Hilary Fordwich

The Lever and the Fulcrum

With a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, the ancient Greek philosopher and scientist Archimedes said, “Give me a place to stand on, and I will move the earth.” It is this concept that Hilary Fordwich, a Surrey, England born, business development icon that has taken the U.S. government contracting scene by storm, brings to her work. By analyzing the current climate strategically and knowing the best place on the lever to apply force, she is shifting the fate of proposals toward a more effective and innovative future.

A week in the life of a mover and shaker like Hilary begins on Sunday mornings at 7 a.m., when she hosts Government Contracting Weekly on the CBS affiliate station, WUSA Channel 9, as part of its Sunday morning power block. As the host, Hilary interviews CEOs and executives of key government contractors in the greater Washington D.C. Metro Area. Personally guiding the trajectory of each segment in the trenches isn’t enough, however; Hilary also invites most of the guests and has developed Strategic Alliances to bolster the show’s reach.

Off-screen, Hilary is the Senior Vice President of AOC Key Solutions, the show’s sponsor, a firm specializing in speaking, training, and orals coaching for government contractors and professionals in service organizations around the Washington metropolitan region. The company, founded in 1983, provides strategy, capture, and proposal services for government contractors. “Quite simply, our typical client is any government contractor that wants to win a proposal,” she explains. “That client doesn’t have to be of a certain size. The top 200 government contractors would be a good list to describe our target demographic, but even small companies can go after $100 million opportunities, and we know how to help them achieve those goals.”

Hilary's position at AOC Key Solutions and at its business development division, the KSI Institute, interplays with her decades of business development experience and her Sunday morning show to place her at a nexus point of the government contracting universe. “Forming a web of strategic alliances through these networks, we are developing an entire business concept and a business development model around the show, with the vision of transforming it into a fulcrum for the government contracting industry,” she affirms. “In this way, all my various roles are intertwined. Guests of the show, clients of KSI, and clients from years prior to joining KSI all move together in tandem, so the resulting sum is greater than the original parts.”

Hilary’s career has always revolved around business development, so AOC Key Solutions has been a perfect fit for her professional skill set. As a solid, client-oriented, results-driven company with strong integrity and a commitment to excellence, it’s been the easy solution to the many questions her own clients and contacts have approached her with, creating a win-win for all involved. “They deliver exemplary strategy, capture, and proposal services—services I can recommend to others with confidence,” she says. “This is perhaps due to AOC Key Solutions’ CEO and co-founder, Jim McCarthy, who’s a wonderful and honest man. I’m very proud to work for him and with him.”

Before Hilary joined AOC Key Solutions, she was still exploring the possibility of Government Contracting Weekly and searching for sponsors of the show. When Jim invited her to speak at their AOC Key Solutions retreat, she heard him address his company, and the pieces of the puzzle immediately began to fall into place before her eyes. “It was as if there were two trains headed toward the station at the same time,” she
details. “I pulled Jim aside and told him about the show. Almost before I had finished speaking, he had said yes to sponsoring it. Not only did he say yes, but I would soon join AOC Key Solutions as a senior VP as well.”

Jim saw in Hilary what everybody does: a single-minded focus and a powerful drive to work hard and do whatever it takes to succeed. Indeed, Hilary has proven herself to be an exceptionally capable woman again and again in the face of a business world dominated by men, which hasn’t exhausted her energy levels, but instead fuels them. Even before she started her own company, Hilary had established a pattern of paving the way, always identifying the fulcrum in each situation and placing her hands on the lever accordingly. In the 1980s and 90s at KPMG, already one of the largest professional services companies in the world, Hilary was a trailblazer. “For every position I’ve held, I’ve been the first person in that role,” Hilary laughs. She was the first to head KPMG’s practice development in Long Island, and she became the first regional leader in New York City. Later, as well, she became the first in a national role to head their government contracting business, and then the first to head business development in Amsterdam. Hilary is used to being a first, and through her efforts in clearing a pathway for others down the road, she is certainly not the last.

Through these increasing levels of responsibility, Hilary embodied a spirit of entrepreneurialism that would soon translate into founding her own company—a business that flourished for a full decade. And while she was born in England, Hilary associates her entrepreneurial side with America. “I’m an American by spirit,” she avows. “I love the spirit of America. I came here as a 15 year old girl, and I feel very comfortable with the way business works here. My friends are here. My life is here. I’m entrepreneurial, and I love the dynamism of America—the can-do attitude that allows people to truly reach their potential.”

Still, Hilary says that her soul is English. “Some of my most treasured belongings are my English antiques,” she explains. “If you could give me the choice of any movie to watch, I would pick something English.” This commingling of her English soul and American spirit lies on a foundation of a refreshing genuineness of character that is as winning as it is amusing. “People laugh at me,” Hilary says, “but I wear my 1980s clothes, no jewelry, and I drive an old car. I don’t really understand what HD television is all about.” When an airline broke her driver—Hilary is a serious golfer, and was a contributing editor for ABC Capitol Golf Weekly for four years—she was thrilled that they were able to repair the club rather than pay for a new one.

It was in England, as a nine year old, that Hilary first noticed that there was something special in the way others saw her. When she spoke, others would listen. Her school class had 50 girls, and without even auditioning, Hilary was selected by the school’s teachers to be the lead in the school play. “I had never thought of myself as being different from anybody else and I didn’t think I stood out in any way, so for me, that was a pivotal moment,” she recalls. “I remember so vividly that it made me think differently about myself than I had before.”

In college, Hilary studied political science and gained a much more nuanced, acute understanding of human nature. “In a sense, I believe the study of political science is the same as that of professional services,” she explains. “People like to think they make intellectual decisions, but that’s often not the case. People in the business world always want to talk about need, but need has very little to do with the choices we make. Nobody in America needs a flat screen TV. You can go into some of the poorest parts of the country right now and find a flat screen on the wall. It’s not all about need. It’s about want.”

Reflecting deeply about what she truly wanted in life, Hilary knew that a flat screen TV couldn’t make her happy—she wanted to change the world. Long after she was no longer a child, and long after she had become a de facto American, she went full steam ahead toward success and found that the only place she felt driven to compromise her 24/7 work ethic was for her own children. “I founded my own company, in part so that I could be closer to my children,” she says. “I didn’t see their first footsteps because I was working. My Mummy said to me that if I missed them, I would never be able to buy back their childhoods, so that was also a pivotal moment of realization in my life.”

Hilary learned many valuable lessons from her mother, though more by example than by explicit lessons. “Mummy is my everything,” Hilary says, “but my decisions all came from me.
Whatever the opposite of a helicopter parent is, that is Mummy. She never told my sister or me not to smoke or drink. She knew the only way she could prevent us from doing the bad things in life was to have us not want to do it ourselves.” In addition to teaching healthy habits by example, Hilary’s mother showed both the potential highs and lows of working in the business world.

“Mummy is brilliant,” Hilary says. “She could have been the CEO of any company, but she was an office manager. In her era, men had an office, and the women were there running everything. She was interfacing with the auditors from KPMG for an investment banking firm, yet she was paid as a secretary. She was treated well—that is, they were nice to her. But she never made the money she could have.” But her highest praise is not specific to any particular lesson or example of work ethic. “She is simply incredible,” Hilary says. “She’s a doer, and she can take care of everything. She’s immensely wise. I always say ‘Mummy always knows best.’ My mother’s my best friend, and we’re so close. Without her, my life will be very different.”

It’s no wonder, then, that being the best mother she can be is among Hilary’s top priorities. She’s compromised when she’s had to, and she’s set her earning goals to be enough to give her children what they need. “I have two sons and a daughter, and they get good grades, play on varsity teams in good schools, are honest, behave well, are good to other people and work hard,” she says proudly.

But Hilary is not only a mother to her own children. When it comes to charitable giving and organizing, if you can name it in this town, she’s been involved. She’s organized for the March of Dimes, Multiple Sclerosis, the American Cancer Society, balls for Leukemia, Heart and Kidney Health, and Financial literacy via Junior Achievement for inner city youth, as well as golf via The First Tee. “It’s important to do as much as you can,” she says. “It’s important to make a positive difference in people’s lives with every opportunity you get.”

Beyond the legacy of her children and her charity, Hilary’s web of impact will certainly be defined by the vital contributions she’s made to her field. Whether it’s through speaking engagements, her television show, or her place as a facilitator at the fulcrum of the government contracting industry, the difference she makes continues to evolve on a daily basis as she works to connect the dots and evoke an increasingly compelling vision. Along this same vein, she has long considered authoring a book, which would add another dimension to this impact in the future.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Hilary reminds us that anyone is capable of achieving the level of success she’s achieved. “Everybody is created equal,” she says. “I don’t think I’m smarter than the average person—quite the contrary, I’m actually not that smart. Everyone should be able to produce what I have, making a good living for their families and finding true happiness along with it. We all have that potential. The only way to achieve it is to work hard, and to engender trust and respect in others.” At a time when over seven percent of the American workforce is unemployed, and countless more find themselves in jobs or careers that aren’t aligned with their ultimate goals, Hilary’s words are perhaps not the end goal, but the fulcrum itself—that pivot point we must all locate for ourselves and use to shift the course of our lives down the path we dream is possible.

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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.