



HR STAR



Lynn Lieber: CEO and Founder of Workplace Answers

[By Robin Salisian]

“I began as an employment lawyer,” says Lynn Lieber, CEO and founder of Workplace Answers Inc. “And although I very much loved practicing law, and I loved the relationship with clients and counseling HR people, my real passion is for training.”

Indeed, Lieber’s enthusiasm for her work is palpable. Her passion for her company and her team is obvious when speaking with her, and it’s that passion that has moved Workplace Answers to the top.

But before immersing herself in HR, Lieber studied pre-law and communications at the University of the Pacific. She graduated in 1984, headed off to law school at Santa Clara School of Law, and in 1987, received her J.D. Next, Lieber worked a five-year stint for the largest employment firm in the country representing management: Littler Mendelson. And in 1995, after leaving Littler, she became a partner at Fisher and Phillips.

“I began doing a lot of in-person training for employees and supervisors in areas like unlawful harassment preventions, discipline and discharge, hiring, interviewing, family and medical leave, the intersection of leave laws and diversity type training,” says Lieber.

“[All of this] opened my eyes to the fact that as an attorney who knows the law, being with employees and supervisors gave me a very practical take on what it’s like to be in the work place. Because I would sometimes say to them, ‘This is harassment. Here are some examples of what could be harassment.’ And some people [would] say, ‘Well, you don’t understand my job — I’m a police officer. I get harassed everyday. So how does that apply to me?’ So it really opened up my thinking about training.”

As a professional who enjoys taking big risks, Lieber soon took a big one: in 2000, she left her practice (and her *salary*) and launched her own business. Its headquarters? “My kitchen,” she adds with a laugh.

Q. What do you do like to do outside of HR? Any odd hobbies/interests? Are you married? Do you have children? Can you explain a little about your personal life outside of work?

A. I’m married to an employment law attorney. I have two step-daughters and four step- grandchildren who are the light of my life and who bring me a lot of joy, because when you’re with them, you can’t think about anything else but them.

Something that helped me leave the traditional practice of law was painting — acrylic and oil painting. And I think my life as a lawyer was so orderly and left brain and rule oriented that painting opened up a different side of my brain to creativity, where perfection isn’t necessarily the goal, it’s about expressing yourself. I also love flowers, art, colors, design, texture — all those things really inspire me.

Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?

A. My iPhone? I love music and am very inspired by music, and it can be anything from pop music, Maroon 5, to country music, to opera.

Q. What is the last magazine you read?

A. I love *Inc.* magazine, which is [made up of] stories by entrepreneurs. I always find their experiences very enlightening.

Q. What is your favorite TV show?

A. 24. I don’t like sitcoms — I like action/drama/suspense

Q. Who is your role model?

A. I have a very dear friend of mine who recently passed away. His name is Stephen Levin. He lead such an exemplary life and had such clear priorities, values, and integrity, and he battled cancer for two years with just optimism, hope, wit — and he just had an indomitable will...He’s really an inspiration to me as [to] how you should live your life.

She founded the business with her brother. “He handled all the technological and financial side, and I did all the course development, the sales, the marketing. We’re not partners anymore. I bought him out in 2005, but that’s how we began.

“I really believed in training, good high quality training, that employees and supervisors could learn from that was scaleable,” she continues. “And the way to do that is through the Internet.”

Workplace Answers is a San Francisco-based company that trains in areas of HR exclusively through the web. With a vibrant and diverse staff of 25 employees (who do everything from graphics to technology, from customer service to sales), Workplace Answers “services employers all around the globe, providing compliance training to their employees and supervisors.”

“It’s been such a labor of love,” says Lieber, who has overcome various new-business-owner challenges, the biggest one being inexperience. Naïve about sales, naïve about technology, and naïve about drafting proposals, Lieber had a lot to learn when she began; however, she persevered. She maintained her passion. She hired an incredible team. And, perhaps most important of all, she learned how to delegate. Doing it all by herself, Lieber learned, wasn’t realistic.

“To find employees and my senior management team and people who have been with me for years now, supporting that dream...it just leaves me speechless that I’ve had such great support. Because you definitely cannot do this alone.”



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And the payoffs of persevering have made everything worth it. “One thing I like,” Lieber says, “is seeing relatively young employees come in to our company and seeing how they grow over the years and time and how they learn new skills and gain confidence.

“It’s a great feeling that you are educating people that you’ll never even meet or know — everywhere. And they can take that education and that learning with them even when they leave that work environment, and hopefully that it makes all work environments a more respectful and comfortable place to work.”

Though not practicing law, Lieber continues applying her legal knowledge to the HR field. And she shares her expertise with many. Lieber has discussed harassment issues in a variety of publications including *HR Magazine*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.

“Harassment is always my favorite,” she says. “I think it’s so interesting because the laws are basically trying to set guidelines on human behavior, which is truly impossible to do, because how one person perceives something might be different from how

other people perceive something, and the whole mindset of the person who engages in harassment I find fascinating — the psychological parts of it. Often people who file harassment complaints have certain commonalities in their personality.”

Lieber is also well-versed in important issues facing HR today. Budgets and laws are two issues Lieber focuses on, saying “I think HR is very well intentioned and wants to do the right thing, and I often see that the further we get up in the budget process someone says, ‘Well, we don’t really need that training.’ Companies that don’t do best practices, that just do the very minimum, that’s very frustrating for HR.

“It’s a very challenging position,” Lieber continues. “It involves a lot of strategy, a lot of political savvy in the organization; it’s not just listening to employees problems. I think that HR is such a pivotal position because the way I’ve always seen it is, the employer/employee relationship is in so many ways like the juncture upon which our society is built, and managing that relationship, finding the really good people, retaining the really good people — that’s a hard job. And there are so many different aspects to it.”

But through the difficulties and frustrations, Lieber has persevered, driven by a passion to positively affect the HR industry. Along the way, many mentors have aided her: “When I was in college, I was a production assistant at a TV station, and there was a female anchor person who was very influential in showing me that I could do something in a male-dominated field.”

And today? She aides others and is happy to offer her own wisdom to aspiring HR professionals: “Think about building a network of people — joining SHERM, joining other organizations, developing resources that can guide you along the way. And developing mentor relationships is very important in HR because someone might have found the perfect solution, and rather than you spending two weeks researching what that is, if someone could tell you that, it makes you a hero.”

But more than organizations and more than networking, Lieber’s greatest accomplishment remains the enthusiasm and intensity she brings to her work: “Having a lot of passion and having people follow me and want to work with me in supporting that passion has been amazing to me.”

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