

## 10 Things Every Business Leader Should Know

*The following are excerpts from a speech by Linda Rosanio, Chief Operating Officer of Vsblty and former CEO of The Star Group, at the Greater Northeast Chamber of Commerce's Women in Business Luncheon on September 29 at the Pen Ryn Estate. The luncheon was the kickoff for the Chamber's Women in Business Conference to be held April 27, 2017.*

Along with two partners, I started my own ad agency in 1985(?) and we eventually grew to be one of the largest woman-owned marketing communications firms in America. Thinking back over those exciting, even adventurous years, I learned a great deal from many people and many experiences. I would like to share 10 key things I learned and that every business leader should know.

**1. Build a Strong & Ownable Culture.** In our business, people have always worked long hours. It is the nature of the beast. Staff does so because they love what they do, and an important part of that love is the company's culture.

A culture that includes two-way communication, being generous with an encouraging word and with deserved praise, and recognizing and rewarding achievement and, especially advancing people from within.

We were the most successful when we were true to our culture and we protected it. That became increasingly more difficult the larger we became. So, beware of the new hires that can crush your culture.

I also learned that culture can be a moving target. In my working lifetime, I have worked with Baby Boomers, who thought they would own the world...GenXers, who knew they would own the world...and Millennials, who wonder what the heck is happening to the world.

All have different views on how work fits into their lives. They have different motivations, even different work styles. So, what I have learned is one style of management may not fit all and that flexibility in management is essential.

We also learned that reverse mentoring is a great thing. Boomers can teach Millennials about business and Millennials can help keep us Boomers on the cutting edge of technology.

That means you have to encourage open communications. Bosses don't know it all and are not always right. (I didn't learn that until I became a boss.) But once I understood that, I learned to listen carefully to input from many sources, but especially from the staff in the trenches...they are an important source of business intelligence.

Don't ever let your management team shut them down. Some of the best ideas and solutions come from the people that are on the ground, doing the work.

Another important part of building and sustaining a successful culture is to celebrate milestones and achievements. At the Star Group we celebrated every company milestone with the whole agency in attendance. And, at the same time, we announced and recognized individual and group achievements with statuettes that our staff valued as if they were Oscars.

Individual pride, I have learned, is the basis of building a culture of group pride.

**2. Recruit & Develop Great Leaders.** I understand that my role as a leader is to inspire others to dream more, to do more, to *become* more. And the more evangelists on your staff the better. That's why it is critical to recruit those who will be company missionaries and work at developing in-house leaders.

Leaders need to recognize and practice simple truths. As Steven Covey taught us, to "begin with the end in mind." And as we Boomers know: "Rome wasn't built in a day" and, yes, that "patience *is* a virtue."

Armed with and in sync with the company vision (which you must make time to communicate), your leaders should be positive and optimistic, and never, ever vent downward. Encourage middle management leaders to share information with their staff—and to listen to what their staff is saying.

While it is important to recruit now and future leaders, a critical lesson learned the hard way for me was to **expect accountability.**

This may be the single biggest challenge. You cannot permit passing the buck or the “that ain’t my job” mentality. Staff needs to be able to count on each other to be successful and to meet obligations to co-workers. If you have a responsibility, you have to own it! Making staff accountable is key to effective management. This is what co-workers of 20+ years would say I might have done better, and I have to agree.

I should have held more people more accountable. Even if it meant parting ways. (Yes, I have also been guilty of having too much compassion.)

When you have an open culture that permits too much self-governance, you are bound to have people that will take advantage. And that lets everybody down. I can tell you first hand that learning this lesson is painful.

**3. Grow Future Talent.** This is another critical lesson if you hope to grow your business. A company CEO, like a farmer, must plant seeds to succeed. Nurturing future talent is essential for sustainable success. You need to encourage and foster growth by offering opportunity, and that includes promoting from within, which boosts morale and demonstrates that there is indeed opportunity for them within the organization.

However, young talent should not wait to be taught. It is their responsibility to proactively learn. It is their responsibility to take advantage of opportunity. Those that do, succeed.

Now here is a tried and true, low risk, high reward investment and lesson: Recruit entry-level people—especially interns. You can have talented, motivated students work with you throughout their entire college life, and then go on to become pillars in your company.

In addition to opening the door to a business career for them, you have the opportunity to train future talent and absorb them into your culture before the competition even knows they exist.

But good team members—even outstanding team members—alone do not assure success in any field. Technology has significantly impacted all of us—in our personal lives and in our businesses. As you are well aware, technology changes, literally, on a daily basis. It is essential that your staff keep pace with technology.

One of the reasons for the Star Group's early and continued success was that we were always invested in staying on the cutting edge of technology. But sometimes it was a struggle for some staff to adapt to fast-paced change; sometimes even total paradigm shifts.

We lost many battles with staffers who were too stubborn to change. Or too unwilling to learn so much, so fast—or even to accept the new. Regretfully, those people were left in the dust of our rapid advancement.

I have added these battles lost to my own failures as a leader. I still regret that I was not able to motivate the acceptance of change and some very smart and talented people then fell by the wayside.

**4. Turnover Kills.** That is *not* overstating the case! Customers like continuity. This is true if you are in a service business or are manufacturing widgets. Customers are uncomfortable with new faces and hate paying for a learning curve.

New staff must either learn what they don't know about your business or learn how to make widgets made the way you want them made.

A successful business also recognizes that it is much more cost effective to keep good talent than to have to recruit new staff. It isn't money that motivates most employee departures. So, look for ways—often simple ways—to encourage camaraderie. If people like where they work and the people they work with and for, they will stay with you.

A source of pride to us at the Star Group was how many former employees returned after testing other cultures only to find that our culture was more to their liking after all. Always keep your door open.

**5. Take Risks.** The strength of a business is sometimes demonstrated by its willingness to take risks...like pitching a client in a category that you lack experience. Like starting new ventures and investing time in start-ups.

It means being able to accept and learn from your failures and, as the song says, “get yourself up, dust yourself off, and try all over again.” That takes confidence and tenacity, two traits that are critically important in business.

With the birth of casino gaming in Atlantic City, we took advantage of our proximity to create a special team that traded under a different brand to concentrate exclusively on the gaming industry. We were able to quickly win business and to grow into one of the country's leading casino gaming marketing firms.

To break into the food and consumer package goods business, we invented a totally new product named after a famous song. Using Jimmy Buffet's popular "Margaritaville" to create a line of frozen shrimp. Today, after much growth and expansion, Margaritaville Foods is more than a \$1 billion business.

The company that developed decals on the floors in supermarkets nationwide was incubated within the walls of the Star Group.

All of those successes would not have been possible without all of the key pieces that it takes to make great things happen...from a great staff...a great culture...great advisors, accountants, lenders, lawyers—even landlords—to things like investments in technology and professional development and training...innovation and the willingness to change.

**6. Cope with Growth Stages and Evolve.** Businesses, like people, grow. And there is no shame in being small, as long as you are good. And many times big is not better. Yet successful companies, like successful people, evolve to survive. As the Star Group grew...and then grew some more...we recognized the need to evolve. And so we did.

And when evolving is not enough, re-invent! And so we did. That's why we divided the company into its dominant areas of specialized skills: gaming and entertainment, life sciences, shopper marketing and retail.

Always look for ways to evolve, and involve your team in the process for without their buy-in, evolution becomes revolution.

**7. Give Back to the Community.** It is said, "to those who much is given, much is expected." Supporting your community is not merely a leadership responsibility; it is part of sustaining a culture that includes contributing to your industry.

At the Star Group we believed that giving time is sometimes more important—and beneficial—than giving money. We found that rather than deducting charity contributions from staff paychecks, having staff volunteer to participate in *pro bono* community assignments helped build camaraderie and a sense of individual accomplishment. And, equally as important, the value of the work far exceeded what their financial contributions would have been.

**8. Don't Burn Bridges.** The temptation is sometimes great, but must be resisted. Advertising can be a frustrating business. You can lose a client due to no fault of your own.

I know this is true of many other businesses too. You can be blindsided by people you thought were your allies. The impulse to get even is human nature, but never destroy a link to a past relationship.

It is not unheard of for a former client to become a new client. Or for a valued ex-employee to return to the fold. Or even for a former co-worker to become a customer.

For those of us that have lived long enough to experience these unexpected—and rewarding—developments know that “what goes around comes around.” You just need to be true to your true self, and not be frustrated.

Speaking of frustrations, they are called lawyers. Well, that's been my experience anyway, so that's why it is important to...

**9. Manage Your Lawyers.** I certainly do not subscribe to Shakespeare's suggestion about lawyers for there are situations where they are really helpful and can, in fact, literally “save you're a--.” But there are also times when lawyers can really destroy you. You need to recognize which time is which.

I fear that many business people rely too heavily on their lawyers for everything. I have learned that that is not a good practice. While many lawyers may know the law, they do not necessarily know *your* business. Don't forget that you are the one who knows your business best. It is your job to direct your lawyer to accomplish the stated business goals. It is your

lawyer's job to find the best way to accomplish that goal within the boundaries of the legal system.

But, knowledge of the law does not make them a better judge of your new partner than you. That's *your* call. They can't make the deal you are working on. You need to do it *your* way. They just need to help you paper it correctly.

You can have general counsel that learns your business and is a great advisor and sounding board, but at the end of the day it is you that has to live with the decisions.

Not all lawyers are created equal, so hire special counsel when you need it. There will be times when you will need a lawyer with specific expertise and experience such as when you are buying a building or involved in a labor dispute.

Which reminds me, you can't blame a lawyer if you don't read legal documents. And I mean *carefully*! Yes, legal papers may be boring, perhaps even intimidating, but that *is* your job and not one to be delegated. Once you affix your signature you don't want to have regrets.

And, finally, and perhaps most importantly:

**10. Trust Yourself First.** This is the ultimate lesson I've learned. You are the one that faces yourself in the mirror every day. As a woman CEO my motto was "the doe stops here." It was your abilities that help you rise to the top and it is your abilities that will keep you there. But, be prepared for setbacks.

I as able to set aside setbacks and in the last two years, I have helped create four new start-up companie...smaller, nimbler... leaner and meaner organizations...infused with talented, fun, experienced people.

These include a marketing agency headed up now by my incredibly talented daughter, Kate Talamo, who has a special focus on food industry marketing. Another is a social media savvy music company organized by my son, Tony Talamo, and his partner, Zach Friedman. The up and coming talent they represent have international social media dominance in the industry. In just two years they have already created two gold records.

As for me, I also now have the opportunity to apply lessons learned over 40 years as chief operating officer of a new company called Vsblty. This is a cutting edge technology company that combines interactive glass with facial recognition on everything from retail displays on supermarket coolers to signage in sports stadiums.

Imagine this if you can: technology that has “minority report” type facial recognition capability to gather data such as gender, age, ethnicity, engagement time—and even the viewers’ moods—while an individual is just standing in front of the display.

We are taking point-of-sale marketing intelligence to a whole new level. So you can see why business still excites me— even after 40 years—because I am still learning something new every day.

Jan Talamo, my original partner and husband of 30 years, continues to drive the creative and brand strategies for these companies as well as a new casino gaming company called M Partners.

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