

FUELING ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Determination + Preparation = Success

By
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The Roman philosopher Seneca said, "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity." If Seneca were alive today, he would most likely be connected on LinkedIn to Bernita McCann Hightower, President and CEO of Next Generation Fuel. As a child in Mississippi or even as a real estate professional in California, she did not see owning a fuel company in Ohio as her path.

"I got into this by accident," McCann Hightower recalls. "I went to work for an MBE-owned fuel company, and I found the B2B business model so interesting, I wanted to learn everything I could about it." Although she had plenty of experience building relationships, it had been mostly in a business-to-consumer environment. So, she did something that she has often repeated throughout her career. She set about learning everything about the business that she could.

"No job was too small," McCann Hightower recalls. "I answered phones, made copies, took out the trash, but I got to see every facet of the business and I soaked it all up." She learned about insurance, pricing negotiation, bidding, and more. Then came an opportunity. The company she was working for did a number of agreements where they needed diverse-owned businesses to partner with as Tier 2. There was more need than supply. She seized the opportunity. She went to the owner of the company and asked for a shot to incubate her own organization. They agreed.

Next Generation Fuel, LLC was born. The company started with a Tier 2 contract and grew from there. Two years later, McCann Hightower found the next iteration of her business. What was supposed to be a 10-day vacation in South Africa turned into an eight-day business planning visit. Next Gen expanded with a South Africa office. Once again, she leveraged her quest for knowledge and training.

"I believe in eating your humble pie when learning," she shares. McCann Hightower knew that she needed to learn about the business environment and culture in South Africa as much as she needed to train those she worked with. "There is nothing unique about selling fuel," she observes. "It's about my performance and how well I can service my customers."

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It's also about paying it forward. McCann Hightower recognizes that she did not take the silver spoon route to success. She wants to be sure she is helping the next generation. She is a strong practitioner of internships and the company provides scholarships through the YWCA.

"I didn't see a lot of me earlier in my career," McCann Hightower notes. "I love seeing that light in a young woman's eyes when she sees someone like her who has been successful." It is that desire that sometimes puts her on unusual agendas. She likes speaking to groups that don't get a lot of speakers; that perhaps are not in the best neighborhood or the largest draw for other business leaders.

When asked what advice she would give to aspiring entrepreneurs, McCann

Hightower had some real talk for them.

1. **Put the time in.** McCann Hightower is not afraid of hard work and believes in doing the research and understanding whatever area of business is being undertaken.
2. **Keep it personal.** Providing the personal touch sounds simple but doing it well can be complex and have a lot of moving parts.
3. **Know when to pivot.** "I have a 10-year plan, but I am constantly tinkering with it," she says. "You have to be ready to shift when the climate changes. If you take a hit, you hit back harder and reinvent yourself."
4. **Take time to fill your cup.** As an entrepreneur, you spend a lot of time filling the cup of others. Customers, staff, family, it all pulls on you. "I value my 'count on one hand' members of my tribe," McCann Hightower accedes. "If you don't invest in filling your cup, you won't be able to take care of anyone else."

At a time when small businesses may be reeling from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, McCann Hightower gives us the framework to not just survive, but to thrive. ☺

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