

Laurie Keyser Brunner

Find a Way, Or Make One

Long ago though it was, Laura (Laurie) Keyser Brunner very distinctly remembers the moment she decided to become an executive. Only a few months into her first job with AT&T, driving to work off of Old Georgetown Road in Bethesda, Maryland, she was struck with the realization that would change the rest of her life. "I am going to run a business and be an executive leader," she said to herself.

Over the next 12 years, Laurie saw her star rise and her career blossom, fulfilling and then surpassing that goal she set on her drive. Today, she has assumed her most ambitious role yet as the President of MainStream Management, a management consulting firm focused on helping mid-sized companies improve their financial performance and overall market growth. Her own growth since entering the business world has been as impressive as it has been surprising—after all, her arena of success is a far cry from the forestry and natural resources degree she pursued in college. But for someone whose high school motto, "Find a way, or make one," has stuck with her as a lifelong personal philosophy, it's hardly surprising that, once her desires crystallized, she pursued them single-mindedly.

Laurie attributes her competitive spirit to her early interest in sports. Growing up in Potomac, Maryland, she had a close relationship with her father, an electrical engineer who loved athletics and the outdoors and encouraged her pursuits. He introduced her to golf, which she came to love, as well as baseball, which, she laughs, she never did come to appreciate. "I'm a sports junkie, and I listen to ESPN every morning, but I hate baseball!" she says.

Laurie excelled at soccer, golf and tennis, and recalls that her father never missed one of her varsity soccer games in high school. Her tremendous success in business stems, in large

part, from this success in sports earlier in life. "Not only is success in sports advantageous from a business standpoint, but it enables you to be coachable," she explains. "To be successful in sports, you have to accept the input of a coach. Even the pros have coaches. I think that, along the way in life, I've searched for that coaching. Finding the right mentor and being able to listen to feedback from a manager is critical."

Her participation in sports also brought Laurie her first jobs—one as an intern at the Kemper Open for the PGA Tour office, and another as a tennis instructor at a summer camp. Although no one had told her to get a job, she returned to the camp to teach every summer during high school. Ever ambitious, she was put in charge of the other instructors during the summer after her junior year. The summer after that, she hired her own staff and ran the entire program—a glimpse of the success that lay ahead.

After graduating from the Holton-Arms School, Laurie enrolled in the University of the South, a small liberal arts college in Sewanee, Tennessee, where she channeled her love of the outdoors into her pursuit of a forestry degree. In retrospect, Laurie wishes she had had some kind of mentorship to guide her career when she left school, but she drew on the wisdom of her schoolgirl days: *find a way, or make one*. "You can't ever be too proud during your first job out of college," she advises. Striking out on her own with no clear picture of the future, she saw an ad in the Washington Post classifieds for an Administrative Assistant position. She applied, got the job, and began her professional career.

It was during that job that she had a stroke of luck and encountered her first important mentor. In her new office, Laurie was working for Barbara Hackman Franklin, an incredibly successful force in the business world who was, at



that time, serving on the Board of Directors for six Fortune 100 companies. A member of the Consumer Product Safety Commission and Reagan's US Trade Advisory Board, she later became the Secretary of Commerce under President George H. W. Bush.

"Barbara was one of my most important early influences," Laurie remarks. "The impact that she made on how I work with other people was tremendous. I'm still paying it forward, because she really gave me insight into what I could do as an individual and what I could do as a woman." It was Barbara who encouraged Laurie to pursue an MBA, and so she gained admission to the George Washington University and returned to school. While earning her MBA in Marketing, she met her future husband, who became another career advisor as she explored potential paths to success.

Upon finishing her degree, she looked into opportunities at AT&T, MCI and BellAtlantic, and hoping to eventually move into marketing, applied to work as part of the AT&T sales team. She was hired as a National Account Executive for AT&T's USAir account, her first position at the firm where she would spend a dozen years.

From there, Laurie rose quickly within the company, moving from National Account Executive to International Account Executive through her hard work, ambition, and a handful of executive sponsors. She also stresses the importance of vocalizing the desire to move up. "You need to tell people that you want to succeed, that you want to advance," she emphasizes. "Managers can't know that. They can certainly provide mentoring and guidance, but it's up to you to basically raise your hand and say, 'I want to really excel here.' I did do that, and I ended up with a couple of executives who really helped me along the way and gave me opportunities." Among them, she fondly remembers Larry Bell, the Executive for Business Network Sales, who taught her to always pursue perfection and professionalism in business. He emphasized doing things correctly, holding people accountable, and always arriving prepared.

It was also during her time at AT&T that Laurie learned what she considers the most important lesson of her career—the importance of integrity above all else. While working on a high profile account, she and other employees became aware that a client had been overbilled. Laurie

alerted her leadership about the incident, but no immediate action was taken. "That was a huge learning experience for me," Laurie explains. "Even though I had raised the issue, I allowed the direction of those above me to dictate right from wrong. At the time, I felt I'd done everything I should have done, but in that moment, I knew I could—and should—have done more." The matter was ultimately resolved, but not until much later. "I carry that lesson with me always, to have the courage to communicate and behave with integrity, and to always do things that are consistent with what is right. With all the pressures for business results today, staying true to yourself is, I think, a challenge for some, but it's also the most important trait a leader can have. Living your values is ultimately the most rewarding thing of all."

Laurie was a District Sales Manager for mid-market accounts when AT&T began offering buyout packages to trim their employee ranks. She took the money, and without missing a step, found a job with a training and consulting firm in Arlington. The firm, ESI International, grew dramatically during her years there; when she left in 2011, there were nearly 100 people in her worldwide organization. She had started with three. She had become a member of the executive team, building a high performing leadership team of her own and enjoying her time in that capacity so much that she had no plans to move on. But the economy changed the fortunes of the training market, and after three reorganizations of the business, she knew it was time to move on. When a former client of hers put her in touch with the President of MainStream Global Solutions, her decision was confirmed. The two had lunch, and a month later, she went on to meet with the Founder and Chairman of MainStream Holdings. She was elated when he asked to come onboard as President of MainStream Management—an opportunity for personal and professional growth she could not, in good conscience, turn down.

MainStream Management was founded in 1999, and in the years since has expanded from its initial focus in corporate restructuring into business strategy, including financial and operational improvement. The consulting firm's proud mission is to help middle market businesses set up the right strategies for business growth, which encapsulates everything from designing the most efficient operational processes for long term

customer loyalty, to securing the right capital structures to sustain growth. Mainstream Management works with the stakeholders of mid-sized businesses like banks, lawyers, and private equity companies to improve the results of their clients and investments, with special emphasis on manufacturing and consumer product companies.

Today, Mainstream Management is a team of about 50 full-time staff and contractors across the country. “As President, my job is a little bit of everything,” Laurie points out. “You’re steering the ship, you’re the captain, and you have to set the course. You also have to be aware of the environment you’re in. I think functionally, you have to be involved as a leader in every aspect of the business. You have to be able to rely on people to run their parts, but you can’t ask anybody to do something you wouldn’t do yourself. So I’m out there meeting clients, rolling up my sleeves and thinking about products and capability. I’m developing marketing plans, making cold calls, and reviewing the financials. I’m thinking about networking for business partnerships and strategy. It’s very broad, and I think the rewarding part of running a business is that you get to think about it all. You’re not just in one silo.”

As a leader, Laurie is clearly hands-on, eager to be involved in all aspects of the business and never content to let others do the heavy lifting. She also describes her leadership style as collaborative, pointing out that the best leaders surround themselves with smart, talented people, and try to create a cohesive team. “From a leadership perspective, you want to give your employees runway, empower them, and give them credit,” Laurie explains. “Be very open about the contributions those individuals made. You’re successful because of your team.” Laurie’s leadership style also hinges on the importance of feedback, both positive and negative. “From a management perspective, I think it’s important to give feedback,” she affirms. “Too often we’re afraid to tell people they didn’t do something so well, because we don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings. But really, that kind of feedback can be the greatest gift you can give somebody.”

If Laurie’s goal in life is to make a lot of money, it is only so that she can give it all away. “That’s actually what drives me,” she remarks. “It’s not the car, or the house, although those are

certainly nice things to want in life. It’s the prospect of making the world a better place—to truly make a difference.” It’s also important to her to bestow those values on her two sons, ages 16 and 13, and to keep them grounded. They recently accompanied her on a business trip to China, where they took a day out to visit an orphanage for handicapped children. The boys decided to sponsor a child there, demonstrating that they’ve grown up with both an appreciation for what they have, and charitable hearts. “It’s crucial to show your children how important it is to do something for someone else,” Laurie emphasizes. “That’s the legacy that truly lives on.”

Professionally, this legacy will also live on in the lives Laurie has touched through coaching—members of the next generation who will undoubtedly follow in her footsteps. She tries to mentor and encourage younger employees the way she was mentored, helping them understand the context in which they work and to reach their potential. As she coaches and emulates those that coached her, she stresses the importance of integrity and professionalism, helping young people develop the kind of ambition and can-do attitude she has employed throughout her own career. “After you retire, your values, your style, and how you lead continue on through those who have worked with and for you, and that makes your position as a leader all the more important,” she avows. If Laurie has her way, plenty more young executives will also find their way—or make one—as they pursue success.

— **By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®**

About Gordon J. Bernhardt
President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon’s Blog](#).

