

Erika Flora

All In on a Challenge

Nothing fuels Erika Flora's resolve quite like a challenge. She still remembers the day when, at five years old, she was asked by a babysitter if she knew what she wanted to do when she grew up. "I told her I wanted to be a doctor, but she told me I couldn't do that because I was a girl, and girls can't be doctors," she remembers today. "Even at such a young age, that comment made me angry. It fueled my determination that I could do whatever I set my mind to in life, and that I wasn't going to let people tell me what a girl can and can't do."

If Erika was born with the innate desire to meet challenges head-on, her parents taught her how to go all-in to overcome them. Through her formative years, they showed her how to take an interest and really run with it. When Erika's sister decided she was into basketball, their father conducted extensive research to find the best shoes to help her vertical jump and enroll her at a camp taught by Shaquille O'Neal. Another summer, Erika got into reading, so her father took her to the library constantly and helped her learn how to speed read. "Whatever we wanted to do, it was full-steam ahead, 1,000 percent," she says. "The support was incredible."

Years later, as a young woman in a new career field, Erika was offered a job as a project manager, and though she had no idea what a project manager did, she decided to take on the challenge. At the time, her new employer was struggling to manage a chaotic mess of projects with no system and no accountability—not exactly the kind of scenario people willingly walk into with no experience and no mentor to guide the way. But Erika had spent her childhood watching her parents embrace new cities, new career fields, and new interests with enthusiasm and confidence. "If we moved away from the town where my mother owned a business, she'd just open a new one in our new town," Erika says. "And my father

has had seven different careers through his life. He taught me that I could chart a new course for myself anytime I wanted."

Over the next several years, Erika took the initiative to get her official project management certification and mastered the inner workings of the company's 150-plus active projects. They were interwoven and highly complex, but thanks to the processes and tools she put in place, she could tell leadership at any point in time exactly what was going on. "It was a defining moment for me because I saw that my skill set could be used to really transform a company," she says. "I fell in love with the work of providing tools, processes, and trainings to help people do a better job and be better team members." Erika continues that work today as the cofounder and President of Beyond20, an IT service and project management firm that specializes in the elegantly simple mission of bringing out the best in people.

It is often said that employees are a company's greatest assets. Conversely, they can also be a company's greatest liability. Studies show that, when mission-critical IT systems fail in large companies, software or hardware issues are the root cause of crisis in only 20 percent of instances. In 80 percent of cases, the problem can be traced back to a failure in people or processes. "It all comes down to people and how they work," Erika says. "People make changes and don't think through the impact of those changes company-wide. We're passionate about fixing those disconnects."

Erika and her husband, Brian, launched Beyond20 in 2006 as a small consultancy in Arizona. She came from a project management track in the pharmaceutical and healthcare industry, while he had an IT and dotcom background working for companies like GoDaddy. "We were driving in the car one day, when we



happened to hear a webinar about IT service management and project management,” Erika recounts. “The discussion centered on how similar the two disciplines are, breaking them down to show that at the end of the day, both were simply trying to improve how companies work. We realized we were doing the same thing, so we decided to build something together.”

Beyond20 serves IT departments, including thirteen of the fifteen cabinet-level government agencies, and IT leaders in large companies. It has worked with over 25 percent of Fortune 100 companies in some capacity. No matter who they’re serving, the company is known for its creativity, kindness, and innovation, and was a 2015 Gold and Silver winner of the Best in Biz awards for Most Customer Friendly Company and Most Creative Executive. “We’re very focused on using creativity to drive innovation in developing exceptional solutions for our clients,” Erika says. “I’m also very proud of our awesome team and the great work we do together.”

Though she’s always considered herself introverted and often shy, Erika’s career trajectory has been amplified by moments of boldness that perhaps stem from the unique strains of courage that belong to each of her parents. Her mother immigrated to the U.S. from Guatemala at the age of 18 without knowing any English and learned the language by watching TV as she worked as a nanny and attended school. She was a hair salon owner by the time she met Erika’s father, a chemist-turned-professional bowler, the only time she ever set foot in a bowling alley on a night out with friends. Erika was born outside of San Francisco, and her younger sister was born shortly thereafter. When Erika was three, they moved to Iowa to be closer to family, and her father worked as a pharmaceutical salesman. Four years later, they moved to Georgia so he could go back to school, and her mother started another hair salon.

Though she was shy as a child, Erika showed early signs of leadership while playing with other kids, and some might have even called her bossy. “Our parents encouraged my sister and me in everything we did,” she recalls. “Whenever we took an interest in something, they were interested too.”

Her parents, as well, had varied interests of their own. After four years in Georgia, the family moved to Tampa, Florida, where her father took over a clinic and her mother opened a salon.

Erika was in third grade by that time. “I was very nerdy and shy, but then I’d do these really bold things every once in a while, like run for class president in sixth grade,” she says. “Nobody voted for me because nobody knew who I was, but it was still something I wanted to go after.” She developed lifelong friendships with other studious girls in her class, excelled in school, and enjoyed participating in youth group with her church starting in junior high.

In high school, Erika joined the dance team, the diving team, and the debate team, but she still felt most at home and empowered in the classroom. “When I was at school and really in my element, I went from the shy, quiet one to the outspoken, bossy one,” she recalls. “The teachers liked me because I always participated in class.” She wasn’t afraid to be herself—a gift given to her by her father’s example. “He’s always been best known for his colorful character and outlandish wardrobe, including a pair of brightly-striped bellbottoms that I still hold onto,” she laughs. “His style was so infamous that his college named a day after him—Don Malnati Day—when everyone wore the most ridiculous, bright, mismatched stuff. He taught me to walk to the beat of my own drum, think critically and logically, question what people told me, and have fun with life by being weird.”

All through high school, Erika’s dream of becoming a doctor never wavered. She was drawn to the challenge of it, as well as the joy of proving wrong the babysitter who had tried to limit her aspirations all those years ago. When she graduated from high school in the top ten percent of her class, she accepted a scholarship to the University of Florida and went pre-med, as she had always planned. “College was another level when it came to academics,” she says. “It was a real awakening, to be surrounded by so many other smart people and to have to study a lot harder than I did in high school. But that was a great thing.” Erika majored in microbiology and also joined a sorority, though school remained her top focus. She also worked one summer selling Cutco knives—a seemingly irrelevant sales experience that would become important to her career later on.

By her senior year, Erika’s interest in being a doctor had taken a turn. “I spent several summers shadowing doctors, and it didn’t seem like there was a lot of joy in it,” she recalls. “People

told me there was a lot of paperwork, and not a lot of time to care for patients as much as they would like. It seemed like I might be able to help people more if I pursued something else.”

Fortunately, Erika had an exceptional food microbiology professor whose enthusiasm was truly compelling. He worked as both a hospital consultant and a restaurant auditor, both of which supplied fascinating stories that caught Erika’s attention. She decided to pursue her masters in food science with an emphasis on food microbiology, paying her way by doing work for a professor and for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

When she completed her graduate program in 1998, Erika decided to try a new challenge and accepted a microbiologist job for a large chicken processing plant in a small town in Arkansas. There, she tested products for bacteria before they headed to market, working for several years before opting for a new challenge yet again. “Most people my age had left town to go to college, so I really didn’t have peers there,” she recalls. “And I didn’t want to be in a lab anymore. When I went to visit a friend who had moved to Phoenix, I loved it, so I decided to move there.”

In Phoenix, Erika was hired by a company to build their pharmaceutical division through recruiting and internal sales. “They saw I had a background in science and at least some sales experience, so they thought I’d figure it out,” she says. “I saw it as a challenge, so of course, I was game.” For her first few months on the job, Erika learned all she could about the pharma industry and took to heart the mentorship of the company’s owner, a dynamic entrepreneur. “The company was around 80 people at the time, and he would personally sit down with all new employees to train them for a week,” she recounts. “It was very encouraging.”

Erika worked there for three years, building a network that she then reached out to when she was ready to make her next move. One of her contacts was looking for a project manager, and though she had no idea what that meant exactly, she accepted the job and dove right in. “The company didn’t know how many projects they had going on, how they were going, or when they were expected to be completed,” she remembers. “I got thrown into the fire and just started figuring out what I was supposed to be doing, beginning with the basics.”

That first month, the 50-person company had a staff meeting, where new employees were asked to introduce themselves and say what they do. “I was so terrified of public speaking that I stood up and managed to say my name and title, but then blurted out that I didn’t know what I did,” she remembers. “Who does that? It could have been a career-limiting move, and I resolved immediately that it was time to beat my shyness.”

With that, Erika signed up for stand-up comedy and public speaking classes, excited by the idea of injecting humor into business presentations. She cultivated her voice and poise, learning how to overcome her fear and say out loud the things she felt should be said. “You had to stand up on stage and come up with a routine on the spot, which was really challenging for me,” she remembers. It was an incredibly important professional milestone to overcome, especially for the regular public speaking obligations that would come later in her career.

Erika also joined the Project Management Institute, getting as much exposure as she could at a time when the field was much more obscure than it is today. She signed up for trainings and started taking night classes in project management, earning a certificate and then a Project Management Professional (PMP) Certification. And with the skills she learned, she tamed the chaos at the company, building out an enterprise project management system where they could view the status of projects in real time. She created monthly progress reports for leadership, tracking important milestones and charting out future projects and activities. “It was the best learning experience I ever had, and it was a joy to accomplish something so exciting,” she says.

Also during that time, Erika met Brian. “He always knew he wanted to run a company one day,” she remembers. “I was struck by how smart he was, and what a strong entrepreneurial spirit he had.” Erika ended up working a brief stint at a medical device company, where she organized projects across multiple locations and implemented software tools that allowed for effective progress reporting to external customers, before realizing she had entrepreneurial aspirations of her own. “I decided I was ready to go out and chart my own path in pursuit of something challenging and meaningful,” she recalls. With that, in 2006, Beyond20 was born. Several months later, Erika and Brian got married.

Several years later, Erika and Brian won a contract with the State Department to train the IT departments for their consulate offices. They were traveling back and forth to DC so frequently that they decided to set up an office in Washington and focus on expanding their footprint in the nation's capital. "It was a happy accident that we expanded to DC and government work," Erika says.

Erika and Brian hired their first employee in 2012, and since that time, their team has exploded to around thirty people. They were recognized for their outstanding company culture and entrepreneurial success by the Northern Virginia Technology Council in 2013, and landed their 8(a) certification in 2016. Clocking in at around 70 percent growth each year for the past three years, Beyond20 made it onto the Inc. 5,000 list in 2015, 2016, and 2017 with no signs of slowing down, and in 2017 was also named a "Best Place to Work" by the *Washington Business Journal*.

Today, Brian manages Beyond20's software development and training teams. As President, Erika oversees sales, business development, and overall strategy, including the company's consulting team. But as it is with most small businesses, there's room to be nimble and responsive to any challenge that arises. "When you're in a small company," she says, "everyone jumps in where needed."

Erika and Brian have complementary skill sets, which contribute to their exceptionally positive work relationship. Each Beyond20 employee takes a StrengthsFinder test when they join the team to determine their top five strengths, and usually Erika and Brian each share at least one strength with each employee, but the pair has no overlapping strengths between the two of them—a testament to their power as a team. "A lot of people have a hard time imagining what it's like to work with your spouse, but I couldn't imagine not working with Brian," she says. "Of course we have good days and bad days, and there are certainly times we get frustrated with each other, but ultimately we work together very well. A fellow business owner once told me that, in every relationship, there's a kite and a string. I'm the kite, and Brian is the string. Like my father, I love ideas, and 'no' is not in my vocabulary, so it's

important to have him balancing me out and reigning me in a bit."

Today, Erika has more than thirty different project management, IT, and leadership certifications. As a leader, she focuses most on mentoring and empowering her employees, removing roadblocks and encouraging them to be the best they can be. "I make a conscious effort to include and teach people, and to recognize a job well done," she says. "Servant leadership is very important to me."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Erika underscores the importance of hard work to build excellence and mastery. "Get really good at your craft, whatever it is," she says. "If you're not sure yet what your passion is, just jump in and start learning. Say yes to every opportunity that comes your way and don't be afraid to try unusual things that are completely out of your comfort zone." Living by this philosophy, Erika signed up for improv classes in 2015 as a way to challenge herself, and is now a better listener and leader at work as a result. "It's helped generate ideas that have led our team to do creative marketing that no one else in our field is doing," she says. "Challenges keep us fresh, innovative, and competitive. But most of all, they show us that life always has more in store for us if we're willing to look."

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