

Christine Bond

The Power of Draft

One fall afternoon in 2010, as Christine Bond was sitting out on her deck working on the layout of the team that would form the network of her new company, she looked up. Passing overhead was a V-formation of geese headed north for the winter, each bird catching the updraft cascading over the wings of the bird ahead of it to help save strength through the long journey. “I love bike racing, so I understand the power of the draft,” she reflects today. “Leaders can trade off, allowing others to keep advancing the team forward and utilizing the talents of all. You need solid people around you, and you need to position and time your formation and movements in a way that allows everyone to lift each other up.”

That company is now The X-CEL Group, LLC, and Christine serves as its founder, CEO, and Chief Transformation Officer. And as the firm creates updrafts for its client organizations by helping them build their concept, her own success is inextricably bound to the updraft her team provides her, and which she provides to them in return. “For years, I thought I was driven by the goal of simplifying the complex,” she says. “But now I realize that my core ‘why’ is developing trusting, meaningful relationships. Everything I do is predicated on solid, deep relationships that I trust.”

Christine launched X-CEL, an executive coaching firm that helps organizations set and achieve financial success goals, with the vision of reaching a broad platform by serving corporations as opposed to individual clients. Within two years, her business model expanded to strategic transformation and then naturally extended to financial planning. “I was helping organizations set up these phenomenal five year plans, but when I’d come back to check on their progress later on, I’d find that the plan had become shelf work because the companies didn’t have the money to

make them happen,” she explains. “So I decided to get my Series 7 and 66 licenses to be able to go beyond P&Ls for my clients, offering deep skills and understanding of the investment policies and law associated with what I bring to the table.”

With this knowledge, Christine excels at helping mature organizations with between \$50 and \$100 million in revenue looking to either sell or expand. As they seek capital, develop relationships with banks, and prepare for the changes ahead, she designs and implements strategies for success. Her company and impact is the sum of the close relationships she’s built with other professionals offering complementary skills, allowing each client seamless access to an extensive and sophisticated network of knowledge and expertise.

While her creative professional achievements are remarkable by any measure, their significance is increased tenfold by the reality that Christine was born and raised in a small town in Michigan, 45 minutes North of Detroit—a place that most of her peers never left. Her parents both worked at manufacturing plants, lucky to have jobs in an area with high unemployment. They divorced when she was young, and only later in life would Christine gain a deeper appreciation for the sacrifices her mother made as a single parent, finding ways to send her four children to private school even though she only received \$100 a month in child support. “She did the best she could, taught us a strong work ethic, and made sure we had a moral compass,” says Christine.

Faith was an important part of her life growing up, though she wasn’t partial to her father’s evangelical practice of going door-to-door. Her mother sent Christine and her brothers to a Presbyterian Church, but Christine most enjoyed going to Bible study on Sundays with a friend. “My faith has been the one thing that has kept me



going and encouraged me through my whole journey," she says. "It's been the pillar that gave me incredible courage later in life when I faced my fears or when I wrestled with the challenges of the corporate world."

Her senior year of high school, the year she spent with her grandmother, was perhaps the best year of her adolescent life. "She was a pretty woman who had a very simple, down-to-earth lifestyle," says Christine. "She could eat greens, cornbread, and chicken every day of the week. She worked at a hospital and always saved her earnings to give to her family. It was a very special time where I got to know her and love her."

At that point, Christine had no life plans and no roadmap. Thankfully, her basketball coach, Mr. Robinson, saw great things in her and helped her land a scholarship to play basketball at Michigan State University. Looking for ways to help cover the rest of her tuition, she signed up for the Air Force reserves, dreaming of becoming a firefighter. But when she finished her eight weeks of basic training, she was sent to Colorado to learn the art of food service—something she had absolutely no interest in.

With that, Christine set her mind to starting over, hopping in her car at the age of eighteen and heading to Washington, DC, where one of her brothers lived. She was foregoing her Reserve obligations as a cook, but at that point, she didn't care. She got one job at a video store, another at a post office, and a third in the HR department of a wholesaler called Macro. Within a month, she had saved enough to rent a room.

Eighteen months passed before she came to terms with the gravity of what she had done by abandoning her responsibilities with the Reserves. "I was working odd jobs, taking care of myself and getting by, but I was completely foregoing my responsibility to Uncle Sam," she said. "I was terrified to deal with the consequences, but I knew I needed to." With that, she decided to report for duty as a cook at Andrews Air Force Base, knowing full well she could be facing jail time.

When she showed up that morning and uttered the words, "Airman Bond reports as ordered," the Chief Master Sergeant of the base marched her to his office and asked what was going on. She explained that she hadn't wanted to be a cook and made some stupid choices, but she was here now to deal with the consequences. He could have come down hard, but instead, he

invested in her. Thanks to his belief in the strength of her character beneath the bad decision, her jail time was dismissed, and her record was scrubbed clean. Most remarkably, she was ultimately given the opportunity to prove herself as a firefighter as she had always dreamed. At 5'1" and 95 pounds, she had to have special gear purchased for her, but she survived basic training and went on to serve six wonderful years as a reserve firefighter. "That was where my heart was," she says. "I loved putting my mind to something, having that strong desire, and then making it happen."

Later, Christine spent eleven years in Business Services for Siemens, which she fondly refers to as the best company she's ever worked for. As the Director of Product Development, she would handle the sale of new technology management solutions to companies like Koch Industries or Mellon Bank. She completed a master's degree online, and the role required her to travel the world, which she loved. Eventually, however, she decided she wanted to be home with her daughter. With that, she took a job at Unisys running its Siemens Security Operating Center. She ended up spending as much time on the road as she had in her previous position, eventually opting to move on from there as well.

Christine started work at HP in 2003, serving as a transformation executive responsible for the dynamic implementation of new systems and processes. She excelled in her work as a high-level technical executive, but in 2008, she decided to start rounding out her skill set by taking on a completely new challenge: sales. As a Chief of Staff, she set up a new organization called the Strategic Sales Center, running deals of \$100 million or more. She then became an Executive Capture Manager, setting her sights on winning a multi-billion dollar NASA contract that had been held by Lockheed Martin for a full decade. Her efforts were successful, landing the deal and resulting in the largest government contract takeovers in history.

Christine has always been a servant leader, content to work behind the scenes to help others shine. But people had been telling her to start her own business for years, so she decided to give it a shot by starting The X-CEL Group on the side, diving headlong into the process of transformation that would lead to a second career that was, for the first time, truly in step with her heart. Meanwhile, at HP, she took on a new role handling an

organization's finances, mastering new skills while developing and operating the organization's financial management system. "I look back and appreciate every single situation I had in corporate because it really helped me understand how to navigate as a business owner," she affirms. "I spent my last three years at HP going through a very painful transformation, but it was necessary, and when I left in 2013, I was fully ready for life as an entrepreneur and small business owner."

Faced immediately with the need to expand her network with a focus on building local relationships, Christine spent the next six months highly focused on networking. She came to find, however, that she did much better when she instead focused on forming a core group of people she could develop business relationships with. She began networking with a purposeful intention of acquiring a deeper connection to those partners and their business models so she could then engage in warm handoffs when opportune moments arose. "Since discovering this philosophy, I've developed great friendships and partnerships that are now the crux of X-CEL," she says. "Now, X-CEL has garnered so much support and interest that I've actually had to put the brakes on my growth to make sure I have the structure in place that can handle so much increased volume."

Developing close relationships with partners certainly marked a fundamental shift in her approach and identity as an entrepreneur. One of Christine's most transformational experiences, however, has been her role as a mother. "I never thought I'd have children, but the growth I've gone through in raising my daughter has truly been a revelation," she says. As well, her identity as a global citizen, forged through corporate travel and her yearly mission trips to places like Romania, Israel, and African countries, forms the crux of her worldview. "I've had the opportunity to understand people from all over, and I see that prejudice is rooted in ignorance," she says. "When you go to a different country and develop deep relationships, you understand why they do what they do, and it really changes your perspective."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Christine stresses the importance of asking as many questions as possible and surrounding yourself with people who are much smarter than you. Abiding by such principles and laying out goals for yourself sets you up for success, whether you're the young

person looking for mentoring or the mentor looking to learn a thing or two about how to stay relevant in a constantly evolving culture. Such has been the relationship between Christine and her mentee, Jamila Corbett, the woman she took under her wing several years ago. "The process of reverse mentoring is truly incredible, allowing the people involved to learn from each other regardless of age, experience, or creed," says Christine. "Really, it's about collaboration, and it feeds into our businesses. I take everything I'm learning and experiencing in life and bake it into X-CEL because I believe my journey is one that can, has, and will provide value to other organizations looking to develop."

At its essence, X-CEL is a business devoted to change—at times painful, yet absolutely necessary for survival. Drawing on memories of her own periods of gut-wrenching, soul-shaking, spirit-transforming change when she was put out on her own at age sixteen, and again when she left the corporate world behind to start her own business, Christine's work is dedicated to leading others as they design and embark on the next chapter of their lives and business. "To me, leadership is very much about being able to see and support the potential in others," she says. "By tapping into the power in the people around you, you can place them on a continuum of growth. And in order to do that, you have to try to know people. That's why, when I meet a business owner who's a potential client, I try to know their why. What makes them tick? What keeps them up at night? When I go into the initial sales call, I never bring an agenda. Because the only agenda is getting to know the other person. The only agenda is finding that perfect geometry between us—that configuration that allows my draft to lift their business and ease their journey."

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt
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