

About Charlene Wheelless

Business executive, speaker, author, and communications expert



Charlene Wheelless is a renowned communications expert, author, and speaker with more than three decades of experience in business, corporate affairs, and communications. She leads her namesake communications and business advisory firm, Charlene Wheelless LLC and is the senior advisor for equity and justice at APCO Worldwide, a global advisory and advocacy communications consultancy. In this global role Wheelless is a senior leader and advisor to both APCO and its clients on issues of equity, justice, diversity, and inclusion. She also mentors, trains, and leads both internal and client-facing teams on these issues, as well as works directly with APCO clients on corporate purpose, crisis and issues management, internal communications, organizational change and diversity, equity and inclusion. Wheelless is a member of the APCO Worldwide International Advisory Council. Additionally, she partners as a senior counselor with Gagen MacDonald, a strategy execution firm and a longstanding APCO partner.

A key voice in shaping the future of the communications profession, Wheelless is the chairman of the board of trustees for the Page Society, the world's leading professional association for senior public relations and corporate communications executives.

Earlier, Wheelless served as the principal vice president of global corporate affairs for Bechtel Corporation, one of the leading engineering and construction companies in the world. Responsible for global communications, issues and reputation management, sustainability, stewardship, and public affairs, she is credited with transforming reputation and brand of the 120-year old, multi-billion-dollar global corporation. At Bechtel, she also served on the boards of the company's philanthropic foundation and political action committee.

Wheelless is a true corporate athlete – one who strives for consistent, excellent performance over a long span of time and ready to take on any challenge. Throughout her career she has put her broad skillset to work to collaborate on corporate real estate deals, run a 700k sq. ft manufacturing facility, work with the DoD security service, develop employee morale programs and lead financial and M&A communications for publicly traded companies. Wheelless's business acumen has helped her develop a track record of successfully operating in large, complex organizations.

As a C-suite leader, Wheelless has lived the experience of being a Black female executive at several global organizations. The accumulation of her skills and experiences has positioned her as a cornerstone in ensuring anti-racist practices, inclusivity, and diversity in corporate environments. Wheelless combines her extensive knowledge of leadership and communications, along with her skill in managing adversity to help others learn to retain authenticity in business and in life.

A gifted speaker, Wheeless has presented at global business and industry events about societal issues, empowerment in corporate America, her “a-ha” career moment, the importance of being authentic, diversity beyond inclusion and much more. Most recently, Wheeless has appeared in several broadcasts and publications on the topic of social and racial injustice, including [Chief Executive](#), [Business Insider](#), [Chief Learning Officer](#), [CCO Podcast](#), and [Thrive Global](#).

Wheeless has been named by PR Week magazine as one of the [50 most influential](#) PR professionals in the industry for five consecutive years. She was also named to the [PR Hall of Femme](#), the [PR Global Power Book](#) and the 2017 Network Journal’s “[25 Influential Black Women in Business](#).” In addition, she was named a [Woman Worth Watching](#) by the nationally known Profiles in Diversity magazine and a “[Women Who Mean Business](#)” honoree by the Washington Business Journal.

Her debut book, "You are Enough! Reclaiming your Career and Your Life with Purpose, Passion and Unapologetic Authenticity" is slated for publication in early 2021. The book details her experience as a Black, female executive and her courageous fight with cancer. The book features practical strategies for overcoming adversity from her lecture “Lessons from Being Invisible.”

Equally as committed to the community, Wheeless has served on regional and statewide councils focused on economic development, health and education. Currently, she is chair of the Board of Trustees for the HCA Reston (Virginia) hospital, a member of the Board of Trustees for the Institute for Public Relations and board member for the Page Center. She is the past chairman of the Greater Reston Chamber of Commerce and former board member for the George Washington University Virginia Campus, National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering, Governor’s Council on Early Childhood Education, and a former commissioner for the Virginia Economic Development Authority, among other organizations.

Wheeless graduated from New Mexico State University with a Bachelor of Arts in journalism and public relations. She earned a master’s degree in public communications at American University in Washington, D.C., and an MBA from Keller Graduate School of Management. She resides in Northern Virginia with her husband of 29 years with whom she shares two adult daughters.