Shining in the face of adversity/prejudice

Profile

Name: Carol Bartz
Born: 1948, Winona, Minnesota, USA
Claim to fame:
-The woman who was unafraid to excel in the midst of men,
-The woman who turned around the fortunes of Autodesk, and is now currently the CEO of Yahoo!

It is common knowledge that hardships and difficulties often lie in the pathway to success. But it must be asked: what is success, exactly? Not everyone will share the same views on what constitutes success – it is a subjective issue. Although some may equate success with money or financial earnings, most, however, will agree with David McCullough when he said “To strive to do what one loves regardless of any challenges faced along the way is the ultimate path to triumph – and that’s exactly what Carol Bartz did.

The story of Carol Bartz’s ascent to the higher ranks in the corporate world is a riveting one indeed, and for many reasons. Born in Winona, Minnesota, Bartz had had a difficult childhood – her mother had died of a chronic disease when Bartz was only eight, leaving her in the hands of a brutal father who believed the belt to be the best way to reform a child. Fortuitously, Bartz was raised by her grandmother, who got ahold of Bartz at the age of 12. Despite these domestic issues, Bartz went on to excel in high school, where she was one of just two girls in her physics and advanced algebra class.

The next stage of her life took Bartz to William Woods University, where she aimed to major in her favorite field, mathematics. As fate would have it, Bartz changed her mind in view of the fact that in those days, the only career option for a woman with a Math major would be teaching – something Bartz knew she was not cut out for. She therefore transferred to the University of Wisconsin then in pursuit of a degree in computer science. To support herself financially, Bartz became a cocktail waitress, a job for which she needed to relentlessly exercise – in Bartz’ own words “1500 hours a day” - in order to fit into the required miniskirt uniform.

It was only when Bartz joined 3M, a manufacturing conglomerate, did she realize that gender discrimination did actually exist in the corporate world. After four years of working in a hopeless dead-end job at 3M, her request to transfer to the headquarters was expressly rejected, resulting in her well-founded decision to quit. Again, this little bump in the road only brought Bartz one step closer to her big break as Bartz went on to join the computer industry, including jobs at companies such as Digital Equipment Corporation and Sun Microsystems.

In 1992, Bartz was named CEO of Autodesk, a company which designs computer software. But in an unfortunate turn of events, Bartz hit yet another bump on her rollercoaster ride of a journey: around the same time she accepted the role of CEO at Autodesk, Bartz was diagnosed with breast cancer. So determined was Bartz to not let the cancer affect her performance as CEO that instead of taking the recommended six weeks off, she resumed her work just four weeks later. For the seven months that followed, Bartz undauntingly went through the chemotherapy sessions while continuing to work full time at Autodesk.

It was here at Autodesk was Bartz able to use her innate skills to drive the company to success. Under her control, Autodesk emerged as a leader of the market, capturing and increasing its market share and causing rival companies to falter under the pressure. Bartz gives much of the credit about the triumph of Autodesk to her ‘3F’ concept – fail-fast forward. The concept proposes that failure is very much acceptable and when it happens, it should be quelled briskly with a buoyant stance – an approach that allows the company to recover promptly from any failure. Her actions and strategies proved to be rewarding for the company, which saw its profits rocket and its growth rise. By the time Bartz stepped down as CEO of Autodesk in 2006, the company was in the best position it had ever been in. In the words of a research analyst at Piper Jaffrey, Bartz truly ‘fixed the company’.

In recognition of Bartz’s very successful tenure as CEO at Autodesk, she received many well-deserved accolades and honors from different groups. The San Francisco Business Times hailed her as the one of ‘The 100 Most Influential Women in Business’ in 2004, and a year later Forbes magazine named her one of ‘The Most Powerful Women in the World’. In the same year, Barron’s magazine included her in the prestigious list of the ‘World’s 30 Most Respected CEOs’. Bartz also served on a number of executive boards of well-established companies, including those of Cisco and Intel.
Carol Brantz is known for her stringent, hardened approach to matters, for her 3F concept which encourages resilience to failures, and for her inherent ability to ‘fix’ things. These unique qualities make Brantz stand out, and it is perhaps because of these qualities she was appointed as the CEO of Yahoo! on January 13, 2009 – a floundering company in dire need of a capable leader. A mix of uncertainty and hope surround Bartz’s appointment, as although many analysts have supported her election, there is still doubt as to whether anything can be done to save Yahoo! from its deteriorating, impending fate. Nonetheless, it is hoped that history will repeat itself and Brantz can restore the former glory of the good old days.

From cocktail waitress to CEO of Autodesk and subsequently Yahoo!, the journey of Carol Bartz is without a doubt a source of inspiration for everyone. Carol Brantz is that woman who battled gender discrimination, who endured cancer unflinchingly, and who fought her way up the ranks to become one of the world’s most respected women. In the wise words of Anna Pavlova “To follow, without halt, one aim: There’s the secret of success”.

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On being asked by a student reporter if it is okay for one to fail, Bartz responded, "Oh! You must fail! You must fail. If you don't fail, you don't know the degrees of success. It's like, say, skiing. You have to fall down to learn how to be a better skier. I happen to be a big gardener, and if you don't kill a lot of plants along the way, you don't know how to garden. [It's the same] if you don't have failures in school, in business.”

“’I was a real nerd. I love, love, love, love math. Back in the late ’60s, math meant being a teacher if you were a woman. I wasn't interested in teaching. Then I took my first computer course. It was crazy. It was like math, only more fun. I switched to computer science. My roommates thought I was nuts. There were only two women in the department.”