

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the OneAmerica portal. The URL is https://portal.oneamerica.com/Pages/mikooquestions.aspx. The page features a navigation menu with options like Home, HR At Your Service, Learning & Dev, Business Resources, What's Going On, and Feedback. A sidebar on the left lists 'Recent' items such as Alerts, Reminders, Featured Resources, Leader Message Questions, Leaders, and Site Contents. The main content area displays a featured article from 11/6/2015. The article includes a photo of Michelle Koss, a woman in a blue top holding a bouquet of flowers, and a quote about her career and problem-solving skills.

11/6/2015

Empowerment and Problem-Solving: Thoughts from Michelle Koss

Michelle Koss started her career as a florist. Learn more about how she manages projects, processes and teams with a gardener's deft touch.

As director of operations and client services for Employee Benefits, **Michelle Koss** leads a team of problem-solvers, and she's a great fit for her job. That's because she's always had a knack for finding creative solutions. "OneAmerica was my first 'real job,'" said Michelle, who started her career as a florist and once came close to purchasing her own flower shop. Her knack for arranging things in creative ways clears up tricky processes and frequently leads to cost- and time-saving improvements. It also led to her winning the 2015 ASPIRE Award for Excellence in Execution.

Learn more about how Michelle manages projects, processes and teams with a gardener's deft touch.



Creating something beautiful—whether it's a bouquet or a new process—takes courage. "Sometimes trying something new is about breathing new life into old ideas," Michelle said.

What does empowerment mean to you?

To me, it's about trust. I trust my team ultimately. They know what they need to do. They know it better than I do. I trust that they want to do a good job. Empowerment is about giving them guidelines to operate within, and when they touch up against a boundary, they'll let me know they feel uneasy. I put all my faith in them, and they have faith in me. It's a two-way street.

How do you deal with letdowns?

At first I tend to take things personally, then I check my ego and try to see it from the other person's perspective: What do they have going on? What's their story? I try to have compassion and understand it's not all about me. People have their own stuff to cope with.

You consider solutions that some say are “unachievable.” Can you give an example?

It used to take us a long time to get a bill out. And, at the time, the idea that we would ever get those bills done quickly seemed insurmountable. We were trying to figure out why, because we didn't know. After we dug through the layers, we figured out that one of the simplest things we could do was change the order of operations. Instead of letting system builders know late in the process, we realized we could let them know in advance and give them a head start. We also had a problem with the way the system generated plans in groups of 10. What we needed was to be able to order only as many as we needed at one time. We thought we couldn't change it, but we met with a group of people in IT and asked.

There were smart people in the room who said, “Yeah, we could help with that,” and they were able to change the way the system worked.

What inspires you to keep going when you hit roadblocks?

Our customers, and my team. It’s all about making things better for them. Giving up just isn’t an option. Sometimes our success as a division depends on the success of our team. It keeps me going to know there’s a light at the end of the tunnel—a better way.

How does it make people feel when the team overcomes obstacles?

It gives people a new sense of ownership and empowerment. It’s very real. It’s not just talk. People feel trusted. People feel empowered. They own it. The process becomes their process because they had a voice. It’s not just something management said they had to do. The whole thing leads to less stress for everyone.

What inspires you?

Strong relationships, deep connections and nurturing those really inspires me and helps me to keep going even when there’s strain. I have a very small circle of people both inside and outside of work, and I try to make sure those people know where they stand and how much they are loved and appreciated. I want our policyholders to feel appreciated. I want that to come across in our work. All we do is ultimately for our policyholders. We want them to have a great experience and to feel like we care about them.

What do you do when you’re not at work?

Every Wednesday, I take one of my nieces or nephews out on a date. It’s something I’ve been doing for several years. I love to garden and be outside every spare moment I have. My passion is flowers. I spend a lot of time arranging flowers for weddings.

How does this come into play in your work?

I get a lot of joy out of nurturing and taking care of people. I do that a lot in my personal life, and I think that’s my job as a manager. I try to make sure peoples’ needs are met, that they feel valued, that they feel I’m here to take care of them.

What’s your favorite flower?

All of them.