
Business Unusual

by Karen K. Graham, MA, MSW 1998

I really had nothing else to do anyway. So when Laurie approached me with the idea of starting a new sign language interpreter business I jumped at it. I hadn't been a sign language interpreter for the deaf for a very long time, but I'd started up plenty of businesses. I could do that. It was a way of getting to know some people in the town I was now transplanted into, a way to get out of the suburbs we were living in, a way to seem like I was working.

"Sure, I'd love to help set this business up."

Laurie came up with six women that she wanted involved in this business. When I inquired as to how she made this selection she paused a moment, scrunched her face into a little prune, made a body gesture that little old Italian women use when describing their recipe for spaghetti sauce. You know, this and that. It feels right.

"Oh, sure, I understand."

Well, I didn't understand at all and would be soon to understand less. Laurie was one of the first people I had met upon arriving to Seattle. She interpreted for my deaf husband's job interview. She was impish and outgoing. It turned out that in addition to being a cracker jack interpreter she also had great color sense, good taste in children's clothing, and psychic intuition. She was the perpetrator of this interpreter business-to-be.

In addition to Laurie and myself there were four other women slated for this adventure. We gathered one February evening for our first planning meeting. We met with a consultant who wore Birkenstocks, no makeup and started the meeting with a "cleansing ritual." Coming from Chicago my idea of a cleansing ritual usually involved a shower and water. This involved burning weeds and breathing. I went along.

Then we proceeded to make a business plan of sorts. We envisioned. Between the six women the vision mostly involved being good people. Great, I thought, if we fail as a business we can reinvent the Girl Scouts. The group was very high on the ethics and values scale. Money was almost not mentioned at all. We wanted to be great interpreters, treat people very well, work well with other interpreters and the deaf world at large, and have a happy round group of six quilting-translating-gardening women.

"We can do that. (I think.)"

The part that made me think this could work was the women. After only one meeting I could see that they were the most value driven, hardest working, grounded group I'd ever met. So they have a small flaw in their idea of an organizational chart. During that first meeting we designed a "visioning statement" that looked like a cross between an astrological chart and a Venn diagram. I sort of understood it. I needed to understand it because it became apparent to me that I was supposed to be leading it. I only know it largely involved doing the "right thing" and being a collaborative community. I believed I knew what these two things involved. I thought we might slip "earn a bunch of money" in there at some later date.

The Women

In addition to Laurie and myself there was Karen, a tall handsome woman. Obviously bright and dedicated to service. At that time also shrouded in a veil of some anxiety which has since been shed like a fur coat in spring. Beneath it lay the soul of an adventurer and artist.

Francie presented as flawlessly articulate and ordered. Smart, logical and just so. I've also learned since that time she is remarkably thoughtful, funny, and full of optimism. Beth was another very bright, very detail oriented person. Seemed to know everything. Seemed also hard to know. She was the one who held my hand six months later as my daughter hovered near death after open heart surgery.

Our sixth person bowed out and was replaced by two new women, Molly and Jody. Jody, a hearty, opinionated, passionate woman.

Molly, a quieter person but also able to articulate her feelings. An athlete and team player. All seasoned and nationally certified interpreters.

The Group

This group and our right-brained visioning plan became the starting point. We referred to ourselves as the "entity" and refused to share our development with anyone until my husband, who is unable to keep a secret, blurted out our plans to the board of the only other interpreter referral service in town. We became known and became a little more real even to ourselves.

We spent the next seven months talking endlessly about setting up this business and making it consistent with the omnipresent constellation of values. I was awe-struck at the amount of discussion this group could sustain. My main use during this period was to make people stop talking. This was closely followed by forcing them to make a decision. I forged this tedious process on them at every turn. We had to decide on everything from what kind of business to become (a limited liability corporation or Inc) to what color the stationery should be (green, a mistake). We talked ad nauseum about our name (SignOn: A Sign Language Interpreter Resource), our logo, our office, and our procedures. Somehow, we made decisions about all of these items.

Collaboratively. And as hopelessly painful as this process was, I now see it as a means of solidifying us as a group. It was a way of disagreeing and staying together. Of struggling with items that were really important and giving in on items that weren't. We were arguing often and meeting until all hours of the night. But we were staying together.

The Plan

Remarkably, we had quite a bit of business plan and procedure in place when we opened shop in October. Somehow from the words and pictures strewn on our visioning statement, we had moved to knowing who would answer the phone and what they would say. We decided to do all of the actual interpreting and administrative work ourselves, at least in the beginning. We took turns scheduling ourselves to interpret. A few people took the lead on billing and keeping track of our accounting. Someone set up a schedule on paper, someone built a brochure on their computer, someone donated a desk. All the work was ground out by this group of seven (plus some family help) - everything from putting in light bulbs to arranging for jobs to hammering out business deals to setting up a computer. We worked out of Beth's home.

The Beginning

We got requests for us to provide interpreting services quickly. Some of us brought business from the past. Some organizations like calling us because we offered a very different type of service. Previous to SignOn, the interpreter field in Seattle was a loosely connected web of deaf people and interpreters who managed to get together by word of mouth and with the help of a referral service that was overburdened and not functioning at its optimal capacity. Often someone would have to phone many interpreters at home or on their pagers and wait for a response. And sometimes not ever get a response. It was a very inefficient system and what we offered was better. Someone could call SignOn and have access to all of our interpreters. We kept ALL their schedules and we could immediately say yes or no to their request after a glance in our scheduling book. People seemed to like this. We also had only nationally certified interpreters (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf), so they were assured of high quality interpreting. We got busy.

We alternated between being elated at being a business, and being terrified at what we had done. Any slight dip in interpreter requests had us looking at each other longing to have control over our own destiny once again. But those days were over and we had now congealed into an ever evolving mass of business glob. We were in the boat together and contrary to our fears, the boat was floating. Maybe even sailing a bit.

Expanding Field of View

It was time to venture outside of our little group to incorporate others into our world. We developed some relationships with sub-contracting interpreters. Some successful, some not. We hired a consultant to work with us on developing some computer programs. We moved out of our little home space down the street into an office. We hired an accountant. We argued about hiring 'staff' to do our scheduling, bookkeeping, and even interpreting. We lurched towards this by hiring a part-time scheduler, and then another, and then a staff interpreter. We committed to hiring and working with two newly graduated interpreters as apprentices. We coordinated several big conferences. And all through this process, kept a fairly steady pace of work streaming in. We actually found ourselves turning down quite a bit of work. We were once again conquering our fears of losing control over our work.

Group members figured out how to write business plans, budgets, job descriptions, policies, and procedures. We tried to draw an organizational chart, but with seven owners, several employees, and no actual boss, this chart looked like some kind of drawing out of many overlapping balloons. We abandoned trying to define ourselves in this way.

Hold True to our Values

The group did, however, continue to hold true to the original values. In business and in our lives in general. In spite of all this work, we made it a point to check in with each other weekly during our staff meetings. To find out what else was going on with each other's lives. We became our own support network and cried and laughed our way through many life events together. Two adoptions, one miscarriage, one baby on the way, one blossoming relationship, a ten year wedding anniversary, some serious illnesses, lots of traveling, lots of food sharing, lots of fear, and lots of surprise. In addition, we've had two profitable years of business in a row. We've never borrowed money, and have never operated in the red.

Myself, I wouldn't have guessed that seven women as equal partners in a business was a recipe for success. Maybe there's something unique in this group of seven. All are strong, smart, persistent, hard working, kind, and willing to stretch until it hurt sometimes.

What have I learned?

What I've suspected all along. Go ahead and try something different. Be bold. Do something no one thinks will work. Find great people and work with them. Stay with it and it just might surprise you and become something amazing.