

The stamina to succeed
by Ann Van Slyck

When a nurse entertains the notion of becoming an independent entrepreneur, she needs to be clear in her heart-of-hearts that she is going toward something and not running away.

While most people experience negative feelings occasionally—"I'm unhappy; I'm dissatisfied; No one appreciates me; I'm a victim"—nothing aids success more than positive ideas and skills.

To me, being a nurse entrepreneur means offering something that makes a difference in the quality of patient care. I am a CEO of a national, multimillion dollar firm with offices in five states. What I do, and what my staff does, is slightly different than what an OB staff nurse, or an ICU staff nurse, or charge nurse in the emergency room does.

Every single one of these roles affects patient care. However, today my decisions have an indirect impact on many more patients. We deliver services to people and organizations who do provide direct care. As a result, I believe I am even more professionally sensitive, responsible and accountable for quality patient care than 30 years ago.

In 1981, I was a nurse executive at a large hospital in Phoenix. I had worked at that point for 15 years in nursing and love it—gotten my master's degree and followed *the career path*: unit manager, house supervisor, assistant director of nursing, director of nursing, assistant administrator. And I loved all of that.

I simply woke up one morning and said, "I have 30 years of my career, and I want to make a bigger difference in people's lives through nursing than I can while doing what I am currently doing."

There were very few expert nurse consultants in 1981. As a nurse administrator, I hired very talented consultants at large and prestigious firms to work with finances, legal issues and a variety of specialty areas. But no one at those firms employed nurses who could provide collegial consulting services to a nurse executive. I believed as a successful nurse executive, I had experiences that would help other colleagues.

When I resigned my position at St. Luke's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix, I had no client. I had an idea. I had courage. I had fear. Most importantly, I had a commitment to the *product* of health care—patient care. I also had the equivalent of 18 months of savings in my bank account and could pay my half of the mortgage and care payments, and honor my responsibilities to my husband and community.

My business began in our guest bedroom. I think most people who leave an employment environment to be an entrepreneur on their own will be successful the first year or so. I think it is for two primary reasons: First there is the halo effect. They believe they will be successful, so there is that energy and drive. That doesn't mean there is not also fear, but there is an aura about doing what you want to do.

Secondly, for the most part consulting is about credible relationships. Hospitals usually engage individual consultants and—indirectly—companies or firms. They don't engage firms. In the first year, the first thing you do is pick up the phone and call your colleagues and friends. You tell them what you are doing and ask if what you do can benefit them. Someone will say "yes."

The second and third year are benchmark years. You may be running out of money. You may be running out of friends. That is the time you have to make a decision. Are you really going to be in business? If you were not honest in the first place, and you were running away from

something, it catches up with you here. Otherwise, it forces an unimaginable learning curve about how to run a business, and this is a wonderful opportunity.

I had not run a business in the pure sense. How many staff nurses or nurse executives really are capitalists? They have to learn skills such as defining what it is you are selling. If you are a consultant, you are selling expert time. How do you put a price on it? How much is your time worth? What will the market bear? I learned that expert time has no inventory. When I go to bed at night, the hours I did not bill, I can never bill.

It is a critical and decisive reality of consulting. I cannot go to the shelf tomorrow and pull my hour back. For the nurse who wants to sell consulting time, that is a major change in thinking.

The new consultant entrepreneur has four main responsibilities: 1) to deliver the service; 2) to manage the business; 3) to become increasingly expert in what it is you sell; 4) to develop a full appreciation for marketing and sales.

A new consultant can get so excited when she really has a client, she may forget where her clients are going to come from next year and the year after that. Success relies on balancing those four responsibilities, and the second and third years are when the needs for those surface.

I did not know how to run a business the first year. My husband and I were having dinner with another couple in 1982, who observed, "You have a consulting firm." It was the first time someone said to me, "You have a consulting firm," and I just thought about that for a few days. I didn't know what a consulting firm looked like, I thought, but I am it.

I believe in magical moments, and that was a magical moment for me. I thought I better learn, since I'm it. I need to go to the library and do a search. I need to join and be active in organizations and associations that have consultants. That is how you learn. You are learning a new skill set. I was learning how to run a business, so I became active in the American Association of Management Consultants, the Association of Health Care Consultants, and the local chamber of commerce.

First and foremost I am a nurse, I maintained my membership in Sigma Theta Tau, ANA, and American Organization of Nurse Executives. I joined Health Care Financial Management, because part of my consulting practice involves patient, staff and financial information for clients.

Our roots are as nurses, not as business people. But today there are a lot of examples to help us. In the past five years nurses have increasingly ventured in directions that differ from their experience or jobs and have done extremely well, because they have learned new skill sets.

I chose to become a nurse and an entrepreneur, inspired in part by my mother, who died when I was a teen-ager. When I told her during her final year that I wanted to be a nurse like her mother, she gave me a loving smile. "You can be anything you want to be," she said. I watched the courageous choices she made in her short life, and the obstacles she overcame. She showed me that the freedom to choose the direction your life takes brings immeasurable contentment. Choice is the gift she gave me, along with my grandmother's nursing textbooks. I have used both to the full.

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