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Turning the Wrench on Leadership

Lori Johnson is using her one-woman start-up, Ladies, Start Your Engines! to drive forward with a clarified mission: empower women to get under the hoods while only partnering with companies that share her values.

How'd she decide to pursue this venture? She started as an automotive tech in a Honda dealership, holding monthly new owner clinics where she'd put the car up in the air and start explaining the basics. During information sessions, Johnson noticed that women wouldn't step forward and ask questions.

Edited by
Jasmine Grimm

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This was a big problem. Although women made 85 percent of car buying decisions, they didn't feel comfortable talking about maintenance. Female customers were out there and they weren't happy, leaving behind a largely ignored market segment.

She wondered what would happen if she held classes just for women. She assumed they'd feel more comfortable asking questions because she shared their gender. She experimented and, sure enough, she had the ability to get ladies to put their nose under the hood. Johnson had stumbled into an underserved market.

Her friends goaded her to expand the idea. They believed she could start her own business. They knew many women didn't get the gist of car maintenance, and one of the keys to developing a great venture is to come up with an idea that people genuinely need. Johnson had taken the time to look at incongruities in her industry and then listened to the customer's needs to serve them better.

Johnson realized that many women don't know anything about their cars because they weren't taught how to do it.

"They're taught to call dad or another man

in their life to take care of it," said Johnson.

Johnson provided the solution. It turns out many auto shops were wondering how they could change the way women were served, and thus the idea for her start-up was born.

She started offering private classes on the side in '06. She began with auto dealerships and grew her business to Mom and Pop shops, auto body dealerships and family-owned businesses. The auto industry was looking for new trends to make their customers feel more comfortable; her new idea was an easy sell. They'd hire Johnson, who would travel to their destination and teach their audience about car maintenance. By '09 she amassed a large enough customer base to work on Ladies, Start Your Engines! full time.

In this way Johnson continued to build her network. When the classes would end, Johnson would keep in contact with the shops to discuss additional trends they were seeing while figuring out how she could help them come up with a solution.

She learned charity events were a huge



draw. This was perfect for Johnson because she knew women were drawn to philanthropic events. She'd offer students a potluck dinner for a charity event while doling out her services.

Although Johnson strives to do the right things for her customers, growing her gig has
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been slow going. She's a one-woman show. But she's passionate despite the many obstacles she faces. That's because Johnson has motor oil running through her veins. A Flint, Michigan transplant, Johnson's father and grandfather both worked at GM, and her grandfather was a mechanic. She's been getting her hands dirty since she was a child, taking things apart and tinkering around with

them to see how they worked. Although she had a mechanical background, she believes her gender made it tough for her to break into the industry. So she went to school to hone her skills. In her experience, she constantly has to prove herself.

"When I walk into an auto store, they rush over to help me because there's the perception that I don't know—as a woman—what I'm doing there," said Johnson. "It's the same way in the industry. When I work on a car, I get questions like, 'A woman worked on my car? How does she know what she's doing?'" She's got 23 years experience. In context she thinks that comment is ridiculous, but she's unusual because there are so few women mechanics. As such, Johnson believes that stepping out into a male dominated field blazes a trail for other women who want to get into the auto industry.

And in this way, she's a leader. She's shattered the industry stereotype, and she used her entrepreneurial skills to come up with an idea to serve a market segment. She's unusual. She's focused on helping people. She challenges the status quo. On top of

that, Johnson's out to do what she believes is the right thing for women.

When she leads in her business, values are important to her. Right now, that's right in line with how consumers are thinking. According to *Forbes*, ever since the recession hit, customers are more apt to work with companies that value empathy and kindness, friendliness, high quality and socially responsible endeavors. They're more thoughtful in their spending. It's called the "Spend Shift" and 63 percent of customers are now buying from companies whose values reflect their own.

For Johnson, not only is it an intrinsic value, it's smart business. Social consciousness is becoming a new business model. She's not shy about turning down opportunities to grow her business if it's not in line with her values. It's important to her not only to do the right thing by her largely female students, but also to do the right thing for the environment. When she makes large decisions for her small start-up, she looks at companies with whom she partners and asks herself how that company is viewed by society. She wants to work with companies that are eco-conscious and
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produce green products. It's important for her to partner with innovative companies, but also ones that care about the footprint that they're leaving behind. When she makes big company decisions, she values honesty and integrity.

"I don't want to work with someone and find out that they've been dumping oil in the river for 20 years or something like that," said Johnson. "I think I'm really about them being open about their ideas and views. I have to say I'm concerned about environmental issues and honesty for the customer."

She values honesty with her corporate partners and also her customers. She's against pushing products out the door if the customer doesn't really need it. When she makes a sale she wants to stress that the products are quality, eco-friendly and made in America to benefit the economy.

"It's a lot to look at and there's no company out there that's doing it 100 percent right. I try to make the best decisions," said Johnson. "But I go on the Internet and look at them and try to find everything I can about them. I don't associate myself with businesses if I don't feel we're aligned."

It's important to Johnson to make solid decisions quickly without being hasty. In the immediacy of the situation it's easy to get caught up when a customer wants to partner with her. But, during the years, she's learned to step back and do her research before committing to any big decision. She wants to give her self time to think about what she wants to do. She tries to think about the future. She's looking to form



long-term relationships over making a quick buck.

As a leader, she tries to show commitment to her vision without being rigid. To make better decisions, she has a group of informal mentors whom she can bounce ideas.

"As a business owner, if I haven't experienced something, I don't want to make a decision that hurts me in the long run. I'll ask them if I'm being crazy for exploring an idea or if I should look into it," said Johnson. "There are other women who have been in the situation and ... they can give me their feedback. In this way, I don't make decisions by myself."

She's working toward becoming a better leader. Right now she's working with The Chamber, through their [mentoring program](#), which educates and connects female students to professional businesswomen. This program holds Johnson accountable.

"It makes me stop and think before I give an answer," said Johnson. "I always think how is my mentee going to take it, or how would she apply it. I thought this would be a

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great opportunity for me to learn more about leadership because here's someone who will ask me questions and trust that I'll give her the right answers. I want to make sure I'm doing the best thing for her and make the best decisions for her future."

The program sharpens her decision making skills and made her realize some of the nuances of leadership and how they impact people on a broader scale.

"I'm learning to pay attention to how I react," said Johnson.

But just because she's stepped into a leadership role doesn't mean that she believes she has it all figured out. In fact, she finds she makes many mistakes and she challenges herself not to become angry or frustrated when she does so. Rather, she aims to shape the experience as an opportunity for growth.

"First I have recognize it, and then I have to shape it from a negative to a positive," said Johnson.

Above all, Johnson strives to make her passion infectious. She talks about what she loves to do all the time, and when people ask Johnson what she does for a living they're

spellbound by the response. When she's networking and she brings up what she does, "I can already see women's heads spinning and thinking, 'Wow, I'd like to learn how to do that.' Afterward they'll come up to me and that's when I know they're interested in how I can help more women learn about this."

In the end, Johnson keeps pushing forward and working on her business because she's the only one who can prove that she has the skill sets necessary to pull off this business. She's the deciding factor between whether Ladies, Start Your Engines! will grow or fail.

"When I go for something, I either fail miserably or it's a wild success," said Johnson. And she has every intention of inspiring other women to get under their hoods and empowering them to work on their cars themselves. She's dead set on making sure it succeeds.

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