

Lisa Rosenthal

The Pursuit of Knowledge

When 19-year-old Lisa Rosenthal's college statistics professor called her in after class one day, the worst-case scenarios began playing out in her mind. Surely her lackadaisical attendance had caught up with her and she was about to lose her scholarship, which would prompt her father to pull her out of American University. But as she braced for the dominos of her future to begin toppling in rapid succession, the conversation took an abrupt turn. "Young lady," said Dr. Gene Mignogna, "you've skipped most of my classes, you don't dress appropriately, you have an attitude problem, but you've managed to set every curve in my class."

"Are you kicking me out?" she asked.

"No, I'm hiring you."

Two weeks later, Lisa donned one of the new suits her mother had bought her and arrived for her first day of work as a Congressional budget analyst for a large defense contractor called ANSER. "I went from getting home at 5:00 in the morning after partying all night, to getting up at 5:00 AM for work," she remembers. "It was an adult job, and I was still a full-time student, so I grew up really fast. But it was incredible. My plans to become an environmental lawyer, which I'd wanted to be since I was a little girl, completely died the moment I started working for the Department of Defense. I worked with the Air Force, the Navy, the Army, the Marines, and I fell in love with serving the war fighter." Now the cofounder and CEO of The Mayvin Consulting Group, Inc.(Mayvin), a defense contracting firm, finding ways to support and serve this extraordinary population has been her purpose and devotion for over twenty years.

Lisa's work today is done against the backdrop of a tireless and lifelong pursuit of knowledge, and in many ways, the company itself has been the stage upon which invaluable lessons

in life and self-knowledge have played out. Launching and sustaining a company is nothing short of a rollercoaster toward greater awareness, and Lisa wanted a company logo reflecting that reality. When she came across the symbol of the Akan Tribe in Ghana, she knew it was the perfect insignia for Mayvin. "I've always been an incredibly prolific reader, and I discovered that the symbol means 'the pursuit of knowledge to create wisdom.' It's what Mayvin is all about—the pursuit of solutions to create wisdom that can save

lives on the battlefield and enable our most sacred ideals in the world." The firm's name is equally meaningful, drawn from Malcom Gladwell's book, *The Tipping Point*, to signify a subject matter expert who seeks to share information with others. "Our mission is to assemble a team of subject matter experts who can do it better, and then create an environment where they can be better. We seek wisdom and knowledge and then share that with government clients for the

betterment of all."

Mayvin was officially launched in June of 2008, several months after Lisa gave up a secure job at a billion-dollar firm to find out what she was really made of. The company now provides program management support services to help government offices run effectively, including analytics, budget and financial management, acquisition and contracting logistics, and engineering projects. It also specializes in Army battlefield technologies and mission support services, which can mean sending employees over to Afghanistan or Iraq when they know they have the right person for a job. "We do operational energy, training, asymmetric warfare, and support for the U.S. Army Rapid Equipping Force," Lisa explains. "We also bring clarity and effectiveness to defining requirements and figuring out what's really needed. If a soldier dies overseas, how do



we come up with the right solution to make sure it doesn't happen again?"

Mayvin's corporate culture is steeped in inclusivity, dignity, and respect, oriented around the core tenet values of accountability, responsiveness, teamwork, integrity, customer-focused, leadership, and excellence (ARTICLE). Its leadership team works for its employees first and foremost—a structure that truly differentiates it from other firms. "We're nothing without our employees," Lisa affirms. "They're our number one priority, and we take great strides to bring everyone together for fun events so we can nurture a culture of connectedness and positivity." This mindset, coupled with Lisa's proclivity for celebrating kooky holidays like National Margarita Day and National Haiku Day, explains the company's phenomenal 93 percent retention rate and enduring sense of employee loyalty.

The company's culture rests on the firm foundation created by its leadership triumvirate. As the CEO, Lisa excels in corporate strategy, vision, and generating the crazy ideas that have kept Mayvin fresh and front-running. Carla Percy is the executing force behind the company's success, managing the staff through deep interpersonal relationships as they work to transform Lisa's ideas into reality. Victor Pirowski lends accountability to the whole operation while also managing all financial matters with a meticulous and detail-oriented eye. The three have worked together for over a decade, creating a family-like environment that fuels currents of innovation, creativity, acceptance, and unconditional support.

Much of Lisa's success stems back to her own family, and to the parents she affectionately refers to as her rock through life. Born into a middle class suburban home near Detroit, Michigan, she enjoyed growing up in a close-knit community where the neighborhood kids played outside together every evening. Her father was a school psychologist in the same school system for over forty years, while her mother was a special education teacher who would come home from work exhausted and drained most nights but never throw in the towel. "She kept doing what she was doing because it mattered," Lisa says. "She made a difference in the lives of those students and parents, and watching her had a hand in connecting me with the importance of a purpose-driven profession. And thanks to my

incredible father, I developed my love of adventure and risk. He's always willing to try new things, even if it means getting his scuba certification at age 69. We've traveled the world together and still take a daddy-daughter adventure trip each year."

Lisa's parents have been married for over four decades and always encouraged her to strive for excellence. They set her up with a strong moral background with very specific parameters for right and wrong, and taught her to throw her whole self into her pursuits and passions. They wanted their daughter to know how to cook, shoot guns, golf, and dance, and she was that child who excelled at everything without really trying. At twelve years old, her father forced her to take karate classes so she'd be able to protect herself, but her instructor gave her so much more. "One day, he decked me," she recalls. "I was shocked, and then mad. But he said, 'Are you done not giving it your all?' He decked me again. The third time, I finally hit him back. That's when it dawned on me that you have to play the game. You can't just sit on the sidelines sulking, hoping you won't get decked again."

As a kid, Lisa had no interest in domestic life or motherhood. She dreamed of being a businesswoman, perhaps a lawyer. She read voraciously, was constantly active, and put up with her parents and younger brother when the family piled in to their 24-foot motor home and traversed the country to visit battlefields and historic sites. The tiresome monotony of these history lessons all faded away, however, when the trailer found its way to Washington, DC, when Lisa was twelve. "I remember getting out, looking around, looking up at my parents, and saying, 'This is where I belong; you can just leave me here,'" Lisa recounts. "I knew it from that moment that I was a DC girl through-and-through. It's the seat of world power and greatest city on Earth."

Thanks to that life-changing experience, Lisa set her sights on American University (AU) for college. The school had its own private campus, a beautiful arboretum, and professors that were working professionals before they were academics. They had lived business, not just studied it, and Lisa planned to double-major in Political Science and Environmental Policy before going on to Georgetown Law School to become an environmental lawyer. And though she ended up switching tracks when she stumbled across her dream job in the Pentagon at age nineteen, her

fidelity to the school that helped her get there has remained constant over the years. “I absolutely fell in love with the university, and went back for my MBA,” she says. “I think about the people who changed my life through their mentorship or guidance, and I feel it’s my job now to give back in whatever way I can. I spend a lot of time at AU working with undergrads, and I also run a Junior Women’s Forum for ladies age 22 to 30 to help with career mentorship.” Lisa now serves on the AU Alumni Board of Directors, as well as its Entrepreneurship Council, where she runs the Affinity Committee.

It was at AU, one day in class, when Lisa first heard the famous quotation, “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.” She resolved to live her life by those words, and when she finished her undergraduate degree, she made sure she was prepared for the many opportunities that awaited her in the intelligence community. After completing a series of six-month rotations that built a widespread base of knowledge, she worked in government for a total of four years and then moved over to the private sector, where her entrepreneurial nature had more room to roam. “Working in the government intelligence space, I met more unsung heroes than anywhere else,” she remarks. “What they’re doing and sacrificing is breathtaking. I learned a work ethic that what you do matters, even if you don’t get credit for it.”

Lisa spent some time working at the Department of Energy’s Office of Nuclear National Security Information, where she learned about cost schedule performance, and then landed a job with a small firm working with one of the most remarkable organizations in the military, called the U.S. Army Rapid Equipping Force (REF). In that capacity, Lisa worked on technology solutions for soldiers in need, including robotics, UAVs, lock picks, and camera systems. As she dedicated her efforts to increasing the situational awareness and force protection of America’s service members, she realized who and what she was. “I was working with the brightest minds around to figure out how to save soldiers’ lives on the battlefield,” she says. “At one point we were working on a project called Ballistic Helmet, and one day, we got one delivered to us with bullet imprints on the outside. On the visor was a note scribbled from a kid that read, ‘I don’t know who you people are, but you just saved my life.’ When I realized the magnitude

of what I was doing, it gave me a feeling I can’t even begin to describe.”

While she loved her time at that job, Lisa came to find herself undeniably drawn to the idea of doing business her own way. She wanted to figure out how to run a company, develop a culture, and serve clients—things she had read about in her business books but hadn’t actually lived yet. When she was 32 and confident she knew everything there was to know about running a company, Lisa called up Carla Percy, a colleague from work, and invited her out to drinks. At the bar that night, she drew out the plan on a napkin: they would quit their jobs, go to zero salary, and start a company. Carla looked at her, half-incredulous and half-unsurprised. “An entrepreneur is an entrepreneur,” Lisa reminds us. “It’s natural and in our blood. We’re just compelled to start businesses. I think Carla and I recognized that in each other.”

By the end of the night, Carla was in. Within four months, they quit their jobs and brought along Victor, the 26-year-old numbers whiz who would be their CFO. Ninety days after that, they landed their first contract with an Army organization to enhance situational awareness on the battlefield. Lisa, happily married and living a life in Old Town Alexandria, hopped in the car at 4:00 AM to drive across the country to Seattle, where they planned to open an office at a site they had rented without seeing. Within 20 seconds, she hopped back out of the car and threw up. “I realized it was really happening, and we were really doing it,” she recounts. “That was the only moment of hesitation. A few minutes later, I was on the road, both literally and figuratively.”

Over the next year, Mayvin’s identity and purpose took shape in earnest as Lisa, Carla, and Victor found their sea legs. They resolved to fake it until they made it, teaching themselves how to run Quickbooks, do pricing, write proposals, hire staff, and draft an employment agreement. “In those early days, we googled everything and phoned friends for advice,” she remembers. “There were a lot of naysayers—people saying we didn’t know what the hell we were doing and had no business starting a business. But we knew how to treat people with dignity and respect, and we were willing to work harder than anyone, and that was enough. We would figure the rest out.”

When the Seattle office was up and running, Lisa moved back to DC, but not to the life

she had left behind. In the coming months, she divorced and reclaimed the freedom she had always felt such affinity for. "Running a business is very hard on a personal life," she says. "I'm hard-charging, Type A, over-the-top, and incredibly extroverted. I'm drawn to chaos, activity, and the ensuing exhaustion when I finally call it a night. It makes for one hell of a ride, and I wouldn't trade it for anything."

Lisa's relentless energy became a matter of life and death for the company on March 23, 2012, when a major contract expired and the company didn't win the recompetes. With Mayvin's main source of funding eviscerated overnight, Lisa and her team spent the next several days drinking champagne and crying into their glasses. But by March 26, they picked themselves up, returned to the office, and set their minds to tackling the questions that most needed to be answered. How do we run a company? What do we want to look like when we grow up? How do you actually bid on contracts and win them? How do you hire people and keep them? How do you create a corporate culture? How do you set up systems to make sure everything runs smoothly?

The leadership team managed to pull through that hardship without laying off any of its eight employees. And today, only three years later, they're a team of almost 70 that won a \$20 million contract with the Department of Homeland Security in 2013 and a \$38 million prime contract with the Army's Special Operations Command in September of 2014. It made the Inc 5000 in 2014 and was a finalist for Fairfax County's Corporate Citizen award, signifying its commitment to giving back to the community. "Not bad for a couple of kids with no idea what they were doing," Lisa smiles. "Mentors have been the bread and butter of our success—fantastic individuals whose knowledge and insight have been invaluable. Some have been recognized as members of our Board of Advisors, while some operate more behind-the-scenes. They're people from all over the community who didn't look at us when we were 32 and say we were just a bunch of silly girls trying to figure out how to run a business. They're the people who said, 'Hey, you two are crazy enough that this just might work, and we want to help.'"

Just as Mayvin's success has been defined by connecting with the right people, its integrity has been shaped profoundly by its resolve to avoid

the wrong ones. "We know we're not going to be rich, but we definitely make enough to live on, and that means we can do the right thing no matter the consequences," Lisa explains. "We have no problem walking away from contracts when we believe the entity we're working with is unethical. It matters who you work with—your employees, your clients, your partners. It really matters. We empower our team members to make those decisions too, even if it means walking away from a lot of money. At the end of the day, we need to be able to sleep at night, and that means guarding our integrity on all counts."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Lisa underscores the importance of pushing through fear and doubt. "Was I worried about failure along the way?" she queries. "Every single day. Even now, I'm constantly stressed out about it. What if we don't do this? What if we do it wrong? But I've learned over the years that the 'what ifs' aren't worth it. Every single time, take the risk. If you don't think you can do it, do it anyway. If someone gives you an opportunity, say yes. Failure is inevitable. You're going to screw things up, make wrong decisions, spend money you shouldn't have, and hire the wrong people. You're probably going to screw things up daily. Failure only happens when you don't get up the next day and do it again. There are very few mistakes in life that can't be fixed with a bottle of champagne and some good conversation."

Lisa is also firmly committed to overcoming gender stereotypes in the workplace, which are too often nurtured by both men and women alike. She was 23 when a female colleague from the intelligence community, Marty, overheard her complaining about a female-related issue, and firmly told her that she needed to get over it and get back in the game. "Never again did I apologize for being a woman," she avows. "I'm constantly asked what it's like to be a woman executive running a Department of Defense contracting firm. I tell them it's no different from being a male executive. I'm a CEO who happens to be female. I'm very passionate about the advancement of women in leadership, and I firmly believe that the only way we're going to change the world is for women and men to focus on their similarities instead of their differences."

All taken together, Lisa's journey has been a road to learning that the best workplace is one

where employees are empowered to 'go for it', that the best pathways aren't linear, and that the whole of Mayvin is magnitudes greater than the sum of its parts. But above all, it's been a road defined by learning. "I'm learning every chance I get," she says. "It might be courses at the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce, or the Leadership Fairfax program, or classes at AU. It might be reading. Or it might just be talking with others. Above all else, success is the pursuit of knowledge—the exchange of ideas and the transformation of ideas into action to find out what it takes to move our lives, our business, our communities, and our society forward."

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