



The Unstoppable Karen Totaro, GM Huntington Place, Detroit, Michigan

A famous non-fiction writer, journalist and speaker, Malcolm Gladwell, once observed that, from Beethoven to the Beatles, one must put in 10,000 hours of practice at their art or craft before they can become an expert at something. And then, they must be ready to act when opportunity presents itself.

Well, meet Karen Totaro. In the meetings and hospitality industry, she is a good example of what Gladwell is writing about. Totaro has been the general manager of Huntington Place Convention Center in Detroit, Michigan, for ASM Global since April 2021. Although she has been on the job for less than two years, you could say she's been around: Her career path started way back when she was in college and includes an astronomical number of hours punched in the proverbial time clock at some of the most time-honored and respected facilities in the country. These include the San Diego, Atlantic City, and Duke Energy convention centers.

Currently, at the 2.4-million-square-foot Huntington Place, Totaro has taken on a pinnacle career challenge but no matter. She's got the drive, the brain and the collaboration skills. "Success," she asserts, "is achieved through building a culture that allows for every staff member to bring their authentic self to work each day." And that's what she does and what she expects from others. In this age of inclusion in the workplace, she proudly exclaims that, indeed, diversity at HP is "the secret sauce. I'm responsible for the overall management, promotion, and operation of the facility, leading a magnificent team of dedicated professionals, building on key industry partnerships in the community, and supporting the overall mission of Huntington Place and the DRCFA (Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority)." Wow, that's a mouthful, but, if you think all work and no play makes for a dull person, read on — you haven't met the unstoppable Karen Totaro, who has surely put in her 10,000 hours and is an expert at what she does. —Stella Johnson

What goes into the making of a general manager for a multi-million-dollar, 2.4-million-square-

foot convention center? Not what you might expect. True, most GMs of such facilities are remarkable, well-respected men who have shaped the meeting, exhibition, and convention industry for decades now. In this particular case, however, this particular GM is a member of the softer sex — none other than Karen Totaro. She's one of the few brave women who have taken on the challenge of general manager of a mega, multi-purpose facility. This one: Huntington Place, located in Detroit, Michigan. Some once knew it as Cobo Hall.

So, how did she get there? Well, Totaro's road to success was definitely a road less traveled. She grew up in an old, blue-collar neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago located about five miles from downtown. That means she was challenged from the start but none of her growing-up years were forgotten years. *Au contraire!* She saw the less-than-perfect neighborhood as being both stimulating and engaging, and it helped shape the woman she would one day become.

Forget Disneyland!

At 12 years of age, Totaro's form of weekend entertainment was taking the bus downtown and exploring the city on foot. For her, life was the real thing. As she fondly recalls, "Chicago was an amazing place to grow up, I loved my old neighborhood (still do) and I loved the independence I was able to enjoy by living in a big city." Bridgeport was a very blue-collar, inner-city



neighborhood, and she was one of only four out of a class of 19 students from her grammar school that went on to receive a college degree. In fact, most of her classmates never made it out of high school, let alone out of the neighborhood. “So, again, I know how lucky I am and I never take it for granted. My parents worked multiple jobs to ensure my life, and my siblings’ lives, led to a better future. All four of us were the first generation of college graduates in our family.”

Then, there was the fact that Totaro attended an all-girls, Catholic high school. That, too, had a positive effect on her development as a growing teen as it gave her freedom to have a voice. “No boys were around to impress,” she says. “We felt encouraged at an early age to be our authentic selves.”

What We Do Matters

Like the doer that she is today, Totaro worked her way through college – not at the local mall but at the Assembly Hall Arena at the University of Illinois, now known as the State Farm Center, where she carried 18 hours of credits and “worked like crazy, almost full-time. That’s how I learned at a young age how to multi-task,” she muses. “I discovered that I worked better under pressure and that is just perfect for the industry I am in now. Imagine, I knew from the age of 18 that the job that I wanted was to manage venues. How lucky am I to have such a passion for a career so early on in my life?”

For Totaro, it really was true love at first sight – that is, after working on her first event. “We have conventions that bring these amazing minds together to solve universal problems in science, automation, medicine and so on,” she says. “In other words, what we do matters.”

Apparently, it was the right choice and the rest is history as, among her many achievements, are two of which she is most proud. One, in 2009, Totaro was recognized as an official Certified Venue Executive designee out of almost 300 other official Certified Venue Executive designees in the world. And two, in 2015, she was voted by industry peers to serve as the Chairman of the Board for the 7,000-member International Association of Venue Managers and was able to lead the association through some turbulent changes that have made it a stronger and more thriving association.

Mentors & Leaders

Again, Lady Luck was on Totaro’s side as she asserts that she had some of the best leaders in the convention industry today as mentors.

“My first real role at a convention center was as an assistant executive director at the Oregon Convention Center in Portland, Oregon, working for Jeff Blosser, who is now the current president and chief executive officer of the Washington State Convention Center [now renamed the Seattle Convention Center],” recalls Totaro. “Jeff was always willing to guide, teach, and share. I became a much better venue leader because of Jeff and his work ethic.

“Ric Booth is another one. Ric’s the general manager at the Duke Energy Convention Center in Cincinnati. He was another great mentor and I had the pleasure of working with him as his assistant general manager. Our conversations about the industry were downright philosophical in terms of where the industry was going. He helped me see things from so many new perspectives.”

Totaro also stresses that, during the last two years, she had the privilege to work with industry icon Bob



Detroit’s 2.4-million-square-foot Huntington Place Convention Center, expertly managed by Karen Totaro as GM.

McClintock, executive vice president of convention centers for ASM Global. “Bob is the best sounding board I have had the privilege to work with, especially around unique or labor situations, as he has seen it all,” she states.

The Gorilla in the Room

OK, to address the gorilla that’s still in the room: How did Totaro actually break that proverbial glass ceiling? She says it was more a matter of being in the right place at the right time – she put in the hours and was ready to act when opportunity presented itself. It seems that she had been in the No. 2 role at various venues for quite a while when, one day, almost serendipitously, she heard Peggy Daidakis, former GM of the Baltimore Convention Center, speak at an IAVM event. Daidakis was the first woman to ever lead a U.S. convention center and she shared some powerful wisdom when she said women need to just jump in the fire

and stop waiting on the sidelines.

"In her speech, she reported that she once read an article that said men will apply for a job when they have just one of the 10 criteria required," shared Totaro. "Women, on the other hand, who may actually have as many as nine of the 10 criteria required, won't apply until they have all 10 and that's just wrong. So, I started jumping in the fire and have not looked back since."

Well, fire gets pretty hot. One of Totaro's early projects as a full-time general manager in Detroit was to rebrand the old TCF Center to Huntington Place, but she didn't sweat it. As she explains, "We were Cobo Hall for decades until the venue rebranded to Cobo Center in 2011. After acquiring a naming-rights sponsor, we rebranded again to TCF Center and then, a year later, we were Huntington Place. We were also in the middle of COVID when this current rebranding started, so we knew it was going to be quite a hill to climb. But, what we have in Detroit is this unique underdog spirit that allows us to conquer challenges with great strategic thought and support from our community."

According to Totaro, the brand-development template was honed, and the marketing and social media campaigns have made great inroads for the current rebrand. After nine months of the rebrand campaign, Google search analytics report that web users currently search for Huntington Place 64 percent more than all other previous names or generic keyword searches, and that percentage rises every month.

Ya Gotta Have a Plan

One of the current strategies is to shift the venue's sales philosophy. "Change is hard and we start with small bites. If an event does not net a minimum of \$5 thousand in bottom-line net revenue, we are going to pass on it. This would exclude, of course, a small event that's tied to a larger event or important community events like high school graduations," Totaro states.

In addition to brains, one needs spirit to get the job done and, at Huntington Place, DEI is a big part of that spirit. "We have put practices into place that help us continue to build a diverse workforce," she says. Interviews are done by strategically diverse committees so we can get various perspectives at the table as to each candidate's skill, passion, and likelihood to succeed in the culture we have built. We are in the process of hiring a new director of Human Resources and are looking to implement a new initiative of removing all names from resumes, so we are only reviewing the experience and skillset without the ability to make judgments on someone's name or background. I believe it will have a positive impact in adding even further to a diverse and inclusive workforce."

Reading, Rehabbing & Rooting for the Home Team

While Totaro obviously has a strong work ethic, she has a strong life ethic too. She makes sure she has quality time for family to the point of sharing her love for travel. "I'm gifted with four nieces whom I treasure," she says. "I adore

taking them on trips with me. In fact, as they graduate from high school, each one can select any single city for one full week with me, as long as it's somewhere in Europe. Already went on one trip to Venice, Amsterdam is this spring, and then two more to go."

Outside activities also help Totaro keep a sharp eye on the ball. Obviously, she loves to travel, but she also likes to read and confesses that she could spend eight hours in a bookstore. One book she even re-reads: *The Power of the Subconscious Mind* by Dr. Joseph Murphy. She says it helps her get back on track when she feels a bit wobbly, professionally speaking.

Heavy stuff, but Totaro can be light-hearted, too, and has just finished reading *The Curse of Brinks-Mat* by Wensley Clarkson. As she recalls: "When I was in my early 20s, I worked at a resort in the British Virgin Islands and ended up dating a Scotland Yard detective who was working on solving the largest gold heist crime in the UK. This book brought all those memories and real-life characters back to life for me as they interviewed him extensively for the book. Life is funny!"

During weekends or free time, Totaro might be hunting for the perfect find at flea markets or antique fairs, "a favorite passion." She also enjoys rehabbing old houses or condos. "I am currently working on a 1921 loft space in an old piano factory in the heart of old Detroit. It's like therapy!" She also loves NFL Football "mostly the Chicago Bears but, lately, I'm really loving those Detroit Lions."

It Takes a Village

What's Totaro's game plan for the future? Surprisingly, Totaro anticipates she will be thinking of retirement. As she reflects, "My life's been an amazing ride but I imagine, one day, I will be ready to transfer the skills I've learned to the next generation. I am thinking of living abroad, post-retirement, just for a year or so. Palermo in Sicily or Lucca in Tuscany are two locations I'm dreaming about - they're where my family immigrated from long ago."

When asked if she won an academy award for her stellar performance as a general manager, whom would she like to thank, Totaro replied, "Aside from my family and friends, who always take my calls and enjoy all my work stories, thanks also goes out to my assistant manager, Becky Bixby, and all the Huntington directors who are the best in the business. But I would not be a success in this role at Huntington without the support of the CEO of the Detroit Regional Convention Facility Authority, Patrick Bero, and our Board, as well as the ASM Global team. It truly does take a village."

Words to Live By?

"Success is never final. Failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts," Totaro says. "I always thought that it was Mike Ditka, the former Chicago Bears head coach, that wrote this, but it turns out he borrowed it from Winston Churchill. I think Winston and I would have been great friends!"

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