

Lori DiCesare

The Power of Risk

“There are two different types of people,” explains Lori DiCesare. “There are those that plan their entire future and want to know the end result before they get there, and there are those that don’t think about the end result, just taking each day as it comes and knowing the end result will happen. This is what I do.” Though she admits this can sometimes be a curse, it is also among her greatest attributes. It is the trait in her that, she believes, has made her life’s path so different from many of her peers. It’s the trait that allows her to embrace the exhilaration and free-fall of risk, and the trait that gave her the courage to first start her own business. Now the President and CEO of Legal Placements, Inc., a staffing agency specializing in legal staffing throughout the country, Lori hasn’t thought twice about her leap into the abyss.

With a Masters in teaching and a specialty in learning disabled and emotionally disturbed children, she never imagined that she’d one day found a legal placement firm. However, after working as a paralegal to help fund her higher education, she found the field both challenging and rewarding and recommitted her professional roadmap. Lori then worked as a paralegal for eight years, eventually realizing that law school wasn’t for her but still aiming to remain in the legal field. Believing her next step was a position as Paralegal Coordinator, she sought out a placement agency that could connect her with the right law firm. The agency, however, readily identified her experience and skill set as ideal for a position in the legal staffing industry rather than a law firm. Though initially resistant to the idea, Lori decided to try it out and found that she loved the work. “Just as with everything, the key was finding the right agency,” she explains.

Lori worked at a wide variety of agencies over the following six years, learning more about both the industry and herself with each new

experience. She gained a more nuanced understanding of what she would and would not tolerate in a work environment, always maintaining a steadfast fidelity to her integrity and standards. “My father would always say that you’ve got to live at your job, and if there’s something you vehemently disagree with, get up and leave,” she remembers. “Always leave with grace and never burn a bridge, but leave all the same.” Throughout her five-year employment with her last agency, she noted things she would do differently if she were in charge. Then, one day, she resigned her position and found herself launching her own business the next. Guided by legal council, she saw to it that the transition was honest and lawful.

With only \$5,000 in savings and no credit lines to fund the venture, Legal Placements got off to a tenuous start. With two young children to support, living was tight for the first six months while she refrained from paying herself. Lori had no business plan, taking things

in stride. “Honestly I never thought about the next day,” she admits. “I had to only think about *that* day. No book would have taught me what I needed to know. I made mistakes and learned from them. It’s been quite a ride.”

Though her first months as a business owner were not easy, Lori wasn’t alone. When friends would learn of her vision, they were eager to lend a helping hand any way they could. Whether it was stuffing envelopes or providing free accounting services, Lori was inspired by their optimism and support. She also drew constant strength from her father’s unwavering faith and confidence in her. Legal Placements was profitable six months after its inception, and it took a year for the company to replace Lori’s income. Because of her ample experience working with and for attorneys, conversing with them and dealing with managing partners, she was able to offer a



seasoned and knowledgeable product that was soon in high demand.

Reflecting back on the tremendous risk involved in Lori's decision to break out and found her own company, many wonder how she had the courage to do it. The key to her success primarily extends back to her willingness to risk. "There are people who could go out and do what I've done, but they just aren't risk takers for whatever reason," she explains. Another crucial ingredient to her success was the fact that she had essentially built a client base before she embarked on her mission, as ninety percent of her business at the previous agency came with her once she departed. This reality echoes the third primary ingredient of her triumph, which was her experience and expertise. To Lori, success is not about worrying what the future may or may not hold, nor about trying to micromanage the aspects of life that are beyond one's control. Rather, it's about truly knowing one's product and committing to it 100 percent.

Today, Legal Placements matches opportunities for contract and direct hire attorneys, paralegals, legal secretaries, and IT professionals. Contract and direct hire attorneys supply their biggest source of revenue, especially during massive bouts of litigation such as the recent incidents with Toyota and BP. With fourteen in-house employees and 250 to 300 contractors out at any given time, its impact extends far and wide. While its three offices are located in DC, Northern Virginia, and New York City, they staff projects nationwide.

The staying power of Legal Placements stems in large part from Lori's strong work ethic, which extends back to her early years. Though it may have been bred out of necessity considering that her family was of modest means, she quickly recognized its value and has aimed to cultivate it throughout her life. "In that sense, I feel very privileged that I didn't grow up in an affluent family," she explains. Her parents were very strong and influential figures in her life, working hard to make ends meet and putting Lori and her brothers through parochial school. From the age of sixteen, she sought jobs lifeguarding, working in the deli department at Wal-Mart, and wherever else she could find them. Having to support herself through college and graduate school further stretched this work ethic. At one point, for example, she was managing three jobs

simultaneously just to pay for everything. "I lived on peas out of a can for a year, but that's okay," she laughs now.

Perhaps the greatest source of strength fueling this work ethic was the voice of her father, who had always told her with earnest conviction that she could do anything she put her mind to. The eternal optimist, he always gave her the impression that there were no boundaries to what one could accomplish. "Never forget where you came from, and always be honest. If you run your business with these two thoughts in mind, you'll be fine," he would tell her. He also taught her to stick up for herself and not to feel inferior in the presence of someone who held a higher degree than her. "At the end of the day, it's what did *you* do in your job? What did *you* accomplish? Did you do the best you could?" he would remind her.

It is this sense of honor, focus, and tenacity that Lori strives to instill in her own children today, and that she looks for in both her employees and contract employees. With this in mind, she encourages young entrepreneurs to start at the bottom and work their way up in much the same way that she learned and mastered an industry before starting her business. "I don't have patience for people who don't work hard," she states. In this sense, the recession has been a particularly interesting time for Legal Placements. The staffing industry was hit particularly hard due to lack of hiring, and she remembers that it was a wake-up call to everyone. In making difficult layoff decisions, work ethic was among the primary determining factors for her. One of her top producers would say, "This is not a time to complain; this is a time to buckle up and get back to work." It is this attitude that will bring professional success and staying power, she advises.

Despite her demonstrated commitment to hard work, Lori maintains a sense of genuine fraternity throughout Legal Placements. "My employees are my friends," she says. "They've been very loyal to me, and vice versa. We have great days, but we also argue the way a family does. Everyone has their moments, but you work through it." This is perhaps an echo of her upbringing, which was rich with Italian heritage and the closeness of family. "When I was brought up, there were never enough chairs at the kitchen table," she reminisces. "Dinners would last forever, and everyone was welcome to join in."

Now, with a degree of that same closeness infused in her work atmosphere and in her relationships with clients, her agency emanates a genuine care and commitment to the well being of its employees, its contractors, and its clients.

So what comes next for Legal Placements, and for Lori? The terrain of the staffing industry is in continual flux, with new rules and regulations being added to the mix. Positioning her firm at the forefront of this evolutionary process will continue to hold a seminal place in her plans. "Everything is a lot more complex," she concedes, "but that's the fun of it—the challenge, the result, the catch." She will also continue her unwavering focus on her other full-time job—being a mother. "Undoubtedly, my best decision has been my kids," she affirms. Lori will continue to nurture and teach them as she evolves her business and herself, ready to take the next big risk when it comes along.

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