

The Art of Engineering with Denise McIntosh

Episode 015: Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm VP of Client Solutions at **JE Dunn**

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm has gone from being a college drop-out to a Vice President of Client Solutions in a major construction company. Her career has been full of unexpected turns, working with exceptionally generous mentors, and exceptionally difficult bosses. But her story really begins navigating a profoundly difficult childhood of abuse and abandonment. Bo shares stories of survival and offers lessons to young women entering the workforce. She has turned adversity into positive efforts with women who have been victims of abuse and sex trafficking.

Denise McIntosh: *Welcome to the art of engineering, where we speak with some of the top women in engineering and manufacturing about their process principles and personal stories. I'm Denise McIntosh, CEO of **Custom Powder Systems**, the containment company. Today, we have Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm, who is vice president of client solutions, life sciences at J E Dunn. So welcome Bo!*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *Well, good afternoon, Denise. And thank you so much for having me on. I really appreciate it.*

Denise McIntosh: *Well, I'd like to start because we've done several podcasts with women on the pharmaceutical side, the bio-sciences side, and I find what you do particularly interesting to introduce young women to the construction industry. So, tell me what you do with JE Dunn, kind of what does a day like?*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *So a day in the life of a client solutions person at JE Dunn. I'm trying to help JE Dunn launch into the life sciences sector of the construction business, right? So pre-construction and construction and what that really entails. It's about leveraging my network, my relationships, it's getting JE Dunn's name out in front of the industry and people I know in the pharmaceutical space and the biologic space that are looking to build new facilities that want somebody to come in and help them, you know, put together a pre-construction plan or an estimate of whatever it is that they want to build. And just really positioning our team accordingly. Right?*

So, you know, the company is an amazing company. It's been around since 1924. They operate out of 24 offices across the U S and they work in multiple markets and science and technology and advanced manufacturing are probably the two that are closest to what we're trying to do in this life sciences construction space, but I've spent the better part of my career...It's really interesting... I started off in construction side in 1985 and went kind of full circle, spent the time on the construction. And then I went back into the design side and

then I went to companies that were full engineer, procure construction management validation, right. And now on this side of my career, I'm back in the construction space only.

So it's really interesting that my career has just really taken a full circle and I don't have a technical background. I don't even have a college degree for that matter. And I don't advocate that that's the way to go, the path that I took, but I've certainly been able to come in and start in a typing pool in the federal government when I dropped out of college and then worked my way out of there in, through, you know, being an administrative secretary and executive assistant, you know, office manager into marketing and really, you know, took, I just had that talent and capability in the marketing side of things and how things visually look and presenting a message and developing those client relationships. Right. And so I worked my way up through the marketing ranks in to going into outside business development, client account management.

Denise McIntosh: *I just have to say this both because I pretty sure we've met person, but...*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: We have.

Denise McIntosh: *And we know we met on a zoom thing at an NISP event, but that the interesting thing, and that's one of the reasons I wanted to have you on is because even in our just short conversations, you have, you know, you just feel like somebody I've known forever, which is just, it's one of those talents, those innate abilities that allows you to be very good at what you do, the, the relationship building and the making connections and we don't need college degrees for that. Yeah. So go back to your beginning in construction, because what was it about construction that appealed?*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *I mean, you know, when I went to work in the federal government, you know, I dropped out of college. I took the civil service exam and I could really type like a crazy person and make very few mistakes. Right. So I leveraged that skill and my communication capability to do that. And I worked my way very quickly out of this typing pool, because I could communicate, I could think in a very critical way, right. Critical thinking skills are paramount. And regardless of whatever it is that we do and anything that you're doing even when you come back and think about you're putting together and typing a document for an executive, right. And it's like, you still have critical thinking skills, you know, that you have to apply to that.*

And then I bounced around a little bit and I was really trying to figure out where I wanted to go and, you know, all that.

And I just landed by sheer dumb luck. I went, I had blown out my knee, was in a full cast and saw this job with CRSS in Washington, DC because that's where I lived for about 15 years. And I went to the interview in a full cast and crutches and stuff. And I think that

honest to God, I think the only reason that, that Sal Vatali and Alan Shepard even hired me for the job as they felt, sorry for me, they're like, you know, any woman that comes in, you know, into an interview with a full cast on and crutches must be really desperate for a job.

And so they took the opportunity and the job was really to come in and be an executive assistant you know, working for them. And then the gentlemen, you know, Alan Shepard, you know, he's passed away, he was just really difficult to work for. He was a crazy person in many, many ways, but I learned so much from him and I learned things I would never, ever do. And I remember typing up the letter for him that pretty much sealed his fate at the company. And I told him that it was going to, and this was even after I softened it. And he's like, "oh no, no, it's not gonna be a problem." It was. And then I wasn't really sure what was going to happen to my job at that point. And then the regional leader, Bob Wyatt who was an amazing leader. I just, I thought the world of him. And he said, I, you know, we have an opening over here for secretary marketing assistant, right. To work for this South African Alan Levy. And I had worked in the office long enough to know that I knew who Alan Levy was. And I looked at Bob and I said, you, you do realize that, you know, Alan and I are like probably gasoline and matches, you know, and you're wanting to put us together.

And he said, "Bo, I just, I think it, you know, we really want you to stay in the company. We don't want you to leave." And this is an opportunity for you to take this position and be his admin, but also his marketing person. And he said, you know, I think you and Alan would be great together. And, you know, sure enough, you know, I'm like, well, I need a job. I have to pay my rent. I don't, I don't make a lot of money. I've got to pay my rent stuff. So I said, "oh, what the heck?" You know, let me, let me just go do that. And so I started working for this crazy South African who was about as chauvinistic as anybody you have ever met. He had always had men working in that marketing position for him. And we literally were like gasoline and matches. It would depend on the second, which one of us was the gas and which one of us was the match. Right. But you know, that relationship as much as it started off that, you know, butting heads and fierce and everything else, it turned into a 10 year working career relationship at three different companies working for him and be actually recruiting him into the last one and then a very long friendship that lasted up until April of this year when he passed away.

Denise McIntosh: Oh, wow.

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *And I mean, so he was a perfectionist to the nth degree which I too was like that we were both very, you know, very focused on, "if you can't put together a good document to give to a client, how can you convince them that you can actually build something for them," you know? And that was sort of our mindset, right. And it's always been that just perfectionist drive. And I learned so much from him and he was just one of my greatest friends. You know, he turned out to be one of my greatest bosses of all time. I learned many, many things from him. I learned things that I would never do. I learned things from him. I could never get by with as a woman. Right.*

But you know, he was always a great mentor. He was there when I got married. He was there when my son was born, you know, so he just became, he and his family both became such an incredible and integral part of my life. Right. He was almost like the father I never had. Right. Because I grew up, I grew up in Deliverance and foster homes and just crazy. Right. Just being everybody's victim to going to the opposite direction. Right. So it was just a relationship that was amazing. And, you know, Sal Vatali was the one, you know, he was one of the key people that brought me in and he was always a great mentor and supporter and friend. And then I kind of went up, I grew up and kind of went off and set my own pace. Right. And grew my own wings. And I've, I've had the benefit of having some horrible bosses that really took advantage of me and abused me.

And then I've had some amazing, incredible people like Alan Levy, Sal Vatali, Jerry Galorn, and you know, Pat Angeleno, Michael Avon. I mean, just, you know, just when I go and I look and just think about, you know, the things of the people, you know, the men that have actually been there, you know, and have been supporters of my career, even when, you know, sometimes I'm locking heads with them. Right. Cause they just knew that there was something, there was something there. But you know, like it's done and then I've had the other side of that flip point where it's been awful, it's just been awful and it should never have happened.

Denise McIntosh: *So go back to what you mentioned about your childhood, because this Bo didn't start here. You've had to have the tough-minded get through this anyway from early.*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *Yeah. I mean, it was you know, and I, when I say I grew up in West Virginia and, you know, dysfunction was, you know, I was born into welfare and dysfunction and, you know just abuse and violence and, you know, just craziness. And so I would say that, you know I didn't really know it at the time, but there was always this man that was kind of in my life. Right. Or we would live on his property or something. And then years later I learned that he was actually my bio dad because I surely didn't look like anybody else in my family. And he was always trying to protect me, you know, here and there. And, you know, he had already had a family of like 12 children that were grown up adults and some grandchildren and things like that. And I was just the product of this affair or one-night stand kind of thing that happened. I became lucky number 13. So spring forward, one of my most favorite numbers ever is lucky number 13, because I was a bastard child, lucky number 13.*

So this man, I mean, he was, you know, his wife had passed away and died from breast cancer and things like that. And so, you know, he was on his own at that stage. And, you know, he, you know, he would, he was coming in and out of my life, right. To always try and protect me, we'd go to court and he would try to, you know, get me out to help me. And then I'd always end up getting sent back. And then the violence and the abuse, you know, all forms of abuse.

I mean, it's like everybody. Mother's boyfriend, grandparents, you know, father, I mean, just everybody, you know, it was just, it was a horrible way for a child to have to grow up. But I went into a foster home. I got removed. Finally. I had just turned 14. I was in the hospital and that was like the last time my father came in and beat me up in the hospital. And then they sent him off, my mother ran off with her next whatever fling. And so I just refused at that point, you know, I went into foster home. There was this pastor, Eddie Callahan, that had come into the hospital to, you know, I guess the front desk had sent him back because I was all alone. Like there I was in the hospital, but there was nowhere for me to go.

And you know, I was there, I mean, I had a kidney problem, so I was in there for that originally. And then when I got beat up, I was in for a little bit longer for other things, but, you know, he came in and sat down and talked to me and, you know, he said, I want to try and help you. And you know, so I went, when I was released from the hospital, I got released to him and his wife and they had two young kids and stuff. And so I couldn't stay with them long-term so they were like, you know, I became a ward of the state and it was, I was going to a couple of different foster homes. And then I ended up with this family that lived in his, you know, that went to his church and, you know, that, that had had some challenges and stuff as well, but I still had to continue to go back to visit my quote-unquote family.

And then things would happen. And, you know, even then, and like, nobody was protecting me. I mean, there was just nobody, like, there was nobody there that was my, my advocate or ally. And even my bio dad, you know, wasn't in my picture at that point. You know, so it was, it was just one of those things I'm living with this family and, you know, you spring forward. So I was 14, I lived with them and then I went to live in, you know, another foster home for a bit. Then I went back and it was just a lot of uncertainty. And I, fortunately, I at least had some good DNA, I guess, in my body. And I had some good sense you know, some good sense and I don't know where it came from, but I had some good sense, which I have to say.

It probably came from my bio dad, but you know, it was just one of those things that I almost got kicked out. I mean, I was one of those kids that ... I was everybody's friend, right. I didn't never like date anybody. I was just everybody's friend. I hung out with the jocks, I hung out with the preps, hung out with the druggies. I hung out with, you know, everybody, right. I just had all these little different groups that I could come and go in and out of, but never connected to anybody. And my senior year, I was going through a lot of distress at the home that I was living in. And I almost got kicked out of my senior year of high school because I was just getting taunted a lot.

It was just going through a lot of things. And the assistant principal of the high school came to my rescue and said, "Hey, you know, why don't you consider coming and staying with us?" And he was working with the social workers and everything else, and you know, why don't you consider coming? And it really wasn't. I mean, you know, I didn't have great

relationships with men. I just didn't trust men. I didn't feel comfortable with men and stuff like that. And, you know, he was a very huggy, they were a very huggy kind of family. And I was just kinda not, not the huggy kind of person, but I ended up going and living with them in my senior year. And then he kept me from getting kicked out, which if I had gotten kicked out, my story might be a very different story who knows.

And then they insisted that I went off to college and I went on a work study and I couldn't rub two nickels together. And then that's when I dropped out, but they were, you know, the, you know, Gary Wilson, who was the assistant principal, I mean, he's deceased now. And then that whole family blew up too. I mean, they adopted me at the age of 26 because I didn't want my quote unquote family to ever have claim to my children or anything ever in my life. And you know, if you don't sever those ties entirely, that can certainly happen.

Denise McIntosh: *Wow. I did not know that.*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *So I, they adopted me at the age of 26 and then even that family kind of fell apart too. So it's you know, so now it's my family and you know, my husband and I've been together for 35 years you know, two adult children now. So it's pretty awesome.*

Denise McIntosh: *Oh, look at you now both. Thank you so much for sharing that, that, that really has, I mean, you've, you've touched my heart.*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *It's about survival, right? I mean, I learned I was a survivalist. I learned survival skills very early, and I was a rock climber, a hang glider, a jump off cliff person, you know, very risk-oriented, but, you know, no fear, no fears, no fear.*

Denise McIntosh: *Wow. I mean, in spite of all that, what a valuable thing to learn early.*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *Yeah. But no fears and no attachments and just learning how to survive.*

Denise McIntosh: *Well, once again, thank you for sharing that, because one of the things that...it's been my intention with these podcasts is to share stories that will allow young women to understand how many opportunities there are in spite of where we begin in spite of our experiences. Yes. In spite of all of that, and look at Bo now. You're an inspiration.*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *Here I am. And that's like when I meet young women who are in particularly challenging situations. I mean, I'm a board member of the Women's Center of Wake county. And when I walked through and did the tour of that facility, it's for women who are homeless, who've been sex trafficked, they've been violated, they've been abused. I mean, they don't trust men. There was something that was very, that it spoke to me right when I turned a corner and I saw suitcases lining the hallway of the women's center when I was doing the tour to see if I wanted to be on the board or if they would even have me on the board for that matter. And that really resonated with me is that I really, it probably wasn't too far from that at some point in my life.*

I mean, I had to worry about, was I going to get fed? Was I going to be clothed? Was I going to be alive? You know, who was going to be my next violator? You know, what, what, what was going to happen? Right. You know, how I couldn't defend myself. And I think looking at that, when I walked through and I saw all these suitcases of what these women had been reduced to that spoke to me in volumes, I'm like, this is a place that I need to be on the board. Right?

Denise McIntosh: *Well, how fortunate they are to have you, right?*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *It's really to get those contributions and donations and use our network and everything to leverage, to support these women that this women's center is supporting every day, day in and day out every hour. Right. I think ultimately with the goal, we'd love to be able to have to build some housing so we could support more because they are homeless.*

Denise McIntosh: *Well, you have the true, authentic story. So what's next for Bo and what do you do for fun?*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *What do I do for fun? Well, I used to jump out of perfectly good airplanes and hang glide and mountain climb and play volleyball and all of those things. And what I like to do for fun now is with bilateral knee replacements and a hip replacement, I don't do those kinds of things anymore. Cause I want these, these joints.*

So I'm now the "Bo-onic Woman" and I want these joints to last me a long time. And now it's like, I really enjoy spending time with my family, wherever we can spend that, whether it's in Hawaii or Disney or, you know, a cruise, whatever. Right. You know, in the mountains, you know, wherever it is, right. Even if it's just home playing games, when everyone comes over for dinner or something like that ...I really, really enjoy spending time with my family. And I'm glad that my family and my kids have been able to grow up in a very different, a very different environment from how I grew up. And a big part of that is really thanks to my husband because he's an incredible partner and, and just a great my best friend.

Denise McIntosh: *What advice would you give to a young woman? I mean, part of the other intent of this is to be able to expose those young women who maybe don't have maybe are coming from the same type of background. I just think whatever we can do to help close the skills gap and the wage gap for women is really important. So what advice could you give, would you give?*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *I would say that, you know, for young women, you know, I think one of the things that I even was going through this with a young professional recently, and one of the things that I've noticed this, I've noticed this in my career is, you know, somebody comes to you and they give you what they, what they're looking for, and this is what they*

want in the job and, you know, whatever it is and everything. And I even did this with my daughter, right. When my daughter, who's 26, Jordan was looking at a job. And I, you know, I just say you know men never say no, right? Men never say, "I can't do this" Men don't say that "I can do this, this and this, but I don't have this." Right? I think that sometimes that's really kind of part of the problem.

Cause when I was speaking with this other young professional woman who came to me for some advice and stuff like that, and we were talking about compensation and same thing I told Jordan, my daughter was, you don't have to accept what they put out to you. And that I think is one of the things a lot of times, and I didn't learn this and I didn't have somebody that, gave me that, that coaching or whatever alongside of them to go back and counter right? Or to go back and say what you want. Right? Because I can tell you that there's wage disparity, even where I am now. Even at my level, right? There's just there's wage disparity. And you know, there are things that I do. We, you know, I can have the same job as the man. And I can tell you that the things that he does and what I do are very different. They're the same jobs. Just very different.

Denise McIntosh: *But I get you that he's probably making more money.*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *Than I am. You know, and that's happened throughout my career. But I think as I've gotten older, I've also learned to ask right, go back and ask if somebody really wants you to be on their team. You have to go back and counter and ask. Just because they throw out an offer to you, doesn't mean that you have to accept that offer when it comes to you and I, and that's what I would say to young women is negotiate, right. Learn to negotiate, learn to get those negotiation skills, reach out to your peer group and talk to people before you sign on that dotted line. Because once you get into a company and you stay there for a long time, you're going to be far behind the salary curve.*

Denise McIntosh: *Right. If you don't start where it's equitable... I just had a really, I think you know, her Beth Brock...*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *Oh yes. She's wonderful. I love her.*

Denise McIntosh: *She's starting a new job, July the sixth. And she and I spoke over the weekend about her whole negotiation of what she's been able to put together for this new opportunity. And I just had to say to her "Beth, I'm so proud of you"*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *Oh gosh. That's awesome. I'm so, oh, that she's amazing. She's phenomenal.*

Denise McIntosh: *So she'll be back in pharmaceutical. We'll have her back. Well Bo. Thank you. Thank you so much.*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *Denise, it's just been such a pleasure...just such a pleasure speaking with you. And I would always say to young women you know, don't ever accept less than what you think you deserve. Right. And, you know, use your network, right. Use your relationships, reach out to people. Know that there are people that are there that want to advocate for you to help you. And you know, just people were there, right. They are going to be there to help you and just always know whatever it is that you're doing. You want to do the best job that you possibly can at the job that you're doing so that it always builds on something else for your future.*

Denise McIntosh: *Yes. Everyone is a launching pad.*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *Yes, indeed. Yes.*

Denise McIntosh: *And the asking for help. That, that is so to me, so critical...*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *It really is. And I think that that's not always something you know, if I go back and I think about, you know, even go back and look at my own story, right. It was like, you know, when do you go talk to people? When do you ask them, you know, when do you ask for help? Or how do you ask for help? And I think sometimes we, as women, we look at the whole asking for help as a weakness. Right. You know, if we have to ask for help, it's because we don't have the answers and I can tell you, you're never, I never always have the answers. Right. I don't have all the answers, but I have a network where I can reach out to people and I can help get those answers, or I can at least have a conversation and have somebody give me a different perspective, right. To listen to, because I get accused a lot of being very intense when I'm working on something and I am, I am intense. Right. But that intensity has been a drive, right. That's been a driver to, you know, help me get where I've gotten to. But then it's also looking around is that those relationships have also helped me get to where I'm at as well.*

Denise McIntosh: *Bo, thank you so much for joining us today and sharing your story. It's powerful.*

Bo Crouse-Feuerhelm: *Well, Denise, thank you. It was such a pleasure, you know, reconnecting with you again. And I certainly look forward to the next time.*

Denise McIntosh: Thank you again for joining us on the Art of Engineering. I'd love it if you would share this episode with others in our industry and encourage them to subscribe wherever they get podcasts. In the meantime, we'd appreciate your five star review. I would love to hear any comments or suggestions until next time. I'm Denise McIntosh from Custom Powder Systems online at [custom-powder.com](https://www.custom-powder.com).