

YOUR NAME

Members of the Legislature of the Virgin Islands:

It is my distinct honor to offer this testimony in support of the resolution honoring Rashida Hodge. I have known Rashida for more than 20 years, beginning when we were both at IBM. During my career, I served in senior leadership roles including Vice President of Supply Chain and Vice President of Corporate Operations and Strategy. I had the privilege of mentoring Rashida as she progressed from a newly hired engineer into increasingly significant leadership roles, becoming an IBM Director and Vice President. I have watched her career and, more importantly, watched her grow as a person and as a true leader.

I can say without hesitation that Rashida is one of the most remarkable people that I have had the privilege to know professionally. She is an exceptionally talented, disciplined, and accomplished executive, but those qualities alone do not explain why I have such tremendous respect and admiration for her. What distinguishes Rashida is her combination of extraordinary capability with humility, authenticity, empathy, and an abiding commitment to helping others succeed. She is, quite simply, a wonderful human being.

Rashida's professional journey is a testament to courage, perseverance, and a willingness to embrace challenges. She joined IBM in 2001 through a leadership program in Supply Chain as a young engineer. Rather than choosing the safest or most comfortable path, she repeatedly chose the difficult one. In 2004, early in her career, she moved to China to take on a new role at a time when such international assignments were far less commonplace than they are today. She later took on increasingly complex and unstructured leadership positions, including moving to Slovakia to lead a team supporting IBM contracts for clients across Europe and Africa.

These were not simply promotions. They were difficult roles requiring Rashida to build organizations, establish clear goals, develop people, create high-performing teams, and deliver results in unfamiliar environments and across cultural boundaries. She consistently said "yes" to opportunities that others would have declined.

The most compelling example of her leadership came later in her career when she became an executive in IBM's Watson Artificial Intelligence organization. These were the early days of what we now call AI. The technology was not yet broadly consumable nor accessible, and customers were still learning what AI could mean for their business. Rashida took on the challenge of creating a world-class AI Services Delivery organization capable of developing and implementing complex AI solutions. Her success in that endeavor helped prove the foundation for the senior AI leadership roles she would later assume at Microsoft.

Rashida's professional accomplishments have been recognized by Fortune magazine, Forbes magazine, and the North Carolina Technology Association. She has received numerous awards throughout her career, and she even has four United States patents! But if I were asked what accomplishment best defines Rashida, I would not point to her titles, awards, patents or corporate responsibilities. I would instead point to the people that she has developed and the doors that she has opened for others.

I saw this repeatedly during our years at IBM. Rashida was never afraid to stand up for people on her teams. There were occasions when senior leaders above her were prepared to make rash judgements about an employee, while Rashida would take the time to understand that person—their capabilities, integrity, potential, and circumstances. She would sometimes come to me seeking advice about how she should support the individual and give them an opportunity to succeed rather than simply accept the judgement of those above her. Importantly, she understood that advocating for someone else could carry a personal career risk. Nonetheless, she stood up for her people. And repeatedly, those individuals went on to succeed. That is leadership.

Rashida's leadership style is unusual in the best imaginable way. She is confident without being arrogant. She is ambitious without being self-centered. She is disciplined and focused, yet deeply empathetic. She is not afraid to laugh, to cry, to hug, or simply to be herself. In an industry and corporate culture that can sometimes equate leadership with being the loudest, toughest, or most aggressive person in the room, Rashida proves that strength and humanity are not opposites. In fact, in her case, they reinforce one another.

I believe much of her character is rooted in her Virgin Islands upbringing and in the examples set by her family. Rashida has never forgotten where she came from. Her journey leaving her home, going to North Carolina State University and ultimately to global technology leadership roles is extraordinary. And most importantly, Rashida has chosen to use the opportunities that her own journey created to create opportunities for others. Her establishment of the Rashida A. Hodge Scholarship Fund through the Community Foundation of the Virgin Islands is a profound example. This is a continuation of the very philosophy that has defined Rashida's life: take on the difficult opportunity, work hard, learn continuously, and then help someone else to have an opportunity to do the same.

I have watched Rashida grow from a reserved, newly hired "IBM'er" into a confident, bold, and globally respected executive. Yet despite all of her accomplishments, she has kept the humility, authenticity, and empathy that characterized the young engineer that I first met more than two decades ago. For me, that is the most compelling reason to honor Rashida. She represents the Virgin Islands on a global stage not simply through what she has accomplished, but how she has accomplished it—and through what she is now doing to ensure that others from the Virgin Islands have opportunities to achieve their own dreams.

I am proud to have known Rashida while at IBM, proud to have played a small role in her journey as one of her many mentors, and enormously proud of the leader and the human being she has become. I offer my strongest support for this resolution and for the recognition that it bestows upon her.

Respectfully submitted,

Steve Loehr