

Bringing Inspiration And Joy Into People's Homes

An Interview with Erika Ayers Badan, Chief Executive Officer, Food52

EDITORS' NOTE *Currently the Chief Executive Officer of Food52, Erika Ayers Badan was the first CEO of Barstool Sports, one of the most influential sports, lifestyle, and entertainment media brands on the internet. From 2016 to 2024, Badan led the company from a regional blog with 12 employees to a national powerhouse with over 300 employees. She has been named one of Forbes' Most Powerful Women in the U.S. in Sports. Badan also held leading roles at Microsoft, AOL, Demand Media, and Yahoo. She currently hosts a daily 1:1 series on social media answering work related questions. Badan is the author of NOBODY CARES ABOUT YOUR CAREER. She has been interviewed in national media outlets including CNN, MNBC, Forbes, Vanity Fair, and top podcasts. She currently serves as a board member on Malaria No More, a nonprofit organization that seeks to eradicate malaria. Badan earned a BS degree in Sociology and Philosophy from Colby College.*



Erika Ayers Badan

COMPANY BRIEF *Food52 (food52.com) is a next-generation cooking and home company that was named one of the world's most innovative companies by Fast Company in 2022, with a monthly reach of more than 30 million people. From the beginning, the brand challenged the models of traditional companies and retailers, combining content, commerce, and community around the belief that the kitchen is the heart of the home and food is the center of a well-lived life. Food52 connects a global community of experts and amateurs, supporting them with inspirational, useful content—recipes, videos, podcasts, cookbooks, and more— and outfitting them with products that make them happy. In addition to a highly curated shop representing hundreds of makers, the Food52 community of brands includes its in-house product line Five Two, lighting and lifestyle goods company Schoolhouse, and the heritage home brand Dansk.*

Will you discuss your career journey?

I didn't set out after college with any grand plan for a career. I still don't have any grand plans. I always looked at my career and the jobs I've had the same way I look at any given day of the week or any given opportunity: make the most of today and try to open new opportunities for tomorrow.

I was the first person in my family to have "corporate" jobs. Most of my family are teachers

or artists. My first job was at Fidelity Investments in the legal department. I hated it. My next job was also at Fidelity in the creative department. I loved it. Then I got laid off. I made my way across a bunch of ad agencies in Boston, then jumped to work at Microsoft, and after that a combination of start-ups and big media enterprises (Demand Media, BKSTG, AOL, Yahoo). I had small jobs and big jobs in well-run companies – and poorly run ones too. I was ambitious and always tried to learn and do as much as I could. I came from the

school of thought that said take on as much as you can possibly handle and figure it out. I knew I wasn't the smartest person in the room, but I tried to work the hardest and be the most curious and communicative.

On paper, I would say my career journey has mostly been spent in digital media, marketing, content, and revenue. Practically speaking, I've always followed interests and opportunities and pursued places and people where I could do two things: learn as much as possible and do as much as possible in the most accelerated and compressed timeline possible. I'm not sure this is the right path; it's definitely not the only path – but it's the one I chose.

What led you to Barstool Sports and how do you describe that experience?

I read Barstool Sports as a paper on the subway in Boston and later it became the fodder for most of my guy friends' group chats. I always admired how ballsy they were. I stumbled on the opportunity via a chance meeting with Barstool's new investor, The Chernin Group, in 2015. From the minute I heard they were looking for a CEO, I knew I wanted the job to be mine. I wanted the job so badly because I knew Barstool had something most companies didn't – true fans, a rabid audience, a point of view, and a willingness to work at the pace of the internet. I was coming off jobs in music and in media where it was hard to find product-market fit, even harder to make audiences and fans care, and even harder yet to teach people how to keep pace with the internet in terms of production, distribution, and monetization. Barstool had all of those things. I also liked that I "got" Barstool and I knew that most other people in my shoes – people with corporate jobs, from big media companies, or who had pedigreed careers – wouldn't see it. I felt this gave me a sliver of a chance to actually get the CEO job. And it did.

I would describe the experience of working at Barstool Sports as exhilarating, wild, intense, consuming, creative, and, ultimately, life changing. It was a once in a lifetime job. We grew a company and a brand in our own way and on our terms and in our own style. The people who work at Barstool Sports are some of the finest people I've ever worked with. Regardless of whether you love or hate Barstool Sports, it's hard not to appreciate what we did with it, growing from \$5 million in revenue to more than \$250 million in revenue in eight years, growing from a regional blog to national powerhouse, launching some of the biggest stars in sports and entertainment, becoming a top 10 fastest growing brand in the world on social, and exponentially diversifying our audience and business.

What interested you in joining Food52 and made you feel it was the right fit?

After nearly a decade at Barstool Sports and selling the company twice in 2023 – first for \$550 million and then back to the founder for \$1 – I really felt I had accomplished what I set out to do there. I also was craving a change – a new industry, a new consumer, a different business model. I had been an advisor to Food52 since 2019 and on the board since 2023. I liked that the brand speaks to women and is centered around food and home as the epicenter of a well-lived life. I liked that it was a predominantly design, product, and commerce driven business but had potential for content, storytelling, and advertising. I liked that it appeals to predominantly female customers. I liked that it was female founded. And I liked that there is a big challenge ahead of this company in a space and a sector that has a lot of headwinds, but where there is also great room for disruption.

I am probably an unexpected choice for CEO of Food52 – and some people would probably argue this is an unexpected choice for me. I think I'm a good fit for this company because I'm coming off a job where I spent a decade rapidly growing, monetizing, and scaling brands in a highly cost-effective manner.

How do you define Food52's mission and purpose?

Food52 is a company that contains three brands: Food52, Schoolhouse, and Dansk. Our mission is to create and curate incredible design, to build communities of makers, designers, and home enthusiasts, and to tell stories about people, places, and products. We are striving for distinction across all three. Our purpose is to bring inspiration and joy into people's homes – through stories, connections, and products.

“ADVICE TO MOTIVATE YOU AND GIVE YOU THE TOOLS YOU
NEED TO FALL IN LOVE WITH YOUR JOB.”—BARBARA CORCORAN

Erika Ayers Badan

NOBODY

CARES

ABOUT

YOUR

CAREER

WHY FAILURE IS GOOD,
THE GREAT ONES PLAY HURT,
and OTHER HARD TRUTHS

Why did you decide to write a book, *NOBODY CARES ABOUT YOUR CAREER*, and what are the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?

I wrote *NOBODY CARES* for three reasons. One, we had just sold a majority stake in Barstool Sports to a far bigger corporation than our own and I found my job changing and my creativity at work zapped. Writing a book was a creative outlet. Two, I made a podcast about work while at Barstool Sports and I was starting to get hundreds

of DMs a week from people asking questions about careers and work. Writing a book felt like a more efficient and cohesive way to answer those questions. Three, I went to a bunch of bookstores and looked at the business books and it made me feel depressed. The books were either about people who had done it all and seemed perfect or they were about having some formula or habit or the discipline to follow some multi-step process that would guarantee me to be great – sidenote: I have no discipline for multi-step processes and

I'm uninterested in perfection. I wanted to talk to people in the middle of their career as someone who herself is in the middle of her career and I wanted the book to be a conversation, spoken and written in a way that's relevant and relatable, and I wanted it to be an honest and unfiltered take on what it takes to be great at work. The key themes of the book are as follows:

- Work is tuition you get paid for. Make the most of this education.
- You have to get over your ego and your insecurity to be great at anything, especially work.
- Stop caring about what everybody else has to say about everything you do. It's important to do what makes you happy and for reasons that fulfill you.
- You aren't perfect, and work isn't either, but you can both be great.

What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership and how do you approach your management style?

Effective leadership involves a few things in my experience. You have to care, and you have to be willing to dig in and do the hard work yourself; you have to listen, and you have to be open to feedback and other people's opinions; you have to always communicate, because the more consistent and communicative you are as a leader, the better the chance you have of people being willing to join you; and you have to have a vision beyond yourself. You can get comfortable being uncomfortable and you can be yourself and be successful.

My management style is pretty high-energy and pretty fast-paced. I'm curious. I'm very direct. I can be tough, but I also have a lot of love for the people I work with as well as a lot of love and passion around what we are trying to achieve. I value people with initiative. I am impatient with inertia, and intolerant of complaining.

Do you feel that there are strong opportunities for women in C-suites and on corporate boards?

Yes. There are tons of opportunities for women everywhere. I sit on a public company board that's 50 percent female. It's awesome. My last two companies have had mostly women in the C-suite. If you're asking if it's harder to get to these jobs and positions as a woman, the answer is yes, but getting easier every day. If you're asking if there are enough women in these positions, the answer is resoundingly no.

With the success that have achieved in your career, are you able to enjoy the process and take moments to celebrate the wins?

My friend Barbara Corcoran coined a phrase – successfully insecure. Meaning, you're doing good work but you're still worried about it. I'm successfully insecure. I love the wins and I live for the process. I'm not great at celebrating because it makes me nervous. I do like to celebrate other people's wins.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?

Just start somewhere. It doesn't matter where you start. Get into your chapters and give yourself to learning and growing. Take a few risks. Remember that it's your career and your life and nobody else's. Don't worry so much about not knowing what you are doing. Nobody else does either. ●