

# Ola Sage

## Out of Chaos, Clarity

It was the moment thirteen-year-old Olayinka (Ola) had been dreading for months. As she walked across the stage and sat down at the piano in front of the auditorium full of people, she remembered the day her teacher, Linda Crouch, had decided Ola would play Sergei Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C Sharp Minor for her upcoming recital. "I was terrified at the idea that I would fail—not just by myself, but in front of everyone," she recalls today. "But my teacher just kept encouraging me, saying I could do it."

Ola was shaking as she raised her hands to the keys, but when she hit that first note, she suddenly forgot that there was an audience around her. Out of the chaos of her fear and doubt, she found clarity and confidence. She had practiced, memorized, and mastered the task at hand, and as muscle memory took over, she was fully engrossed by the skill and song of the experience. She played the piece flawlessly, and it wasn't until the end, when the last key was struck, that a swell of applause filled the room and she remembered where she was. "I remember thinking, I did it," she says. "It was a defining realization that, with discipline, preparation, perseverance, and a willingness to work through my doubts instead of dismissing them, I could press on and succeed. It gave me the confidence to take on things that seem impossible at first."

Now the founder and CEO of e-Management, an IT and cybersecurity small business specializing in solutions for the federal government and commercial businesses, Ola has employed this boldness again and again throughout her life to achieve great things. It's the art of creating clarity out of chaos, empowerment out of fear, and success out of static. It's evident in the grand turning points of her life, but also in the everyday moments she shares with family, friends, employees, clients, and even strangers. "To me, success is about having a conversation that brings

us both to a better place," she says. "Success can be as simple as giving someone encouragement through a kind word or gesture. It's about bringing a little clarity and kindness to a person's day, and in the process, we both change for the better."

Ola founded e-Management in 1999 when she finished her master's program in Technology Management at George Mason University. She had been out to lunch with a fellow student, musing about starting her own technology business and imagining what she might call it, when she scribbled "e-Management" on the back of a napkin. At the time, she had no idea the dream would become a reality, as her work kept her fully engrossed in the chaotic climate leading up to Y2K. Over time, she realized the long hours and demanding environment were unsustainable. The epiphany prompted an honest conversation with her employer, and not long after, e-Management was born.

The company's first year was focused on ensuring projects were managed and completed on time. Ola then expanded the company's service offering to help government agencies establish Chief Information Officer functions within their organizations as mandated by the *Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996*. The company then evolved to specialize in the four core areas of planning, engineering, developing, and securing information systems. e-Management has spent the past decade diving deeply into these competencies. "I'm proud we defined who we are early on and didn't just try to do everything," she reflects.

In the mid- to late 2000s, e-Management experienced tremendous growth, particularly in the area of government information security, so that today, it is strongest in its cybersecurity and information assurance services. As a Capability Maturity Model Integration (CMMI) Level 3, the company also excels in web-based application



development. It has innovated and brought to market two software solutions - an enterprise risk management software product called e-Gov Risk Portfolio Manager for enterprise risk management, and another software product in 2014 called CyberRx for cybersecurity readiness and preparedness. CyberRx was spun into its own company focusing on small and medium-sized private sector businesses, specializing in helping companies improve their cyber readiness. "We've been blessed by the receptiveness and positivity we've experienced with this new company," she says. "And, given that small and mid-sized companies are the fastest growing segment being impacted by cyber-attacks, it's perfectly aligned with my passion and purpose to help others succeed. I love that we're serving founders like me who have invested their personal dreams, fortunes, and sweat into creating their businesses, equipping them with the tools to significantly reduce their vulnerability."

Even at an early age growing up half a world away from where she is now, Ola knew she wanted to pursue a career in business. Through the example of her entrepreneurial parents from Nigeria, West Africa, Ola gained an early understanding of the importance of entrepreneurship and the rigors of running a small business. Ola was shaped by the positive, infectious, uplifting laugh of her mother, and by the proverbs and wise sayings of her father. Her parents always had a small business venture going, selling everything from wood products and t-shirts to groceries. "Because I saw that, the idea of starting a business never seemed scary," she reflects. "My siblings and I would help out, so we were always involved in some way. I grew up thinking of business as just another way to offer people options."

From the age of five, Ola attended private American boarding schools in Nigeria amongst fellow classmates who hailed from all over the globe. She grew up understanding that good grades now would open doors to academic scholarships in the future, so she always worked hard in school, and it was there that she experienced what it really meant to grow up in a diverse community. It felt innately right to her, and in the years to come, she would avoid homogenous settings in favor of the varied personalities and backgrounds that lend depth and color to life. "Those early experiences of being in a

really vibrant diverse community set the stage for me," she says. "Now it's all I seek."

Following her graduation from high-school, Ola received an academic scholarship to Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and began her studies as an accounting major. She loved economics, but after completing her Accounting II class, she decided it wasn't for her. After moving to Washington, D.C., she switched to a degree in Computer Information Systems.

When Ola made the move to Washington, she was faced with the prospect of starting a new life and making new friends. A defining moment came one Saturday night when she was out at a party with a group of new acquaintances. Around 1:00 a.m., they decided they were ready to head home, so everyone piled into the car they had come in. Ola, who isn't much of a drinker, was completely sober, and immediately noticed the questionable state of the person who sat down behind the wheel. "I think we should take a cab," she said. No one acknowledged the suggestion, and not wanting to alienate her new crew, she didn't press the issue. It wasn't until the car started weaving back and forth on its way down the road that Ola made a defining decision. "It was like an out-of-body experience," she recalls. "I screamed for them to let me out of the car. Of course the teasing began, but that didn't matter to me. Later that night, after taking a cab home, I thought about the fact that I may have lost all my friends, but it was worth it. It was a defining moment when I realized that I was willing to do what I believed in my gut was right, even if it cost me. The act of breaking from the crowd as a young adult was a big deal, helping me realize that sometimes in life you just have to step away."

After finishing her studies, Ola worked for several government contracting firms in the D.C. area, including a large IT firm, Dyncorp, where she managed contracts for the Department of Education and the Department of Energy. She worked hard there, earning the reputation of being a firefighter. When an important contract faltered and earned poor performance scores, she was called in to turn the program around. Her efforts paid off with the company again receiving the highest performance ratings on the contract. Ready to try something different, Ola transformed herself into a consultant supporting her former employer through her own business, e-Management.

Following a successful rebid of the

contract, e-Management had new life. Ola successfully recruited her brother as her first employee, and a third employee just before the company's first birthday. To celebrate their first year of business, they rented a ballroom at a Marriott and threw a party for fifty friends and colleagues, thanking them for their support and encouragement. "We announced our vision to be an IT company that would provide the best services to the government and lead at the speed of change," she says. "We invited people to connect us to anyone who might be interested."

Grateful for the advice and helping hands of those around her, Ola applied her indelible work ethic to build e-Management into a successful company and a true force to be reckoned with. Through the core of the economic downturn of 2008, she worked even harder. The company was undergoing significant financial challenges, with much of its funding streams significantly cut. In the summer of 2011, it was forced to lay off 20 percent of its workforce, and Ola felt personally responsible for the families of the employees she had to turn away. "It was the hardest year of my professional life due to the decisions I was forced to make," she remembers. "We turned around the loss within twelve months to be profitable again, and the experience definitely turned me into a better leader, but it was incredibly difficult. I had to use all those earlier defining moments to get through—stepping away from the crowd, undertaking a task that seemed impossibly large. As we hit rock bottom, I realized that in those times, you're guided by whatever's in you, because there's no instruction manual that tells you what to do."

All the stress and pressure culminated, and in late September, 2011, Ola was compelled to take some extended time off. In the ample free time she was suddenly presented with, she decided to try something new and start a journal. To her surprise, the writing started to flow as she began exploring in earnest how she had arrived at this moment of personal crisis. "I went through a very intentional process of taking the time to figure out what the answer was," she reflects. "At first, I was incredibly frustrated that I couldn't articulate how I had gotten there. Fortunately, I've been blessed in my life with wise family and friends, and years earlier, one of them had recommended that I put together a personal team—a group of people representing the different

aspects of my life, like health or friendship or spirituality. One team member, a friend for over twenty years, suggested that the simple fact that I was asking the question meant the answer would find me. That was so encouraging to me. I was so focused on results, results, results, but I just needed to relax and be present." A woman of faith, Ola turned her attention to reconnecting with God as she explored the question of why she existed. It was also about that time she started reading Simon Sinek's book, *Start With Why*. This process was instrumental in helping her gain clarity on her purpose.

In this way, one of the most stressful times of Ola's life was transformed into one of the most sacred—the avenue for realizing that she was put on Earth to help others succeed. "It was another one of those experiences where great clarity was born out of great chaos," she explains. "I wrote my life mission statement, 'To live life purposefully and to give generously of myself.' This guiding principle has led me through each major decision I've made since then. Now that I'm able to articulate it this way, it's really given new life to my legacy and ambition. It's been a relief and a joy, and it completely reenergized and inspired me."

Through this process of self-exploration, Ola laid out her why, and then her how, and then her what. She reassessed the business, investments, and boards that occupied her time and faculties, ensuring they were aligned with her purpose. "I had been driving myself so hard at work that I had forgotten why I was doing it in the first place," she says. "So even though that low point was a scary time in life, I believe it needed to happen for me and the company to be stronger in the long run after reconnecting with what's really important. Over the next year, I became an ambassador within our company to help each team member connect with our purpose too. I wanted people to be intentional in wanting to be part of e-Management. We really moved past the mentality that this is a job, and firmly grasped that this is who we are. That's our culture now."

Ola is a servant leader who believes in modeling the behavior she hopes to see in her team. While she tries to lead by consensus, she has also come to grasp the importance of making a call and letting the chips fall where they may. "I've learned that the very best thing you can do in business is run a good, strong, profitable

company,” she explains. “You do a disservice to everyone involved when you shy away from the tough decisions. You have to operate with the belief that what’s good for the whole is ultimately best for the individual people involved, even if they might not see that in the near-term. You have to face your fears.” In 2014, Ola was blessed to be inducted into the Montgomery County Business Hall of Fame. “It was a very personal and surreal experience,” she reflects. “As a first-generation American, it’s hard to believe that I’ve had the opportunity to launch not one, but two businesses so far. I’m so grateful.”

In advising young people entering the working world today, Ola says, “Learn continuously, Inspire others, Value what’s important, and Enjoy all that life has to offer. Or simply, ‘Live.’” This means pursuing one’s dreams and enjoying life—practices that seem simple enough but are at times elusive for die-hard workaholics like Ola. In 2001, she decided to take up social ballroom dancing, and at a dance class two years later, met the man who became her husband, Richard Sage. “Our wedding day was a big party, and one of the happiest days of my life,” she reflects. “Richard is an incredibly kind, thoughtful, and patient man who’s been a perfect partner and balance for me.” In their limited spare time, Ola and Richard still enjoy ballroom dancing, watching movies, and exploring the world through travel. They are also strong supporters of A Wider Circle, a Silver Spring-based charity that takes a fully holistic approach to helping individuals and families transition out of poverty. Ola serves as a board member of the organization, which includes educational programs, job training classes, and a 20,000 plus square-foot warehouse with a constantly-replenished supply of donated furniture and professional wear.

While her innate drive to empower and connect with those around her shines through her

commitment to service, it is also displayed in her fondness for baking carrot cakes. Twenty years ago, a colleague surprised her on her birthday with a homemade carrot cake, sparking a lifelong passion for that particular confectionary wonder. She put her own spin on the recipe and began baking cakes for special occasions and special people in her life. “I love the vibrancy of the cake—the orange carrots, the pecans, the pineapple, the cream cheese frosting,” she gushes. “I love that it’s an experience that brings all of your senses to life, and that it brings people such happiness. And most of all, I love the network of memories that are activated when I bake and share a carrot cake. It’s truly the gift that keeps on giving.”

In a sense, it’s a microcosm of the life she leads—vibrant, diverse, exciting, and nourishing. It’s a labor of love that finds gift in the giving, replenishing its own strength by relishing in the details, the blessings, and the togetherness.

© November 2015 Gordon J. Bernhardt. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

— By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®

*About Gordon J. Bernhardt*

*President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit [www.BernhardtWealth.com](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon’s Blog](#).*