments. Can you do that? I will 110% make that happen at the level of the students. So yeah, that's, my passion is making a difference.

Charlie ([20:46](#)):

Amazing, I can get a sense of that. Let's talk about bucket lists. While it's a little tough to travel to some exotic destinations right now, as we're recording this podcast Theresa. Is there some travel, some adventure, maybe you want to write a book, what's one or two things on your bucket list?

Theresa ([21:03](#)):

Well, personally, I want to travel. I want to see the world. I want to see the Maldives before they disappear, and I want to see the Alaskan glaciers before they disappear. I would love to travel Europe, the UK, Germany, and places that are super sustainable that I think we in the United States could learn a lesson or two from a professional list. I've been pretty fortunate that in my 20 year career I've been able to work on two dream projects as I would classify them. My all time favorite projects were the Aldo Leopold Legacy Center, which was incredibly cool to be a part of and the Lake Mill School District. I would really honestly love one more dream project in my career by that, I mean, having a client that has the faith to do something that's never been done before and have that opportunity to work with the amazing teams that I have had the opportunity to work with in the past to create one more dream project that is truly going to make a difference in the lives of a lot of people.

Charlie ([22:15](#)):

I'm glad you went to those projects because I usually do ask and I'll ask it now. Are there any really cool accomplishments that you're super proud of? Excited to hear about the travel that you do want to do and you will. Take us back just a little bit though. What are a couple other accomplishments? You mentioned a couple of amazing projects, anything else looking back you're just really proud of?

Theresa ([22:35](#)):

That's a good question. My most recent project that I've been pretty proud of is the Oshkosh Corporation Global Headquarters. That was the first project in Wisconsin to achieve a three-star Fitwell award level. And that was just a really exciting thing for me because the Oshkosh Corporation does a lot of great things. Their culture is centered on people. First, they live, breathe and die to make a difference as well and they do that through a lot of different avenues with companies that they own like Pierce Firetrucks, and they just do some really great things. I had never worked on a project where only a third of what I need to work on is actual bricks and sticks or designing construction. But the other two thirds was about facility management policies and procedures, and then HR policies and procedures.

Theresa ([23:38](#)):

Oftentimes in the world of design and construction it's like snapshots in time where you design and you build it and you walk away. Well, this time it was really understanding how they were going to operate, maintain that building and then what benefits they were going to offer their employees. When you really get to the understanding of how a building has to function to make the purpose of the building happen, and then how they're going to maintain it, you can just design and construct it better from the onset so that they can accomplish those goals. So that was probably my most recent accomplishment.

Charlie ([24:17](#)):

Oh, very excited. Let's talk books. Is there a book or two you'd recommend to the group?

Theresa ([24:24](#)):

I have read a couple of really great books. I'm just finishing the book *Becoming* by Michelle Obama. It really is a great biography. I'm always fascinated by people's stories and their experiences in life and that is what makes them who they are. And so that was a really great book. If anybody's out there that wants to do that, I would definitely recommend doing the live book where Mrs. Obama is talking because her voice is very soothing and you can just hear the passion and inflections in her voice. So that was a really cool book. The last sustainability book that I've read was called *Green Thing: how prophets can save the planet* by Rick Fedrizzi. Obviously you all know that I am a big fan of Rick, and it is a great practical book that talks about how buildings can be sustainable, how they can be practical in how being sustainable can positively impact the bottom line.

Theresa ([25:27](#)):

I think that there's just sometimes a perception out there that sustainability has to cost more. People don't know what they don't know. If you can have an open mind about that and you're willing to educate people, I think you'll get a lot farther in life. Another thing is I wish someone would have told me a lot sooner that life is all about relationships and it's about networking. I've told you a couple of stories here, I was always in the right place at the right time. I had created some amazing relationships in my career and I would not be where I am in my life. Especially not in my career unless I had been on project teams and my project team members have become my friends and I rely on them incredibly a lot. A project is not successful unless the entire team is successful.

Theresa ([26:26](#)):

I guess it goes back to the old saying, it's not what, it's who, so again just be a team player, make sure that you appreciate everybody equally on your teams always remain grounded and rooted no matter how you are. I guess I was once told that "a pat on the back or your shoulders, only two feet away from a kick in the pants or above your butt", you always have to remember to remain humble and kind. People don't know what they don't know and education is key. Engage, engage people who are the experts, get out there on LinkedIn and social media and start to build those relationships. Read books that are going to give you a different perspective on life but like I said,

Green Things is a great book, learn about people, learn about rating systems, just learn about case studies.

Theresa ([27:57](#)):

There are so many great organizations out there, like the US Green Building Council, like IWBI and WELL, or the center for active design with Fitwell and every single one of those ratings systems have amazing resources on them. They have case studies, they have free educational resources and especially when I look at my mentors, my mentors want the best for me and for the future of people and that's what I want for people, too. I guess reach out to anyone, reach out to me know I'm happy to pay it forward. So Charlie, thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

Charlie ([28:57](#)):

I just want to say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over one year. Me and the entire team are stoked and just so glad to continue to listen every Wednesday morning to a new interview with the green building professional here in this industry, or just some pro tips that we want to make sure that you are getting straight from us straight to you. Thank you for listening to this episode of the green building matters podcasts at gbes.com. Our mission is to advance the green building movement through best in class education and encouragement. Remember, you can go to gbes.com/podcast for any notes and links that we mentioned in today's episode. You can actually see the other episodes that have already been recorded with our amazing, yes. Please tell your friends about this podcast, tell your colleagues, and if you really enjoyed it, leave a positive review on iTunes. Thank you so much.