

SALES STAR



## Lynda McDermott: A World Class Sales and Consulting Dynamo

[By Akbar Ali]

As president of EquiPro International Ltd., Lynda McDermott has had more than 30 years of management and consulting experience and has helped transform dozens of international companies and corporate executives into industry leaders. She is also an accomplished, in-demand speaker and bestselling author whose expertise has been utilized by companies like Pfizer, Procter & Gamble, and Time Warner.

McDermott's path to consulting success began atypically: she started out as a psychology major at Miami University of Ohio. After graduation, she moved on to a management intern position at Ohio Bell Telephone Company. Soon thereafter she was recruited by the prestigious Cleveland accounting firm Ernst & Winnie (now Ernst & Young). When the firm transferred to New York City, she was given the official launching pad to her sales career when she was hired as a consultant.

"What I quickly learned was that if you're going to consult, you *have* to sell," she affirms.

It took a while for McDermott to fully bridge her consulting ambitions with her selling abilities:

"They didn't throw me to the wolves right away, but it became pretty evident that I was going to have to sell. I guess I was pretty naïve, but I didn't really realize that part of consulting involved selling. Now it seems almost hilarious to think that I was so naïve, but I just didn't realize it because my earlier jobs had been in a corporation where I didn't have to sell for a living."

She spent the following eight years building up the Ernst & Winnie human resources consulting practice. From there she moved on to KMG Main Hurdman, which was also ranked

among the Big Eight accounting firms.

"I started from scratch there too, building up their human resources consulting practice. I was the primary salesperson and had a staff of about six people working for me," she recalls.

KMG's decision to enter into a merger

**Q. What do you do for fun?**

**A.** We boat; during boating season we love to boat. In the wintertime we love to cross-country ski, and occasionally I will go sit down at the piano.

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

**A.** My husband bought me Neil Sedaka's 50th anniversary CD.

**Q. What is the last magazine you read?**

**A.** Oprah's *O Magazine*.

**Q. What is your favorite TV show?**

**A.** *American Idol*.

**Q. Who is your role model?**

**A.** Jack Nicklaus. It took a lot of courage for him to go up against Arnold Palmer's army as a young golfer because everybody loved Arnold Palmer. He's gone and really turned his career into a legacy, and he's a very strong family man. In a profession that takes you away from a family a lot, he just exudes confidence and steadiness.

prompted McDermott to leave public accounting firms and start her own business.

"I decided to start my own business, EquiPro, in 1987. It's been 20 years now that I've been doing this. I decided I wanted to keep it small because, in addition to selling, I wanted to continue to offer other services. We only had five people in the firm as I didn't want to grow it to the point that all I did was manage it," she said.

Since starting her own business, McDermott has developed and implemented a number of business development strategies which have led to tremendous results.

"I believe very strongly in a concept called contemplative selling, particularly if you're selling services. (This won't work all the time when selling products.) Contemplative selling essentially means that when I go to a client call, I'll get on the web and find out as much as I can about the company that I'm calling on *and* the person I'm calling on," she says.

"But I rarely take anything — I rarely even take our brochure on the call because my job is about 80% listening and 20% talking. Your whole job as a sales professional is to find out more about the organization. You don't go in blank — with the Internet there's no excuse! You can have probing questions on the things

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you found out. You want to start building a relationship with the decision maker and find out the types of things they're working on."

She offers the following story as an example of the benefits of contemplative selling:

"We went and called on a nationally known retailer that we'd not done any work for before. We did our homework in terms of the company and the person we were talking to: we found out that person had been with the organization and then left for a few years and was now back. One of the things that I asked him, maybe 20 minutes into the meeting, was 'If we were sitting here a year from now, what would you be delighted to say that you'd accomplished this year?'

"I intentionally used the word 'delighted' because I want to get beyond just the goals — I want to get at the emotion, like what would they really feel proud about? That led into a very interesting conversation because it becomes very clear for those who have really thought about it and who have goals about what really excites them. And then our job is to figure out in that revelation if there are places where we can support them. If we're calling on the right person, we should be able to support them in some way."

Among the most prevalent problems McDermott encounters with sales professionals she consults is their failure to approach their problem solving with creative solutions.

"One of our clients is a big magazine organization. When you sell for magazines, traditionally you're selling ad pages. That's no longer the case — now they've got to sell ad pages, but they've also got to sell web advertising, and they've got to sell solutions that can address the various platform needs that the advertisers want to have met. They

have to get a lot more creative about the solutions and do a much better job of listening to what the client's business objectives are. Then they've got to get creative as to how they take the various pieces apart within the magazine to offer creative solutions, which may be web-based, ad pages, or even a traveling bus that goes around the country with various advertisers on the side."

When asked why she has been so successful at sales despite her lack of formal business training, McDermott credits her background in psychology.

"I know how the mind works, and I had very good listening skills. I never took a sales course until I started my own business. I was asked by Deloitte (an international accounting and consulting firm) to team up with a Harvard Business School professor to go around the country teaching Deloitte partners how to sell. When I was offered the opportunity, I told them, 'I've never taken a sales course, let alone *given* a sales course!' to which they said, 'Yes, but you're a practitioner, and you had to sell to be successful. We want to team you up with this academic.' And so once I learned the models and principles of selling, I understood why I was good at it though I didn't even know what I was doing: listening and then trying to solve problems."

McDermott has also authored two very successful books, *Caught in the Middle* and *World Class Teams*. Though she describes *Caught in the Middle* as being out of date (it is currently out of print), it was an important manual in the early 90s which discussed the fact that middle-management jobs were going to be eliminated.

"The book was written back in those days when corporations were very fat and had lots of layers. The middle manager spent the majority of his or her time in meetings

getting information and then having another meeting giving information; they didn't really do 'work.' I predicted that we would move more to a player-coach model where the middle manager would end up coaching teams with their own projects."

*World Class Teams*, first published in the late 90s, is currently undergoing a revision. It is based on the work McDermott has done around the world.

"I've been to over 30 countries and probably launched and worked with over 1,000 teams in all parts of the world," she says. "*Teams* is not a textbook — it's more of a how-to book on establishing teams to be world class and high performing."

McDermott also recognizes the contribution and guidance of several individuals in both her professional and personal life which have helped her become the industry leader that she is today.

"Robert Zelly was my first boss at Ohio Bell Telephone, where I was brought in as a management intern and given responsibilities for a group of 25 people depositing and processing the telephone payments that people would make. There I was, 23 years old, running this multimillion-dollar operation — and he *let* me do it. Not that I didn't have problems and make mistakes and have to go to him, but he basically let me run it.

"My father also helped me a great deal. He was in management for all of his career, and I just wanted to watch and listen to him dealing with people. I would watch him deal with the most senior managers and the janitors, and he treated everybody the same — very respectful.

"I got my master's degree from Bowling Green State University as I was working, so I was in a weekend master's program. Glenn Varney,



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who started that program in organizational psychology, was a great mentor because he was really practical. I got the academic grounding, but at the same time all of my assignments were back in the workplace, so it was all very practical. I've always been a very practical consultant, which is why, I think, I've been successful."

She adds, "I've learned from my clients along the way. They give me great problematic situations to partner with and to learn from. A lot of what's in *World Class Teams* came from

working with Pfizer. I've also gained a lot from Nolan Brawley, one of the co-authors of *World Class Teams*."

McDermott's husband, Bill Waite (also a co-author of *World Class Teams*), gave her lots of advice early in her career and continues to help by putting things into perspective when she needs it.

And last but certainly not least among her mentors is her 11-year-old daughter, whom she adopted from China and who has taught

her, through her own inquisitiveness, to really think through her answers. In terms of sales, Lynda McDermott has the answers down pat.

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