How Success Happened for Designer Eileen Fisher

On the most recent episode of the How Success Happens podcast, learn the key traits that helped turn Eileen Fisher into one of the most successful designers in the world.

In my many years of speaking to executives, founders and CEOs, I have always enjoyed learning how they built the businesses they did, the impetus for the choices they made and overall what makes them tick. I really love finding out what it was that made them successful. It’s why I enjoy hosting Entrepreneur’s How Success Happens podcast.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Eileen Fisher, the founder of EILEEN FISHER, Inc. this past week. I think we can all imagine the iconic EILEEN FISHER outfit – simple lines and clean design. What I found most intriguing was the series of intuitive decisions that Eileen made that resulted in the classic minimal design concept. With only $350, Eileen started her business in 1984 from the ground up – literally step-by-step – from a fifth-floor Tribeca walkup. It was there that Eileen conceived the early idea of a “clothing line as a system” where each shape worked with every other shape. A graphic and interior designer by trade, she was well-trained in the idea of timelessness. Just like in the interior world where one buys furniture for longevity, she had an idea that did just that for women’s clothing: buy timeless pieces that can transcend years and trends.
What was so interesting to me was that Eileen started with a creative vision in her mind. The idea of simple shapes that work together has been her north star ever since launch and it impacts every decision the company makes. What I find unique to Eileen is that much of her decision-making was intuitive and not based on a financial or business strategy. Her initial creative vision would end up dictating the company’s longer-term plans.

For someone who has built a 35+ year company, I entered into the conversation assuming Eileen was self-assured and confident. What I discovered throughout our conversation was that she is quite humble and grounded. She shared that she felt the need to create comfortable clothes because she is such an uncomfortable person, which I found fascinating. It is rare to find such a well-known leader express her genuine apprehension and self-doubt in many parts of building the business.

In addition to the idea of timeless clothing, she was also a vanguard when it comes to sustainability in the fashion industry. Eileen was a true pioneer in this area by hiring the head of social consciousness over 27 years ago – seeing the value of this integral work way ahead of the rest of the industry. The efforts in sustainability not only impacted the clothing – from the materials and fibers to the design process – but also helped build the company and share the unique culture that EILEEN FISHER is known for. Every employee is armed with the social consciousness goals and initiatives so that they can make informed decisions in the area that they oversee. These purpose-driven values are embedded from day one at the company.

We also spoke about how these last 8 months have impacted the state of the business and how she has stepped up as a leader in these difficult times. For example, one way the company has adapted is by utilizing a virtual showroom allowing for wholesale and specialty partners to experience the line and create their buys. Though challenging, this time has allowed Eileen to take a moment to pause and reevaluate what the future looks like for the brand.

Listen to Eileen’s interview here entm.ag/hsh