Amanda Hollins

Good Old-Fashioned Horse Sense: A New Model for Business

Determined not to meet the fate of his father, a coal miner who died of black lung disease, Amanda “Aimee” Hollins’ grandfather moved to Southern Maryland and started his first business, selling snack foods. Several other very successful businesses followed, including a gas station, an upholstery service, and a horse training and breeding service. He did all this with only a third-grade education.

A big man with a deep belly laugh, he didn’t realize he was grooming a future leader when little Aimee traipsed behind him, attentive, ever eager, and always full of questions, “Pop-pop, why’d you do that?” or “How did you know that, Pop-pop?”

“My grandfather had a keen sense of people, so he was able to work his relationships even before it was fashionable to have relationships as your basis of business,” Aimee Hollins recollects. “Watching him interact with other folks just fascinated me. It just drew me in. He had this instinct about people and about business itself. It was one of the tools that allowed me to learn to trust my own instincts.”

Pop-pop’s wisdom and common sense approach became the touchstones for Aimee who grew up to become the co-founder her own business. She now serves as the President and Chief Financial Officer of Constellation Software Engineering Corporation (CSE), a government contractor providing information technology and engineering program level support services to government agencies.

Aimee and her business partner, who both previously worked in government contracting, knew all too well the frustrations and inefficiencies that can plague a bureaucracy.

“We first saw a need within The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) for collaborative software technologies and we had a sponsor who was willing to get us started with a task contract.”

Founded in 2002, CSE started out like many companies, in a home basement. As they continued to deliver quality products to their clients, their reputation grew by word of mouth.

“I liked the idea of writing my own ticket and determining how this business is going to be driven,” she states.

It’s wasn’t just the gratification of being the president of a well-honed firm that motivated Aimee. Her intention is that CSE will not only make a difference for their clients, but to also really make a difference in their employee’s lives. “I wanted to be a part of an organization that cared about the individuals, not just the work they were doing. One that took a holistic view of the employee and the company and the corporate citizenship and the fiduciary responsibilities that encompasses all of those things. That was a big driver for me.”

Since opening, CSE has grown to 32 employees with reported revenues of $8 million last year, covering three major areas of service, configuration management, software and enterprise engineering and collaborative technologies. “All of these different supporting roles help on a program level to get people to talk to one another, whether it’s electronically or physically,” Aimee informs. “We work on compliances and regulations, making sure that programs follow their own guidelines which is sometimes a little bit of a challenge,” she chuckles. “We also offer other services like graphic arts, website design and technical writing.”

Because she started the business when she was 29 and had not yet completed her college
degree, Aimee initially struggled with being able to walk into a boardroom and have older, more seasoned colleagues take her seriously. Over time, her confidence grew, with the help of mentors and classes she took. “I didn’t like that commanding, militant style of leadership,” Aimee admits. “My style is more of a conversation. I like to ask questions, to put a personal flavor on leadership.”

Aimee’s growth as a leader has been steady. “As the oldest of five children, it was my role to make sure that everybody stayed in line,” she says. “I’ve been bossy for as long as I can remember, but that doesn’t always mean being a good leader. I’ve learned a lot of my leadership skills through modeling people who have strong personalities, who are able to communicate well, and excite people about their vision.” She also read biographies and memoirs to study and learn about the leadership paths of business leaders who were known for their effectiveness.

Another characteristic of Aimee’s leadership is her belief in giving back to the community. CSE sponsors cystic fibrosis events and supports local baseball and soccer teams.

“Our newest push is corporate citizenship and we’ve offered funding to a girls robotics team to promote opportunities for younger women in technology. Being in a rural community, some of local schools have really suffered financially, so providing financial support for these projects to move forward is important to me as president of CSE.”

On a personal level, Aimee does a great deal of small business mentoring and volunteers with local organizations, both corporate and civic.

Inspired by companies like Patagonia and Google, Aimee strives to create an environment at CSE where employees can thrive and fosters a healthy work-life balance, telling new employees, “I want to empower you. I want you to grow your empire. I will give you tools and training. I want you to go home to your family. I want you to volunteer in your community. I will help you make that happen because you’ll be a happier and more balanced employee.” She shares, “It’s really important to me that they have that opportunity.”

Aimee’s commitment to balance may stem from the dynamics of her childhood. While she has pleasant memories of her time with her grandfather, the family was extremely pro-male. “All of my male cousins got college educations and vehicles handed to them. The girls were supposed to get married and be taken care of. I was the exception.” And even though Aimee worked with the horses with her grandfather, she wasn’t taught the business. “I was interested in it and learned by proxy, she says.”

Aimee vividly remembers a pivotal occasion when she was in high school. “My mom and dad were married for 13 years. During that time he was very abusive to her. She never complained, but eventually, she began to stand up to him. I was scheduled to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test for entering college. On the day of the test, my father told that me I would have to work at the gas station that day instead. My mom came to the gas station and told him, ‘Look, she’s taking that SAT and I don’t care what you say.’ That was very empowering,” Aimee recalls. “Watching my mom stand up to him with grace and strength and conviction opened up so many doors for me”. She realized in that moment that she didn’t have to accept whatever was handed to her.

But Aimee didn’t attend college right after high school. She got her first real job (and her first taste of government contracting) when she was 18.

She also got married, and stopped working to raise her children, home-schooling her sons through their first six years of education.

“At one point when I was home-schooling my children, I felt like my own brain was turning to mush, so I decided to start college.” Majoring in engineering, Aimee eventually realized that she just wanted to play with numbers and that CSE, which had been newly started, needed a strong financial person, so she switched her major to accounting. It took her eight years of part time study to get her baccalaureate.

During that time, Aimee also started her first small enterprise. Building on what she’d learned in her grandfather’s horse business, Aimee became a horse trainer. She specialized in problem solving for horse and rider teams, including teams participating in competitive equestrian sport. “That was fascinating to me to figure out the psychology of where they were getting hung up and how could I ‘un-stick’ them,” she notes.

Beyond her grandfather’s tutelage, Aimee had several people take her under their wing along the way. Her first mentor was a certified public accountant. “I don’t know what I would have done without him,” she confesses. “Many times I called him in the wee hours of the morning and he...
helped me work things out. He was also pivotal in getting CSE through some of the practical accounting issues that all businesses experiences."

Aimee is most proud of being able to use her own ingenuity and drive to find the answers and to stick with it through the end. Knowing that she was able to figure it out puts a smile on her face. “I hope that others will look at my story as an underdog story. Look at where I started and where I ended up and say, ‘Wow, she didn’t give up’ or ‘She didn’t listen to the criticism or the people telling her that this is not what she should be’.”

When asked what was one of the biggest lessons learned, Aimee quickly responds, “That you don’t know what you don’t know until you know you don’t know it -- and then it’s too late,” she continues, “When I mentor younger businesses, I encourage them to do a lot of research and to really think strategically, not just throw themselves into an idea.”

In fact, Aimee’s advice to anyone starting out, whether in their own business or a job is to ask a lot of questions and to look for the value. “Even with opportunities that look like you won’t get anything out of it, find the value. Whether it’s shadowing the trash man for a day or sitting in a CEO’s office for a day, find value in every single experience. Find the lessons. Don’t just dismiss an experience.”

For Aimee Hollins, leading Constellation Software Engineering Corporation has been about building a business based on fundamental values, creating balanced relationships, and modeling good practices. Coming from down-home origins, she shows us, by example, that all things are possible if you trust your instincts, tackle problems head-on, and respect learning in all of its configurations.

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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.