

Sustainability Strategist and People First Leader - Devon Bertram | Transcript

Introduction ([00:01](#)):

Welcome to Green Building Matters, the original and most popular podcast focused on the green building movement. Your host is Charlie Cichetti, one of the most credentialed experts in the green building industry, and one of the few to be honored as a LEED fellow. Each week Charlie welcomes a green building professional from around the globe to share their war stories, career advice, and unique insight into how sustainability is shaping the built environment. So settle in, grab a fresh cup of coffee and get ready to find out why green building matters.

Charlie ([00:34](#)):

Hey everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast, where I get to interview someone once a week that's been in the green building movement sometimes for a little while, and I've known Deb for a long time and I can't wait to hear her story. I don't know if she's been back in Colorado over the last couple years and just one of the originals when it comes to this movement. Dev and how are you doing today?

Devon ([00:55](#)): I'm doing great. Thanks Charlie. So glad to be here. Thanks for having me.

Charlie ([00:59](#)):

We've known each other for a while and I can't wait to get the present day. I know you're VP of Sustainability consulting at Stoke, but there's a lot that's probably happened before that. Take us back and tell us about those roots. Where'd you grow up and go to School?

Devon ([01:13](#)):

If I could just pause, I wanted to ask if today is your birthday. It kind of gives some history. I grew up on the East Coast in Connecticut and spent sort of the first half of my life on the East coast. I went to college at Middlebury College, a small liberal arts school in Vermont and majored in environmental studies with a literature focus there. I took a semester off during college, so I actually delayed my graduation by a summer and did Middlebury Spanish Language school under their campus there. Which was remarkable and beautiful. A few things beat a summer in Vermont and after college, interestingly enough, I was avoiding diving into the real world a little bit and had learned about a program where you can get a work visa for a year in certain countries and found out New Zealand was one of those. Devon ([01:58](#)):

I went with my twin sister and spent a year in New Zealand where I had some of the best experiences and memories of my life. Actually one of my favorite jobs there, which was working on an apple orchard picking apples from sunrise to sunset. I had about seven or eight apples a day and I stayed healthy and had a great time. In terms of my career start, I came back to the States and started in the environmental world. When I graduated from college, I knew I wanted to venture that way, but I didn't have quite a clear vision of what that was gonna look like. After many job applications and then pursuits landed at a nonprofit in New York called Earth Pledge and there were a number of different initiatives that organization focused on. My particular focus was on green roofs and affordable housing. I didn't have much background in green roofs or buildings for that matter, but it was an entry level position focused on research and providing some consulting on some projects in the city and actually throughout the states. But this was really my first land in the green building world and exposed me to what a big world and movement it was.

Charlie ([03:11](#)):

So that's how you got into buildings, but just probably that time in the Green Mountains of Vermont and time in New Zealand. Probably just more sustainability minded. You immersed yourself in it. When did you really

start not just getting into green buildings, you're answering that with New York City and green rooms, but just sustainability, it sounds like it's been around you for a while.

Devon ([03:33](#)):

I can't remember a distinct moment in time where it sort of clicked. I don't know if it was growing. Despite Connecticut and where I was in Fairfield, a bit of a suburb, I grew up with an appreciation for the natural world and experiences, even just playing outside and building sports with my siblings camping and backpacking. I really had a relationship of awe and wonder with it and I realized, okay, we need to take care of it. There's this interconnection among us all. Limited resources and really to be mindful about how our actions impact everything.

Charlie ([04:09](#)):

Eventually made your way to Colorado, so maybe even New York, Colorado, talk about that part of your career.

Devon ([04:17](#)):

After the Green Roof stint, I actually joined a small consulting firm, YnG, which I know you're familiar with in a small sustainability world. I know Josh Roff was on your podcast. I joined YnG at their New York office and was there for a number of years and that was really kind of my dive into LEED. My first LEED project was a SAP headquarters going for LEED Platinum and also had the opportunity to get exposed to LEED volume or LEED portfolio pretty early on there. It was a buzzing time for LEED and green building and really also like a learn by fire, as mentioned, I didn't have too much background on it, but I think we were all just figuring it out by learning and diving in. It was a fast-paced environment wearing a lot of different hats, but a lot of learning and with great people. So that was in New York for a few years. I had two sisters that had made their way out to Colorado, on their own pursuit, but YnG had an office in Colorado and they were like, Dev, what are you doing in New York? I spent a summer in

Colorado and then that quickly won me over. So I sort of had a trial period in Colorado in Boulder and then that won me over. A few months later made the move full-time to Boulder and continued with YNG for a number of years and joined their offices here and was there for about seven years, but had a little bit of an itch to I don't know, I think to expand my perspective of sustain and broaden it and the application of sustainability and really deepen my business acumen skills. I'd heard about Presidio, which is a master's program in an MBA and MPA program in San Francisco. And so kind of went part-time at Y G and pursued my MBA Presidio in San Francisco.

Charlie ([06:05](#)):

Good for you. That's fantastic. That took you to California and then you've been there for a while. Maybe this is a good time to talk about mentors. I'd love to ask, did you have anyone you looked up to along the way that opened a door for you? Any mentors along the way?

Devon ([06:32](#)):

Yeah, sure. In one regard, so many and some I know directly and some I don't. I had a professor in college, Don Elder. He was my environmental literature professor and he was just so humble and caring and believed in me and really opened my eyes to love of environmental literature and a way of seeing the world that I hadn't been exposed to before. I'd also say Lauren Garma from Wire G and Josh, the two of them running this business, kind of jumping into the sustainability consulting realm, both relatively young at the time for doing it. And it was just wonderful to be a part of that. Janine Beez as well who introduced me to Biomimicry and had the privilege of sitting with her at a conference and then I'm doing a workshop with her in Montana and it was a bit of a fangirl moment. Some are longer term relationships and others are just key individuals in the field that have just been an inspiration throughout.

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

I recognize some of those names. That's really fantastic. Connect the Dots a little more so then you've got this postgraduate work, you've really

sharpened the business skills and then kinda get back on the sustainability consulting side.

Devon ([07:41](#)):

I went to Presidio, I also maybe had in the back of my head to move beyond the built environment. It's interesting enough sometimes to reflect back on that. But at Presidio I did meet my now colleague Burke Pemberton and learned about Stoke, which at the time was environmental building strategies or EBS. Burke and I became close friends and then realized, feels a little same but different and really intrigued me because of its different organizational structure focused on self-management, autonomy, mastery and purpose, and also working with some really incredible clients with big visions and ambitious goals. it kind of made me pause and think, this actually feels like a pretty exciting place to be.

Charlie ([08:26](#)):

That's fantastic. Thank you for connecting those dots. You're back in Colorado, right?

Devon ([08:32](#)):

Covid Reflections got me back here. And interesting enough, when I moved to San Francisco in 2015 to join Stoke, the idea was that maybe I would be there for a year or so and then moved back to Colorado to help open up the office and I ended up staying there for about five years in the Colorado office, grew with others and now is actually our fastest growing office. We have about 25, 5 people or so in the Denver area, which is exciting.

Charlie ([08:59](#)): That's amazing. Congratulations. One more look back and then we'll get to the present day, but it's a question I love to give permission to my podcast is, what's kinda on the highlight reel? What are some of your proudest achievements?

Devon ([09:12](#)):

Thinking both personally and professionally. One thing I didn't mention about the past and personally, after spending about three weeks in Santiago Chile with a grad school project, I just fell in love with the city and decided to move there after grad school. I didn't join Stoke directly, I had a little hiatus down there, it sort of demonstrates to me taking a path unknown, a little uncertain, but responding to a desire for change and challenge. I've always wanted to live in another country and I hadn't done that. And to do that again also still exists. I look forward to that happening again when and where we'll see. I think sort of taking those risks or doing something different, is just not always the easiest decision, but usually it's very rewarding.

Charlie ([09:57](#)): Sounds like you had a great time there. Anything else stand out? The achievements side?

Devon ([10:03](#)):

Certainly stepping into the role of a VP of sustainability consulting with Stoke about two years ago, it's really been a wonderful combination of supporting team members and building client relations and challenging project work as well as being part of mapping stokes direction. It's been a wonderful opportunity to kind of have a foot inward and externally helping our culture align and stay true as we grow and also tackle some pretty challenging issues that we're dealing with they might know you're dealing with on a daily basis.

Charlie ([10:37](#)):

I'd love to ask about some projects, I'm sure even confidential and you can't pick just one. As you look back, even your time at Y R G or now Stok, I know you're doing even more corporate initiatives, not just buildings, but other couple cool projects that really stand out over your career.

Devon ([10:56](#)):

What really was a pivotal project and I mentioned earlier was the LEED for volume or LEED portfolio program that we worked on. I worked on with Citibank and a few other clients, just shifted my focus and interest and I guess I'd say sort of specialty on impact scale and portfolio wide efforts. And that LEED volume just really helps to identify a standard process that includes education and quality control and a standard and how you roll that out across a portfolio rather than just on a single building effort. How do you do that and really integrate it into how a company works? And I didn't mention earlier, but we recently offered or released the sustainable real Estate Program handbook, which I offered with Stoke about a year ago. And it really kind of demonstrates how to do this and is dedicated to accelerating the adoption of sustainable and equitable real estate solutions by outlining these key steps that were really kind of forming in my brain during that first project with Citibank.

Charlie ([12:01](#)):

I can tell you're very proud of that and here's that additional roadmap. So much work to do even on greening of existing buildings too and I know you've got a lot of experience. For those that don't know, tell us more about Stok , about your role and what keeps you busy day to day.

Devon ([12:18](#)):

Stok is a real estate sustainability services firm. Our headquarters is in San Francisco. Given the last two years or three years with Covid, we've got our team members across the country and some even internationally. We've grown to about 85 individuals but are really focused on helping owners and occupiers invest in their real estate wisely. We've got four core teams, our sustainability consulting team, which I head up our real estate and workplace solutions team, our engineering team and our commissioning team. Our goal is really to provide integrated solutions for our clients. And so my role focuses on working with our clients and partners and identifying

what challenges they're trying to resolve or solve and what, how to prioritize. That's certainly something that people are juggling with on the daily And then identifying the right SMEs to help push those solutions.

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

I know you're plenty busy and growing the team also in Denver. We've had the pandemic hopefully in the rear view now there's healthy buildings, of course there's decarbonization and ESG. How do you navigate it all? Is that working?

Devon ([13:27](#)):

It's a great question and it's I think, let's see, I, one thing is just to start and do something I think that we can get caught up in sort of analysis paralysis and it does feel like we're shifting a little bit from or hopefully from goal setting to actually operationalizing those goals and putting those into action. And that's something where I see us really trying to focus as well and our clients looking for our support with.

Charlie ([13:53](#)):

I see you curve ball there, but you had a great nugget. That was wonderful. There's plenty so we can all be moving in the right direction. Let's talk to the future. I'd love to ask if you had a crystal ball, what's coming next in this green building movement?

Devon ([14:12](#)):

Certainly understanding the future of the workplace and our hybrid approach, that's a big question and I don't think there is a clear answer. We're still trying to work through that. It's not one answer either and maybe that's what's encouraging sometimes is that there's not one right answer, there's going to be many and really understanding what our client partner needs are, what team members and employee needs are, and crafting a solution that that meets, that meets that. And interestingly

enough, Stok has a new report coming out that's focusing on this by our director of workplace strategy and wellbeing. It's really looking at findings from a perception survey to offer clarity about what decisions around changes to the workplace experience will most positively impact employee productivity and retention and wellbeing. Which is something that we're often looking at. So it'll be, it's, I look forward to sharing that with you and the group here. Hopefully that'll provide one perspective.

Charlie ([15:07](#)): You're putting out some great reporting and insights and I'd love to link to anything that's already published. I can put that in the podcast show notes. Let's do some quick rapid fire questions about you. Let our audience get to know you a little more. What would you say is your specialty or gift?

Devon ([15:24](#)): I laugh because I have a love of dancing so I could say that. What a combination of warmth and I like to work hard but with some levity as well. So keep us human.

Charlie ([15:36](#)): Well I love the warmth of grit. Sounds like definitely some good resilience in there. Determination, but a very caring kind goal, but now you can't get off the hook. Tell us about the dancing because it sounds awesome.

Devon ([15:49](#)): Well there's not much more to share except I do think that the sustainability world does have a lot of people that love to dance, so I think Green Build memories are certainly testament to that. It's just a good way to shake things off.

Charlie ([16:03](#)): Thank you for sharing and that's a good segue to the next one. Do you have any good habits or routines or rituals that you could share?

Devon ([16:11](#)):

I am trying to do more and less talking about meditating, which has helped. I really find that a wonderful way to start the day. Also taking meetings as a walk and talk. I don't know about you but it feels like as much as we talk about trying to have less meetings, they still exist. Getting outside and moving during the day as much as possible is a nice shift in the day.

Charlie ([16:33](#)): I got a standup desk walk from home and got bit, but do you do it with just internal team member meetings, even client meetings and the media request?

Devon ([16:49](#)):

That's a great question. Typically just internally and also more especially in my role right now with, I have a lot of one-on-ones with team members and given that a lot of us are not in the same place, we're not gonna be sitting at a table next to one another, so let's both enjoy a walk. We've all seen one another before so it's primarily internally. Although I also appreciate and you're inspiring me to have the question with my clients like, "hey, can we take this as a walk and talk?" Especially if it's not something that we need to dig into a document together or a spreadsheet or something. I like to have that rapport with clients and partners beyond internal team members.

Charlie ([17:30](#)):

Both parties encourage both sides to walk. In the moment right then it's, that's fantastic, thank you for that. I'm gonna challenge all of our listeners to more walking meetings. I'm a fan of a bucket list. Are there one or two things maybe you could share that might be on your bucket list?

Devon ([17:48](#)):

Yeah, this is a good question. There isn't something right now and I don't know if that means okay I'm content with the days or I need you to stretch

more. What was on my bucket list was a trip to Alaska and I did that, but that was a year and a half ago now. So it's certainly time to add some more bucket lists. I feel they will involve travel and as well as you know, connecting to purpose or giving back in some way. But I'm not, not quite sure yet what that looks like.

Charlie ([18:13](#)):

My bucket list, I've got categories. Some of it's travel and adventure, some of it might be business or family related, but just different themes and I try to do four or five a year, the pandemic slowed some of that. I've got a big birthday that I just had and a friend of mine gifted me courtside tickets to the Atlanta Hawks. You know, it's one of those where maybe I could have splurged and done it at any time, but it's pretty cool. Someone gifted that to me and then I can check that. Yeah, so some of us, even like sporting events or one day go to the Kentucky Derby .That kinda sounds fun. Just a few more things, this has been fantastic. Always like to add, ask a pro like you, is there a book, a podcast, a TED talk, a documentary, just anything you might recommend to our listeners?

Devon ([19:10](#)):

I think that there's so much we can learn from so many different areas and arenas and so this book I came across recently and it's not your typical, it's not green building focused. But it's literally been my kind of book of the year and I gave it to my five year old niece as well as my partner's, 80 year old father and it's called The Boy the Mole, the Sock and the Horse by Charlie Mausi. And it's just a sweet story of friendship, adventure and life lessons. Another one that's maybe a little bit more in the typical is a brave new work by Erin dk. And this really speaks to how it's one, one of the intro it said, if we were to look at an address from the 1919 hundreds and address today, we would see some stark differences and see some evolutions and some change. Certainly some things come back in style, but many things that we can think about that were a hundred years ago to today look very

different cause there's been an evolution yet we look at the org chart for businesses and there isn't that much change for the, the typical. And so this book just explores self-management structures and autonomy and how really creating a culture where workplaces empower people to take care of themselves is more sustainable. And that ability to be nimble I think is really critical right now. So yes, that's one that's been inspiring me lately.

Charlie ([20:44](#)): We'll put the links to those books and the podcast show notes. Somebody can check them out and I can tell you're not just a good manager, you're a great leader that you really care that much to, to change things up.

Devon ([20:54](#)): Thanks Charlie.

Charlie ([20:55](#)): Give up the great work. Let's talk a little bit about career. If you look back, Dave, is there any kind of career advice you wish you've known earlier?

Devon ([21:02](#)):

I think to speak up and ask, you don't need to have all the answers. I think this can really demonstrate curiosity and humility and desire for connection and vulnerability. We need to encourage that more and more. Especially, the challenges that we're facing aren't going to be solved by a single brain or a single perspective. I think that the more we can ask for help and not fear not knowing, maybe the faster we'll get there.

Charlie ([21:31](#)): How do you encourage someone that's bashful in asking a question that it's okay, I mean, how do you encourage more of say, your team to ask questions?

Devon ([21:41](#)): I think modeling it and asking questions myself and even if we're all leaders, I think seeing it in individuals in all different positions and roles within the company is really helpful. Again, kind of helps encourage a level playing field, for lack of better word. Or, perhaps just setting up a setting. Maybe it's more comfortable in a one-on-one space or place rather than in a group meeting or whatnot. I try to just convey that I'm here to support in any way. And I too may not know the answers, but certainly there's no bad or wrong questions.

Charlie ([22:18](#)):

Thanks for all these good examples. That sounds like just leading by example and I love that modeling. The last question. Let's say someone's listening to the podcast right now, they're getting inspired by your story and they're just now jumping into this green building movement. Maybe it's a career change, maybe they're a young professional, they're just now jumping in. Do you have any words of encouragement for them?

Devon ([22:38](#)):

I would say reach out. Sustainability world and network is quite small. I mean, you and I have known one another for I think over a decade. And, things come back around and it feels, I feel very blessed that it's been so supportive in my career and I think I feel that many in this industry have had the same experience and I think we only want to kind of feed that back.

Charlie ([23:05](#)): Love it. Well, hey everyone, you got inspired. I did. And I want you to connect with Deb on LinkedIn and I just, hey, keep up the great work and thanks for all the management and leadership tips. I wasn't expecting that. I got it today. I'm taking notes. I enjoyed our time together. Thank you so much.

Devon ([23:20](#)): Thanks so much, Charlie. I enjoyed the time too and have a wonderful birthday.

Speaker 4 ([23:24](#)):

I just wanna say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over one year here on the Green Building Matters podcast. Me and the entire team were stoked and just so glad you continue to listen every Wednesday morning to a new interview with a green building professional here in this industry, or just some pro tips that we wanna 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@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, and you can actually see the other episodes that have already been recorded with our amazing guests. 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 and we'll see you on next week's episode.