

Valerie Perlowitz

Dream More. Learn More. Do More.

Valerie Perlowitz's father owned an insurance business, and from the age of 11, Valerie was at the office helping out. Of her parents' three children, Valerie served the longest tenure at the company; her two older brothers quickly lost interest in working for their dad. She started out learning the basics, how to file documents and assisting with office tasks. Quickly, she moved to helping her father underwrite insurance policies, a more cumbersome process in a time where writing them up was done by hand.

But Valerie didn't content herself with little office tasks. She soon observed inefficiencies at the business and she set her mind to resolving them. She noticed how filing, rather than being done on an as-needed basis, was frequently procrastinated until the work built up and created an afternoon or day-long task. Documents were being touched by too many different employees in too many different departments who coordinated poorly. Her perspective provided valuable insight for her father. "When you're running the company, you don't always understand what happens on a day-to-day level with the business," Valerie remarks, "so I shared some of my experiences of what was happening down the line of filing. He didn't necessarily have insight into what was taking place on the lowest rungs of the ladder. So we looked at it together, and I helped streamline that with him."

Her compulsion to work with the people around her to re-engineer the business, saving valuable time and money, was a preview of a career spent as both an engineer and a grower of businesses. Her ability to work with her father to find solutions also presaged a leadership style that would emphasize both decisiveness and collaboration.

Today, Valerie is CEO and Founding Partner at International Holding Company (IHC), a full-service management firm, a business

dedicated to growing other businesses. "I help businesses bring in money, I help companies get structure, I help companies get out of trouble," explains Valerie. "The Holding Company concept was really built to bring together the right companies and the right skill sets at the right time."

Headquartered in Fairfax, VA, IHC is a small business with a handful of full-time employees. But, as always, Valerie emphasizes that collaboration is key, stressing the importance of bringing in outside expertise with different clients and noting that, no matter how smart a single individual may be, no one individual has all the information needed to build a thriving company. Valerie has embraced her trademarked Four Quadrant Methodology to help entrepreneurs both envision and articulate an end goal for their business, as well as develop their plan for achieving that goal. She encourages client companies to build themselves "deep, not wide,"

asserting that having more expertise in a single area of business is generally a superior strategy to building shallow capabilities across a wider variety of offerings.

IHC is thorough as it analyzes its clients' inefficiencies, trims the fat, and ultimately sets the client up for breakthrough growth. The group employs experts on everything from operations, to finance, to marketing, to management, to staffing as it works to optimize client performance. "Ninety-five percent of companies have some form of basic strategy," nods Valerie. "What they lack is that ability to figure out how they're going to get there from where they are today. We look at where they are now, where they want to go, and that differential. The differential is what you measure. You measure, in every department how are they helping achieve their strategic goals through tactical work. So, for example, in the HR



department, when you're looking to hire a certain set of skills, how long does it take to fill a requisition? In the finance department, how quickly are they producing reports? Can they close the books in ten days? So we look at those kind of goals, and then drive them down to individual performance objectives."

Founded in 2011, IHC has been going strong for eight years and Valerie sees plenty more success in the future. The group finds most of its clients via LinkedIn and word of mouth, and the types of businesses they take on run the gamut. As their reputation has grown, Valerie has begun receiving inquiries from businesses headquartered abroad, and is looking forward to negotiating the waters of expansion.

One childhood anecdote foreshadowed Valerie's passion for efficiency and problem-solving. She was born in Queens, New York, and spent most of her childhood on the South Shore of Long Island with her two older brothers. The eldest is seven years older; the younger is five years older. This made Valerie both the baby of the family, the neighborhood tomboy, and a precocious kid curious about what the older siblings were doing. One day when Valerie was about 11, her middle brother was out for the day, and she happened to notice his tuner was rattling. So she did what any budding young engineer would do: she took it apart.

"He came home while it was taken apart on the floor of his room," she laughs. "He was not happy! He watched me put it back together successfully, it took about 45 minutes, and I found out what was wrong with it. That was my first experience of having management looking over my shoulder! But after that he really pushed me toward electrical engineering, I just had a real love for it."

When she wasn't taking household items apart and rebuilding them, Valerie also had a love for exploring the neighborhood and throwing around the football with her brothers. She joined 4-H and spent as much time outside as possible. Her father was busy running his business, while her mother worked as an instructor at a local vocational school. Both of her parents were first-generation Americans; her paternal grandparents came to the United States from Poland, and her maternal grandparents from Ukraine. The two families lived floors away from each other in the same building and Valerie's parents actually knew

each other as children. Somehow over the years, they went from disliking each other to marrying and starting their family.

"My parents brought a certain old world discipline with them," recalls Valerie. "Both of them were very analytical, they were never wishy-washy with decisions. I respected that my father went out there and pursued what he enjoyed. My mother also really loved what she did, working with the kids going through vocational programs. They were very active, too, always had somewhere to go and something to do. It was the 70s so cocktail parties were everywhere! They really taught me the importance of friendships and relationships, being part of the community you live in, because that's what they did, that's what they believed."

At that time, it was surprising for a little girl to display so much interest in engineering, but Valerie remembers that her parents and brothers were very supportive. She also fondly recalls the mentorship of her sixth-grade teacher, Ms. Fern, who served as another working woman role model and pushed Valerie to embrace her talents. "She was really influential on me," says Valerie. "She was definitely a feminist. She was so confident in herself and her decisions, and she pushed me to do the best I could and move forward. She was the one who suggested that I go out for Mathletes in middle school. She told me I was going to work in math and science. She told me I was a lot smarter than I thought I was." Valerie paid forward the mentorship by tutoring other young girls in the neighborhood in math and science, hoping to instill confidence in her female peers.

As she began high school, it was her middle brother who suggested that she transfer to a different high school, one where she could enroll in a special pre-engineering program. Thanks to his encouragement, she decided to apply, and her request to transfer was approved. She thrived at the school, enjoying her studies and participating in the A/V club, then known as the PA club.

After high school, Valerie started college at the Rochester Institute of Technology, but quickly found that the school was a mismatch. She missed city life on the rural campus, and their engineering program turned out to be focused in an area she didn't want to pursue. She took some time off to strategize and got some professional experience working at a business called AIL Eaton. Then she returned to college at Northeastern University, a

school known for its hands-on, experiential learning style that encouraged students to work in the field while studying. She graduated in 1986 with a double degree in Electrical and Computer Engineering.

During her time at Northeastern, Valerie also met her husband, Bill, and began a decades-long partnership that would extend to their professional lives as well. On their first date, he told her he would marry her. "I probably thought he was crazy," Valerie laughs. But soon after, he left his job at IBM in Virginia and moved to Connecticut to be closer to Valerie at school.

Valerie's first job out of college was a doozy. She was hired to work as an engineer at Sikorsky Aircraft, and tasked with getting their grounded fleet of Blackhawk Helicopters back in the air. Mechanical and technical problems were endangering the lives of servicemen, and Valerie still considers her work fixing the aircraft to be one of her most defining career achievements. "I really had to work with a lot of other people who brought their abilities to bear," explains Valerie. "It was my project, but there was a lot I didn't know, and I recognized there were other people with talents that I needed. And I've always tried to carry that through in my management style, that emphasis on collaboration."

Her father had hoped his three children would someday take over his insurance business, even naming the company after them, but all three of the children decided to pursue engineering. By the time Valerie became an electrical engineer with Sikorsky, her middle brother was already a mechanical engineer, and the eldest a chemical engineer. Valerie laughs that her paternal grandfather had always pushed his two sons toward engineering. He got his wish, finally, a generation later.

After her year at Sikorsky, she spent a few years consulting on various projects. She and her husband worked together at a firm called BITE, where they worked on the FAA's new Advanced Automation Systems (AAS) program. Unfortunately, the FAA was unhappy with the performance of the company and decided to terminate the contract. But before doing so, they approached Valerie and Bill with a proposal—stay and consult for us. Their only stipulation was that they would have to start their own business.

And just like that, Reliable Integration Services (Reliable) was born. The year was 1988,

but Valerie didn't officially join until 1990. For two years she continued consulting with various clients, mainly AT&T as she debated diving headlong into the project of owning and running a business. Ultimately, Valerie felt called to see how far the young couple could take the business together, quickly finding that their skill sets complimented each other perfectly. As the company grew, Valerie found herself gravitating to the business and management work, while Bill wanted to remain more focused on the technical side.

For most people, running and building a major company would be enough work. Not so for the tireless Valerie. In 1994, she founded Women in Technology (WIT) to help steward young women into the field. At 25 years old, the non-profit today has over 1,000 members in the Washington DC Area. "I was actually given their first Presidents' Lifetime Achievement Award," beams Valerie. "I have to tell you, I was in tears when they gave it to me, looking out across that ballroom, where we used to have maybe 5 tables, and now we have dozens. It made me feel really proud of doing something, of giving back." Valerie considers that Lifetime Achievement Award to be her prize possession. She has also launched a scholarship for women pursuing an electrical or computer engineering degree at her alma mater, Northeastern.

In 1997, she also launched RISplex, a corporation that existed solely to bring a technology Valerie had patented to market.

Valerie ran Reliable from 1990 to 2007, 17 years during which she grew the business to a multi-million-dollar company, honed her managerial skills, and learned countless valuable lessons. The collapse of the internet bubble was a setback, but one that taught her the value of diversification. In 2004, with a trusted managerial team in place, Valerie was able to attend Harvard Business School, where she completed the three-year Owners, Presidents, and Managers Program and became an alumnus of Harvard.

In 2007, she made the decision to sell Reliable to a special purpose acquisition company. One of her conditions was that all of her staff would be kept on. Valerie too, stayed onboard for several years as a Senior Vice President. She had wanted the experience of working with a large public company, and remained at the firm until 2010.

In 2011, Valerie went in a different direction altogether when she and Bill brought home a small puppy. She noticed that the dog foods on the market were difficult for a small dog to eat, and didn't provide much nutrition. "We spent so much time cutting up food for him," explains Valerie. "And we saw space in the market. That was kind of the first thing that came out of IHC, because I had to prove that I could make it work. So we launched Small Dog Wonders Bakery with a product called Bistro Bites." The treats were a hit, and the all-natural, gluten-free brand expanded into 24 states in less than 2 years. Having successfully launched and built a business, she licensed the product.

Through all of the ups and downs, Valerie considers herself incredibly fortunate to have had such a great partner—in life and in business—by her side. "We're very symbiotic," she glows. "We've been through a lot together and we're still happily married. I could never have done what I did without him, he was so supportive of Women in Technology, he was always there when I was coming home at 10 o'clock at night, telling me to eat something. He's had such a huge impact on my life."

A lifelong learner, Valerie is wrapping up her Master of Engineering in Cybersecurity at George Washington University, because she considers it "any company's most pernicious risk." As she continues to steward IHC, Valerie has worked hard to create a culture of respect and positivity. She leads by example, showing her employees the importance of collaboration and decisiveness. "When you make a decision, you have to be confident in what you're doing,"

explains Valerie. "And in order to do that, you need to have the best information possible, and the only way to have that information is to work with other people. You have to be able to listen, even to things you don't want to hear. Then you make the decision that hits the mark."

To young people graduating college today, she advises that they heed the lessons she's learned about leadership. "Leadership's so important because you're willing to take the risk, but you need to have people who can follow you," affirms Valerie. "And you have to bring those people in and create a good culture. They have to believe in it. And if they don't believe in it, you have nothing. Being a manager is one thing. Being a leader is something else."

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