

Entrepreneurship and Gender

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I was asked to talk a little bit about my entrepreneurial experiences viewed through the gender lens. But before I get into that, I want to tell you a story of an experience I had this week. I arrived in New Haven today from New York City where my organization, Bright Horizons, has been in the midst of launching a major emergency response effort on behalf of children and families affected by the September 11 tragedy. We put together a very unusual partnership with two other organizations to launch this effort. We partnered with our largest client in New York City, JP Morgan Chase—Chase has 20,000 employees in a building close to the World Trade Center who were directly impacted by the tragedy. We also joined with Mercy Corps, an international disaster assistance organization. So corporate finance, early education, and international disaster assistance—these are not three types of organizations that often work together. But we quickly joined together to respond to this tragedy in New York.

We brought together Monday morning in New York City a small group of senior decision makers from each of the three organizations to hammer out what we wanted to do, to create the plans, figure out the resources, and get it going. We felt a sense of urgency. There were five of us who gathered on the 45th floor of the Chase Tower in midtown Manhattan to make it happen: myself, our senior client from JP Morgan Chase, the Executive Vice President of Mercy Corps (someone who spent many of the last recent years launching major relief efforts in other countries), and two people we designated to be on the ground in New York City to roll out this program. Five of us sat there, and in a matter of hours we came up with a solid, ambitious plan, and over the next few days we marshaled significant resources for the operation. It is now rolling out. Four of the five people in the room were women.

As I was driving here today thinking of gender issues, I thought that was pretty exciting that a small group of five people—four women and one man—made this happen so quickly. While I have your attention on that subject, if you're interested in learning more about this emergency effort, if you are looking for ways to help and get involved, log onto our website at www.brighthorizons.com.

I want to talk about two different entrepreneurial experiences in my past and reflect on how gender matters. I graduated from the Yale School of Management in 1980, and went off to work in the emergency refugee relief world. I went to Cambodia with two classmates to run emergency programs in the Cambodian refugee camps right after the Vietnamese invaded. One of the classmates I went over with, Neal Keny, is today the executive director of Mercy Corps, the large disaster assistance agency that we have partnered with in New York City. The other classmate was Roger Brown, who many years later became my husband! After working on the Cambodian border, Roger and I then went off to Sudan and Ethiopia in the mid 1980s to assist in the African famine relief effort. We were hired by Save the Children Federation to create and launch a large program there. They had already raised several

million dollars in African relief but had no operation on the ground. We arrived in Khartoum with those funds and then raised significantly more capital from the international community there to start a program. We quickly traveled around the country, decided where we could intervene and where we could best use our resources, and created a relief effort that served a large part of western Sudan and operated two refugee camps on the border of Ethiopia.

Now going over there as a co-country director and a woman in a very conservative fundamentalist Muslim state was very interesting. There were very few, if any, other women in senior positions there. The Sudanese were not used to dealing with women. As I look back on that experience through a gender lens, I actually think it was a great advantage being a woman. I was in charge of all of our negotiations with the Sudanese government for our country agreement. I negotiated with many tribal leaders in western Sudan. We had a program where we distributed large amounts of emergency relief to a large area of western Sudan. There were small villages interspersed throughout the desert with no infrastructure, no communications, no vehicles, no roads. We launched a massive camel brigade to get this relief food out to 1,000 villages in the provinces in the Sudan. I negotiated with very corrupt truckers to get a fleet of trucks to transport the goods from Khartoum to the provincial capital.

There was a fair amount of suspicion and reticence on the part of the Sudanese vis-à-vis western white men. To the Sudanese they represented exploitation. It was hard to categorize me. I obviously was not a western white male but I was unlike anyone they were used to dealing with. This proved to be an advantage. I gained respect quickly and was able to get strong local support. It was actually through my experience there that I really learned my negotiating skills. I learned to be tough but to negotiate with great respect. I learned the concept of “saving face”—even though you are negotiating a tough agreement, make sure that there's always respect and consideration for the other side.

We worked in the Sudan for a couple of years and returned to the states in 1986. It was at that point that Roger and I decided we wanted to create an organization of our own. We wanted to focus in the children's field since much of our work overseas had been with young children. They are the most affected by war and famine and dislocation. After some research and investigation, we created a company called Bright Horizons, an organization that creates high-quality childcare at the work site as a benefit for employees. We set out to raise venture capital to create this organization.

Raising venture capital as a couple was difficult. Investors were concerned that if our marriage broke up their investment would be at risk. They wondered if we each brought equal skills or was there one that really had the talent and the other was a tag-along. Before they would give us their funding commitment they asked if we would agree to be analyzed by a team of psychologists to analyze our marriage and see if it was strong enough for them to invest a few million dollars!

Of course I was totally insulted that they would ask us to do this, but Roger thought it was pretty funny and thought we should do it. We agreed and flew out to California to spend a couple of days being analyzed by a team of psychologists. Now our venture capitalists didn't really do their homework very well because this team of psychologists turned out to be a married couple. They thought our partnership was great, they wrote a good report, and we got our funding.

That was back in 1986. Over the fifteen years we have grown quite a bit and today are very much a female organization. We now employ 14,000 people in 360 child development centers across the United States and in the United Kingdom. We care for 45,000 children every day. Ninety-eight percent of our employees are women, 80% of our senior management team are women, and four of our seven-member executive team are women. The culture of the organization is one that I think draws on the best of women's leadership and managerial styles. It is a collaborative culture, a team-based culture, where we are supportive of one

another. We look at the employee as a whole person, we recognize that employees have lives outside the job, and we celebrate that. We have a supportive family-friendly work place. Advocacy has been central to what we do.

Two years after we started Bright Horizons we started an affiliate organization, called The Horizons Initiative, which provides childcare for the homeless. Three years ago we created our Bright Horizons Foundation, a national organization that provides a variety of services to homeless children and other children at risk. It is through the foundation that we are running our emergency effort in New York City. We have combined this collaborative supportive culture with a results-oriented culture. We have high expectations, high goals, and are very focused on results.

Roger and I took the company public four years ago. Childcare has long suffered from being a very under-valued and invisible profession, a women's profession that has never gotten the recognition of its social value in society. Our public offering was very successful. Our employees are all stockholders so it was an important event to them.

I have recently finished writing a book for Random House, a book on working mothers. I try to reposition the debate on working mothers to talk about the welfare of children. The welfare of children is not solely a mother's issue; the welfare of children is a societal issue and a fatherhood issue as well. In this book I am trying to make the point that for a working mother to thrive and for children to thrive three important supports are necessary. The first is the father. Most children have an identified father, whether the mother is married, single, or divorced. It is the father's equal responsibility to be engaged in the daily upbringing of the child. The second is a supportive employer. The workplace in America has to evolve considerably to respond to the new demographics of the workforce. And finally—excellent childcare. The first five years of life are critical in setting the child on her cognitive path for life; what kind of care she receives in those first five years will determine the direction she goes in.