

Minorities and Women..

Role models: How they did it

By Nancy Weingartner

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Women today no longer sit by idly waiting for the glass slipper to fit, nor are they hunkered down beneath some version of the glass ceiling. They are heading up companies, sitting on boards and finding work that fits where they are in life.

We've profiled two women here who have taken different paths to reach a state they each call success. That doesn't mean that their definition of success won't change in a few years, but, it does mean that right now the glass is always full—and when they go to the well, it's never dry.

—Nancy Weingartner

Rosalyn Mallet, Caribou Coffee

Sometimes getting to the C-suite is as fortuitous as the right background at the right time. Rosalyn “Roz” Mallet was on the board of Caribou Coffee—her first public board seat—when she got tapped to be the company's president and chief operating officer.

“It wasn't a route that I thought about,” she said, but by being a board member, she had the luxury to think about the brand and where it should be headed without the pressures of applying for the job.

But while serendipity—the knack for being in the right place at the right time—is a valuable tool, Mallet's diverse skill set, well-established network and years of hard work were really what made her visible to the powers that promote.

Here's how she did it:

Work background: “Over the last 20-plus years I've developed a skill set that developed around franchising,” she said. Mallet started with Applebee's when they had two units, and helped develop their first Uniform Franchise Offering Circular, the bible of the brand. While there, she learned how to grow a brand, run a P&L and, most importantly, she learned operations. “I am a general manager,” she said. But more important, “I am a leader first, and a general manager second.”

Her path has been atypical, she admitted, because in the restaurant industry, it's traditionally been easier for women to be promoted through the functional ranks, such as marketing and human resources.

Mallet has been on the human resource side of the business, as well. As a senior vice president for the Carlson Companies, she managed 250 employees and a multi-million-dollar budget. Instead of seeing herself as an HR director, Mallet treated the assignment as if she were running a business unit. That tweak in thinking helped her develop the skills needed to run a company. She went on to become the chief operating officer of the La Madeleine French Bakery, Café and Bistro chain.

Personal background: Sometimes it helps to see how someone arrived at their current position by looking at where they've been. Mallet, 51, grew up in Houston, Texas, in the 1960s when society was going through monumental changes. She was the eldest child and the only girl. “My parents instilled in me that I could do whatever I wanted...they raised me to be optimistic,” she said. Her father had been in the Army in Europe and that experience led him to believe his children shouldn't be raised in a small-town cocoon. Mallet attended integrated Catholic schools and was introduced to people and cultures very different from her African-American roots. “I'm shy,” she admitted, but having a diverse group of friends and acquaintances and the exposure to other cultures “teaches you that you belong. It allows you to take risks in your career.”

Leadership style: “The good news about me and a lot of women leaders is we don't lead with ego. I lead with servant-



leadership," she said. While it's important to have enough ego to have self-confidence, Mallet said, "if you lead with ego, if you go into an organization with 'it's always about me,' it's a short-term career. It needs to be about the people in the organization."

Advice:

"Be willing to learn and teach yourself."

"Define your goal and then break it down into steps."

"Be willing to work harder and shine brighter. It starts with being really good at what you do." Know what you want out of a career, so you're traveling the right path.

Be a role model. Sometimes senior management gets sucked dry, so find ways to replenish yourself so you can be available.

On board positions:

Start with nonprofit boards. It's important to be involved in the community, and to network. Get noticed for the right things: for following through on volunteer commitments, for being a good leader, for being involved in your industry. Not coincidentally, involvement with the Women's Foodservice Forum is advantageous, too. It's where she met her current employer.

Caribou's Chairman and CEO Michael Coles was looking for diversity on his board. He knew Mallet from her involvement with WFF, and when he talked to other CEOs about female candidates for the position, her name came up more than once. He called and told her he'd like to spend some time with her to learn more about what she might have to offer his board. The rest is "herstory," as the feminist used to refer to "history."

"Everything you do in your career is leading you to your goals," she said. "You need to know whatever you're doing is feeding your skill set and your reputation. Focus on what's important."

But also realize: "This is not for everyone." There's constant accountability and it's a lot of hard work. Board positions are well suited for people who have a personality that thrives on stress, strategic thinking and long hours. "I truly enjoy business management, leadership and strategy," Mallet said. "I'm not happy sitting in an office waiting for someone to come out of a board meeting to tell me what to do.

"This is cool, but it's not glamorous."

Shawn Kahle, Arment Dietrich

As she enters her fifth decade, here's just a snippet of what Shawn Kahle has learned so far: Life's not fair. "It is what it is. Deal with it."

And, as far as bad news—"It doesn't get any better with time," so there's no better time than the present to deal with it, she says.

Fifty may be the new 40, but for Kahle, a senior account executive with Arment Dietrich public relations firm in Chicago, age has not only brought wisdom, it's brought a wealth of experience. She's been a speech writer for the head of Michigan Bell Telephone, vice president of corporate affairs for Kmart and president and chief executive officer of The New Detroit Science Center, before digging up her roots and moving to Chicago.

The woman who remembers when "computers were the size of washing machines" and non-landline communication was so unwieldy "you needed someone else to carry your cell phone," now works in an office of young, tech-savvy go-getters, and it's not always easy realizing that "biologically I could have birthed all of them."

But while she may need help with newfangled technology, she brings a wealth of experience from her years as a company spokeswoman in the corporate world. Her 30-something employer, Gini Dietrich, has the agency experience coupled with an entrepreneurial bent, and her co-workers provide tech-savvy strategies for their PR clients.

Kahle is one of a multitude of female baby boomers who are finding that life at top of the ladder offers a panoramic view with some unexpected sightlines. Sometimes staying in high-paying, highly visible jobs isn't the only rung on that ladder. There's such a thing as loving what you do and who you work with, she says.

For every door that closed in her career, Kahle found another corridor existed around the corner. Her one regret is that she didn't rely on her instincts when new management was brought into her last corporate job. Her gut told her it was



time to leave, but she allowed her boss to convince her to stay. When Kmart's management announced they were laying off the entire communications department, Kahle was given a one-year severance. She used the time to hone her tennis game, get in shape, travel and volunteer her time. Fund raising for The New Detroit Science Center led to a job as the center's CEO. "I loved it, loved it," she says, "but I missed corporate communications." Detroit's market was not conducive to finding a comparable position to what she had left, so since she and her husband, Bob, had a lake home near Chicago, the couple moved to take advantage of the more diversified Chicago market. Since they didn't have children, "some changes are easier. If it's good for me and Bob and the dog, we can do it," she says.

Her advice to those just starting out in their career is: Don't expect to work for the same company for the rest of your life just to get ahead.

"You don't have to pay your dues for five years if you're miserable." People come and go in companies all the time.

"A lot of people have this false sense that the place will go under if they leave," she says. That sense of obligation limits your choices, and more often than not, the business enters a new phase of its life, too, she adds.

Which in the end, does make life a little more fair.

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