**Fire Alarm and Safety Design and Installation**

**16.05.2018**

XX, aged 52 with children 7 and 16. Husband worked full time and abroad mainly, now retired. Mother moved in to provide childcare.

Started as a PA, worked way up to Board at a fire protection manufactures. Had children whilst working. Pushed out, short period in London with US firm but too far commute around children etc. Set up E. with an Indian company, then bought them out (with savings) to own the company 100%. Built from scratch and started with 3 employees.

Relentlessly having to prove credibility in a highly male dominated industry. Did an MBA to build up self-esteem that was being attacked all the time.

E. design & installation of complete fire detection and action systems. Fire control panels / devices / testing equipment. Contracts across the UK and export overseas, HQ in Waterlooville and offices in Northern Ireland, North Yorkshire and London with 10 employees.

CG: Please can you give me an overview of how you started the business, what made you decide to the business?

XX: Is that in terms of just E or before as well?

CG; If you could tell a little of what you were doing before, so I situate the transition into your own business?

XX: I came from a fire detection manufacturer, worked my way from PA up through several layers of management to get to be the first female Board Director. During a lower positon, and I don’t mean that in a derogatory way, I just mean below a Director, I had my first child. Then during my time as the Director I had my second child. After which new management came in, they basically bullied me out of the business.

CG: So you feel you were pushed out ……?

XX: Yes for being a female. Without a shadow of a doubt. Even though I took my case all the way through to the company secretary of the Plc Company, as an appeal process with so many evidence, they didn’t do anything. I decide to just leave peacefully to make it easier to move on to an American organisation in London. But I couldn’t make the work/life balance with family commitments and commuting to London. So I set up E. with an Indian company, but it just doesn’t work well enough and so I bought them out with savings and set up on my own. I was in control and I could employ the people I required to have to space and time to properly focus on the business and still be around for my children.

CG; How old were your children when you decided to buy the business and 100% on your own?

XX: They were 7 and 16.

CG: Did you find that it was at this point, when they were out of early year’s education, that you had the time and energy to focus on a start up?

XX: Yes, what was interesting was that at my busiest time as Director at the manufacturing company, when I was travelling the world and when my 2nd child arrived, my mother had to move in and live with us full time. I could not have done it, at all without her. My husband was the stereotypical man, he would do his diary and then I would have to obtain his travel routes. If he was here, he would deny it. So would I have to plan my trips around his, however inconvenient. So mental space during a difficult time, was only possible because of my mother.

When I set up E. I made the decision upfront not to take an initial salary, so that I could afford to employ two people to do the stuff that I could do. I needed the time with my children and I needed the headspace to think clearly. That was a choice I made, I sat down with my husband on the financial side to say, this is how I am going to structure the company, I don’t want to be at work all the time because it’s not fair on the children. At that time my husband was hardly at home.

CG: So would you say you took 100% of the domestic responsibilities?

XX: Yes definitely.

CG; Why did you choose to set up that particular business? Was there a gap in the market?

XX: I knew the industry really well and the gaps I saw were that corporates were getting more corporates and employing more people from outside the industry. So the customers are getting less focus and relationships are weakening. So the company that I had spent 19 years helping to grow, changed the brand and focused solely on profit, just not interested in the customer and it was all basically about themselves. So that was one of the reasons for leaving and setting up F, I knew I could fill that gap – go back to talking with the customer and building strong relationships. Filling that gap. I could work with customers as partners again.

CG: So your business is putting that personal relationship back in.

XX; Yes

CG: AS the business has grown, what do you feel the milestones have been, the business challenges you have overcome? Also thinking about that within your family context too.

XX; The biggest milestone without a shadow of a doubt was the first year. The bully that pushed me out of the business went after my suppliers and customers; basically trying to undermine my credibility and the relationships I had built up. He was questioning my professional integrity, he was ridiculing me, which just doesn’t happen to any men. It was always “she”, the female side of it. It was by far the hardest hurdle to get over.

Now I am established, that isn’t questioned anymore. But back then it was really hard. I had to keep it together for the children. For me as a mum and trying to teach your children respect and decency, was what actually kept me going. In a strange way, had I not been a mum I think my work ethics would have been different.

CG: In what way?

XX: I was not sympathetic before I had children, I did not have the empathy. My management style has definitely changed for the better as a result. At Board level, I was able to put more of a human side to decisions that had ramifications for staff.

CG; When you set up your business, was it a very male dominated sector, and therefore your credibility as a business person, simply based on your gender?

XX: Bizarrely when I set up, I was already very established. So yes the fire industry was and is still very male dominated. Senior females in the industry are rare. I was fortunate (but I did earn it), that I could work my way up to the Board position. That gave me the exposure, so when I set up E I was already well known. For people that knew me, I already had their respect. For people that didn’t know, that was so much more difficult. All the usual allegations; she only got to the top because she slept her way up etc etc.

But in a way it made me more determined to be successful. I would negotiate harder.

CG: So you turned it all on its head, reinforcing your determination to beat them.

XX; Yes. So when I started E., I was already known in the part of industry that I am in as strong. But what I get so much, more than anything, is that I am trusted. Back when I was Board employee, I had formed a number of partnerships that benefitted not just me but everyone involved. I am literally just doing the same at E. I am trying to set up this network, they are all male owner businesses, where we can all benefit. It’s scale together. I had a meeting yesterday, where one of the business owners said to me “Do you think you can do this so well, because you are female?” and said well you need to answer that. What has made it a success for you? He said “Well I’ve known you for 20 years”. I said no, you asked me whether I thought I was able to do this because I was female. I would say no, I would say it’s because I am a good business person, I am trustworthy.

CG: So it was nothing to do with your gender at all.

XX: Correct, absolutely. In the end he agreed, but he said “I still think you get away with things because you are female.” He is someone that I respect and we have a lot of mutual marketing together. I didn’t take it was a negative but it was interesting.

So I have managed to pull 9 companies together into this really beneficial network and I am the only woman. There generally all bigger businesses than mine because they have been going longer. I am the single female that owns another company in this group.

CG: So being that single female owned company in such a male dominated environment, do you have a support network or alternative business network of women who you can talk to?

XX: No, I don’t find that. I find being the MD of a company lonely, not being the only female. So there are a number of MDs that I do talk to, but they are all male, because my peers are all male.

There are 2 females in the industry that I would talk to, but not on a regular basis. We may have a bit of a joke. But no I would not say they are my support network. There are 3 guys that I can think of, off the top of my head, that I would talk to. They are all business owners and I can talk to them about all my day to day stresses, cashflow, people, but of course nothing to do with being a female. In a way I think I am over that now. It’s not an issue.

I took a load of clients out to the local football match, again the only female. One of the owners of our biggest customer is 73 and he talked about how when he walks in he feels them all asking “What’s that old guy got to offer?”. He’s the only one in ages that has asked me about how it feels to be a female in this industry, I think for the rest it’s irrelevant because I have been around for so long.

Some of the new people that I meet will have that conversation with me.

CG: I suppose that is a sign of your success, being accepted by those men who were so against you?

XX: Yes I suppose so, but getting here has been so hard, so hard.

CG: What do you think was the hardest part of it?

XX: At work, I work hard and when I socialise I will socialise hard too. Running a male team, you have to be very careful all the time and hold you own at all times, with your staff and with your customers. You can’t let your guard down at anytime.

When I would go to meetings with a team , one employee kept introducing me to everyone as “my boss” and I said you don’t need to do that all the time. And he said that he did, otherwise they’ll just think you are the secretary. I said that was fine, I would show them in the meeting what I could do and it would be obvious who I was. It was so tough all the time.

CG: So you have had to prove your credibility at every step.

XX; Yes absolutely, absolutely. Even when I did my MBA. It was awful. I had a customer who said “Good luck with the business, you are gonna need it.” And I asked him why and he said “It’s because you are too nice” and yet 18 months later he admitted that he had been wrong. He never would have said that to a man, course he wouldn’t have done.

CG: It was relentless…

XX; Yes, each time I had a choice to make. Do I just carry on or do I stop but then I am letting them win. Now when I look back I think that actually, it just made me more resilient and determined. My aim has always been, I need to be respected. You don’t have to like me, but you do need to respect me. I am now established and I don’t think I am seen as anything other than the business professional that I am. But getting here has been far, far harder than it could ever have been for any male in this industry.

My focus has always been driving improvement for the customer. It’s the customer at the centre of everything.

CG Have you found that having established your own business, it’s taken you away from all that sexism?

XX; Yes definitely. It’s funny have my new staff in and watching them. My brother works for me and he said one day, I don’t think I could do your job, you have a way with people that I don’t, you get them to trust you. I think it’s different styles, I’ve been the outsider for so long and worked so hard to prove myself and be accepted, you have to be able to bring people round.

I do think with my business, I have got over the female hurdle and now I am a boss and accepted and respected. I think that’s age, I really think that is age.

CG; You have built the standing and respect, I suppose a man would have not have had to build it that high, to leverage it into a company, but once you are there you can retain it and build your own framework to work in, rather than accept theirs?

XX: A horrendous nightmare to get there. It was literally only 2 years ago when I was on holiday with my husband that I started telling him the stories of what I had to deal with. And he asked why I didn’t tell him at the time and I don’t know, I just had to deal with it. There was only once when I felt I couldn’t resolve it, back when I was employed and then luckily my boss sorted it.

CG: Do you think it has get better?

XX: Yes I do, there are more female coming up; buyers, customer relationships, not enough engineers but I think that is a UK wide problem. Overseas it’s very different, so many more females, particularly engineers coming through; India and China, the Middle East even. But in the UK, none at the award dinners yet, but I’m hopeful, it’s still very male, entrenched industry.

CG; It is an achievement to have set up a successful business in this environment.

XX: Well looking back I think it was setting up despite everything that was thrown at me, particularly from my old company. Facing them down (and they are not working in the industry now) gave me real credibility. It would never have been an issue for a man.

CG; How did all this impact on your family?

XX: Well when I had my second child, I didn’t feel held back in work or unsupported or pushed out. Had I not already been a director, I know I would not have subsequently be given the directorship.

CG; Is that because you would have had a young child?

XX: Yes, they would have feared I would not have been able to do the job.

CG; Now you own your business, do you have flexibility to work and have time with your children? Or is your time still filled with business?

XX: I work much more around the children. I have the flexibility to take a business trip abroad and add a few days on the end to have with my family. I can time the overseas trip for the school holidays and take my husband and youngest son away with me. I would never be able to do that if I didn’t own the business.

CG; So setting up the business has given you more time with your family.

XX; Yes, definitely.

CG; Was that a motivator as well for you, in terms of setting the business up?

XX; I think when I thought all about it, then yes. The thought of going back to another corporate, where I would have to work and prove myself all over again, I just couldn’t do it. I had 3 really good job offers on the table from great companies. The thought of proving myself again and not being there for the children, was what stopped me.

CG; Do you regret anything about setting up the business now and not taking a job?

XX; No. I look at the children, my home and what we have achieved….Actually running my own business have given me more information and knowledge, to chat with my boys about. One of them is business minded and I can bring him to do work experience. In their eyes they can see me succeeding, that is really important for the children. Rather than that period of time when I was being battered down, I had lost all confidence because I had been bullied and undermined. My self esteem was rock bottom back then, at the corporate.

CG; That’s an amazing contrast to what you have achieved now with the company.

XX: That’s what people outside see more, than myself.

CG; Almost that the male corporate company was not able to utilise your skills, it battered you down inside and it took you setting up your own company to show what you could do.

XX: Yes, definitely. It was because of the children that I didn’t take the big salary jobs.

**Personal Details**

Age: ~~16-29 30-39 40-49~~ 50-59 ~~60+~~

Nationality: British (white)

Country of origin: UK

Mode of working: Full Time ~~Part time:~~

Children: (1) ~~0-2 3-4~~ 5-11 ~~12-18~~

Children: (2) ~~0-2 3-4 5-11~~ 12-18

Children: (3) 0-2 3-4 5-11 12-18

Children: (4) 0-2 3-4 5-11 12-18

Highest educational qualification: O’Levels (later MBA)

Location of business: Winchester

Home working: No

Last position held in employment: Director

Husband Occupation: Retired

Husband highest educational qualification:

Household income: Dual ~~Single~~