

Local Training Company Celebrates 20th Anniversary



When Deborah Mackin founded New Directions Consulting, Inc., people suggested that she was foolish. The typical advice was, “A female consultant in Vermont won’t last a year; better find something else to do.” She proved them wrong. Today, New Directions celebrates its twentieth anniversary, providing training and consulting to large and small businesses and organizations throughout the United States and Canada.

“I was determined to make the business work,” Deborah commented recently, reflecting on her company that now has five employees. For the first year, she operated out of a spare room in her home in Bennington, Vermont, launched with a \$500 loan from her mother. “The first thing I purchased was an answering machine, and I’d travel around calling myself to see if anyone left messages.” Mackin would rent a typewriter from a local business supplier once a week and do all her correspondence on Fridays. Her first disappointment as a business owner was getting turned down by her local bank for a charge card. “They told me I didn’t have enough work experience, even though I’d been working at that point for thirteen years.” Her response: she walked across the street to a different bank, asked about their position on women-owned businesses, and had a card within twenty-four hours.

When the business got too big for the spare room, Mackin moved into the Bennington County Industrial Corporation incubator building, renovating space with a construction loan from the Town of Bennington. She also purchased computers and doubled her size, a

move that would later threaten the survival of the business when the recession hit in the early 90s. “We were over-extended with our debt and when I asked the bank for more money, they froze everything instead.” Needing a creative, out-of-the box solution to keep the business alive, Mackin turned to one of her clients, who advanced her \$10,000 against future billing. “That was our little pot of gold. It took us five years to come out from under the debt, but we did it.” Today, Mackin is very careful about borrowing money, although she will acknowledge that sometimes it’s needed for business growth.

In 1994 Mackin wrote her first book, *The Team Building Tool Kit*, which is still in print having sold over 55,000 copies. “I wrote an outline and first chapter and mailed it to sixteen publishers of business books. Much to our surprise, four of them called and American Management Association gave us the best offer.” The book became an instant marketing strategy for New Directions, as calls came in from throughout the United States and Canada for help with implementing team-based organizations. Early this year a reader on Amazon.com wrote about the book:

“I have easily paid 8x more for other ‘manuals’, ... this is the anchor of my team building library. It is short on philosophy and long on the day-to-day requirements of goal-setting, consensus building, procedures, and strategies. This is THE book of practical advice to guide a team and its' leader, regardless of prior experience.”

Mackin wrote a second book called *Keeping the Team Going* that was published in 1996. “The books give us legitimacy and open doors to large

firms like Delta Faucet, Exxon, Sanofi Pasteur and AT&T.”

Today, New Directions offers a full-line of training seminars and products for businesses and organizations. “We not only deliver high quality training, we also are our own R & D and Marketing departments—designing, developing and selling the training programs as well.” Mackin explained. “We prefer to work with organizations that are looking for a long-term relationship with experienced consultants who can help them drive change toward teaming, high quality service and increased productivity.” Mackin has worked with one manufacturer, for example, for over six years to help them implement self-directed teams in the company. “The transformation to a team-based organization, especially from a top-down hierarchical one, takes substantial time. People see that we have the experience and are willing to invest in a slow process that nets big returns in the long run. Team-based organizations are 30 percent more productive than traditional ones.”

Reflecting on how she convinced people to see her as a trainer twenty years ago, Mackin shared a humorous story. “I was teaching a small business course at a local community college and invited three local businessmen to come speak to my class. As a thank you to them, I offered each of them a free seminar on time management, with one hitch: If I got good

ratings on the seminar, they would agree to buy another one. All three got a kick out of the idea and accepted the challenge. I then used their endorsements to market the business to others. In small business you have to be very creative – and sometimes daring.”

Speaking about the trends she sees in business, Mackin stated, “A recent article in HR Magazine showed that the top 50 small and medium size businesses are averaging 44 hours of training per employee per year. Smart organizations see training as an investment that they must make in order to be competitive in the marketplace.”

Looking forward, Mackin is eager to find the time to write another book and to increase the number of products offered on the business’ web site: www.newdirectionsconsulting.com. “The business has great people working for it who have really enhanced our line of products and services. We do customer surveying, online employee and team surveys and assessments, and sell scripted training modules and numerous meeting and teaming products. I could never have imagined this twenty years ago.” Mackin noted. “I’d also like to see the business thrive and survive without me.” To that end, Mackin has been teaching others in the company how to take her place. I’ve got ten years before I’d like to retire; I’d like to see the business continue as a legacy to the value of determination, drive and creativity.”