

AWARD FOR DISTINGUISHED CITIZENSHIP

WILLIE A. DEESE

Willie Deese's career in manufacturing started when he was just 16 years old, but he'll tell you he's been working since he was six.

Deese, one of nine children, grew up on a farm in rural North Carolina. "We were, I guess you would have to say by today's standards and the standards then, poor. But poor didn't mean destitute, because our parents instilled in us faith, the value of family, and hard work," he reflects.

Deese says being poor wasn't something his family spent a lot of time thinking about. "My parents always had us looking forward, dreaming, and believing that tomorrow was going to be better than today," Deese says.

At 16, Deese started working at textile manufacturer, Cannon Mills. That's where he first developed an interest in manufacturing. A few years later, while a junior at North Carolina A&T, Deese had the opportunity to take a second step in his career in manufacturing with an internship at Digital Equipment Corporation.

"It was a computer manufacturing facility and I fell in love with it," Deese says. Thirteen years later, he was running that plant.

It was during his time at Digital Equipment that Deese was first identified as a strong leader. "It was there that I learned the value of inclusive leadership and how to take advantage of the knowledge and skill sets of everyone around you to make the team stronger and to make you stronger as an individual and as a leader," Deese says while noting that his time at Digital Equipment shaped what was to come for the next 30 years of his career.



**"I LEARNED THE
VALUE OF INCLUSIVE
LEADERSHIP AND
HOW TO TAKE
ADVANTAGE OF
THE KNOWLEDGE
AND SKILL SETS OF
EVERYONE AROUND
YOU TO MAKE THE
TEAM STRONGER"**

Deese eventually made his way to biopharmaceutical manufacturer GlaxoSmithKline and later Merck where he ultimately served as President of Merck Manufacturing for 12 years. During his time at Merck, Deese went, overnight, from managing 28 to 98 plants around the world, following a merger. Then, over the course of less than five years, the two manufacturing companies integrated while going from 98 to 42 plants and increasing output by 50 percent. What made the merger particularly challenging was that Merck was required to reregister every single product in every country where the manufacturing origin was consolidated to another country, all while continuing to provide critical medicines to patients in a timely and seamless manner.

Passionate about fostering an inclusive and diverse workplace, Deese is deeply committed to creating environments that welcome people from various backgrounds and ethnic groups. “If you can create an environment that is inclusive, you end up with a more productive organization. Now, it probably takes a little more time to create it, but that investment pays off with significant dividends over time. You end up with a more productive workforce, you’ll probably end up with less turnover, and you’ll end up with people able to achieve not only the company’s objectives, but their objectives, too, a true win-win” says Deese.

“IF YOU CAN CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT IS INCLUSIVE, YOU END UP WITH A MORE PRODUCTIVE ORGANIZATION. YOU END UP WITH A MORE PRODUCTIVE WORKFORCE AND YOU’LL END UP WITH PEOPLE ABLE TO ACHIEVE NOT ONLY THE COMPANY’S OBJECTIVES, BUT THEIR OBJECTIVES, TOO, A TRUE WIN-WIN.”

Deese is quick to credit the many mentors who encouraged him along the way, noting that they never requested anything in return but instead asked that he “pay it forward.”

Deese has done just that.

Over the last 20 years, Deese and his wife have provided full or partial scholarships to over 300 students and mentored countless others at North Carolina A&T. Just as Deese was taught, he says the students don’t owe him anything, but they do owe doing it for someone else when they are able. In 2020, North Carolina A&T State University named its College of Business and Economics after Deese.

Deese’s commitment to Historically Black Colleges and Universities extends far beyond N.C. A&T. He now serves on President Biden’s HBCU Advisory Board.

“I believe HBCUs are national treasures. They’re worth preserving and ensuring that they go on in perpetuity. And no question about the fact that the

African American community is a beneficiary, but the community at large is a beneficiary,” says Deese.

He, along with the other members of the President’s Advisory Council, are working to ensure that the nation’s HBCUs not only remain strong but grow and thrive, as well.

Deese is certainly “paying it forward.”