

Lessons in principled leadership from the Simmons School of Management

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HOW I BROKE THE CONCRETE CEILING AND BUILT A MOST UNUSUAL COMPANY

by Jennifer Pinck



Jennifer Pinck is president of Pinck & Co., one of Boston's leading planning, design, and construction management consulting firms. Pinck served in key roles on the Boston Harbor Project and the Big Dig. She has served as Vice Chair of the Cambridge Zoning Board and Trustee of the Boston Harbor Association. She is the 2013 recipient of the Phyllis Rappaport Alumnae Achievement Award.

First the foundation: I studied Classics in college and faced a future with dim prospects in the recession of the mid 70s. Accidentally getting a job in the building trades I was immediately fascinated by construction and decided to pursue a livelihood in an incredibly male-dominated industry.

I assumed that a careful, patient, and deliberate approach, combined with confidence that the technical aspects of buildings were just as translatable as Latin and Greek, would be the path to my future.

Over a period of 20 years I embraced increasingly difficult and different positions—and along the way acquired skills and experiences that served me well when I started and as I grew my business.

There are common threads: perseverance, embracing change, a commitment to community, to upholding personal values, and to getting things done.

Perseverance was essential. I looked beyond the present and endured adversities that would have broken many. I endured extreme cold on the fortieth floor of a building in the middle of winter, and at times *complete* ostracism by coworkers. I figured out how to manage a meeting of 30 engineers discussing the fine points of wastewater pumping stations by carefully concealing how much I did not know while developing authority and credibility (Secret tactic: don't speak until the END of the meeting). And I never hesitated to ask questions—and still don't.

In addition I sought out new challenges, organizations, positions, and responsibilities. After rising to the challenge as the first female superintendent in Boston (1986), I moved from the field to the office; from the general contractor to the owner's side, and then

to the consultant's side. I went from the private to the public sector, working on projects subject to intense scrutiny. It often felt like I communicated directly with all of Eastern Massachusetts—politicians, regulators, community activists, business leaders—during my Big Dig tenure.

I consider myself an accidental entrepreneur. I did not imagine or plan to be in business. I had no burning desire to do that. Instead, after a sabbatical abroad and away from all things work in 1998, I had to decide what to do next. A colleague needed some help on a real estate deal and I commenced consulting. Then, realizing I could combine my unusual experience with my interest in and commitment to economic development, I built a business with that same focus.

By that time I had the confidence and the knowledge to succeed in building a client base. When I showed up at project meetings, unknown to all, I brought a reputation and resume with serious credentials. Those whose initial reactions to me revealed the same old stereotypical thinking—I just passed out my resume. 'Nuff said. We got down to business.

Now my local firm (started in 1999) competes with national companies and wins. At any moment in time we are managing almost half a billion in projects from Boston to the Berkshires. From our commitment to values and to community we are different, and we thrive because of that. I seek out and hire talent and experience—and unlike any of my competitors we are 66 percent women. I see what others overlook and I know one can survive—and achieve—with focus, passion, and commitment. ■