

Trainer gets to the heart of business

Margaret Thorne Seidler

By **HERB FRAZIER**

The Post and Courier

A busy Margaret Seidler is in the business of making businesses better. In the process, she learned something about her style as a manager.

In the corporate world, Seidler realized that to become effective at managing people, she needed to lead less with her head and more with her heart while finding a workable balance between the two.

She's become a better listener, acknowledging others' strengths and varying her message to speak effectively to a variety of people.

"You can have a bunch of education, you can have a bunch of job experience, but if you don't have an opportunity to raise your own awareness, you will not know your strengths and areas for growth," she says.

A manager who hasn't come to this epiphany could crash and burn, she predicts.

With that realization, Seidler has been on a mission to study what makes great leaders to increase her skills as an organization development consultant and master trainer.

That is her business: Seidler & Associates, based in her West Ashley home, secluded in a quiet neighborhood against the marsh that borders the Ashley River.

The more she learns, the more she can give to her 21 clients who keep her constantly on the move. They include the Space and Naval Warfare Systems at the Naval Weapons Station, Santee Cooper, General Engineering Labs (GEL Group), East Cooper Regional Medical Center and Heritage Trust Federal Credit Union.

"I help people in organizations work more effectively together so their businesses and organizations can have better bottom-line results," she says.

It is a business, or as she prefers to say, a "practice," that she launched in the summer of 2001 when she and her husband, Bob Seidler, returned to Charleston from Minneapolis, where he headed corporate sales for an international hotel company.

She was the training manager and internal consultant for Hennepin County, Minn. While much of Seidler's experience came from on-the-job experiences, she reveled in the move to Minneapolis, an academic mecca for organization development.

After four years in the frozen Midwest, where the sun could be absent for six weeks and the snow begins to melt in April, Seidler says it was time to return South with the experiences she had gained as a trainer around the United States and Canada and establish a business in her hometown.

Together again

The year Seidler returned home, she also became reacquainted with a childhood friend, Jennet Alterman.

In the mid-1960s, they played together with the props at the Footlight Players, managed by Alterman's father, Emmett Robinson. Alterman delighted in donning a donkey's head her father made for a production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and terrorizing Seidler with it.

Seidler and Alterman are taking the stage again today, not for schoolgirl antics, but to lift the veil on the business world for women. They are co-chairs of "The Women in Business Conference: Growing Your Mainstream Connections" at the Charleston Area Convention Center.

Alterman is executive director of the Center for Women on Savannah Highway. Since 2003, the center has offered programs to support women entrepreneurs. It is the only women's development center in South Carolina. Seidler is a former staff vice president for community development with the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce, once headed in the 1960s by her father, Tommy Thorne.

After attending a Center for Women program last year, Seidler was surprised by the number of women interested in business, far more than there were two decades ago when she entered the corporate world.

That led to an idea that the Center for Women and the chamber should form a partnership to organize a conference for women in business.

"Margaret was the driving force behind the collaboration between our organizations," Alterman says.

"She has been actively involved in our programs as both presenter and participant since she moved back to Charleston. She also has been active with the chamber and, as a result, saw the potential synergy in getting the two groups together for the common goal of supporting women business owners and professionals.

"Her work in organizational development has been extremely well-received, and as she established her base here in Charleston, she has seen firsthand the impact of women starting businesses."

According to the U.S. Census, Alterman says, women in Charleston County are starting businesses at twice the rate of men, "and we have the largest number of women-owned businesses of any county in the state."

As Seidler and Alterman work together today, Alterman says her thoughts will be on how "it is a blessing that we were able to leave and come back to Charleston and work together."

Alterman was a Peace Corps staff member in Washington, D.C., and Swaziland in southern Africa, a Peace Corps volunteer in Afghanistan and a radio saleswoman in Palo Alto, Calif.

"I think it speaks volumes for Charleston that both of us choose to come back to work for the greater good of the community," she says. "It is an example set for us by our parents. My father was involved in the nonprofit community and her father was in the business community. We are carrying on a rich tradition, but we have flipped the gender."

Climbing trees

Near Wappoo Creek on James Island, Seidler's favorite pastime as a child was climbing a massive water oak in the side yard of her family's home behind the gates of the Country Club of Charleston. On the club's golf course, she played with the boys in her neighborhood. In her backyard, she swam in a small cement pool. Nothing fancy, she insists.

Her mother, June Thorne, wanted Margaret to play the piano and take tap and ballet with her older sister, Lynda.

Margaret, however, preferred weekend trips with her father to his business, Woodstock Manufacturing in North Charleston, the maker of wooden soft drink crates. At "the plant," she'd hitch rides on a fork lift and stack crates to build a fort.

"I took piano for six years, and I barely got out the first-year book," she says. "I was a tomboy. I was different."

That difference became even more apparent when Seidler left the gender-mixed public schools on James Island in 1964 for the all-girl Ashley Hall in downtown Charleston.

"I don't think it was a good fit for me," she says. "In retrospect, it was tough to have a kid make that switch at age 12, to go from public schools with girls and boys to an all-girls school and people I didn't know."

After three years, Seidler wanted a change. It was a change that brought her from behind the country club gates to witness a changing Charleston society.

In 1967, Margaret entered Charleston High School, where she went to school for the first time with black students. Two years later, racial tension was high during a strike of black hospital employees at the Medical College of South Carolina. National Guard troops enforced a nighttime curfew. During the day, demonstrators took to the streets, passing within her view.

"I saw Coretta Scott King march in front of my high school," she says.

In the country club, Seidler says, "I grew up in a really nice, safe place where everything seemed so perfect." Attending an integrated high school "was a great melting pot," she says. Witnessing the hospital workers' protest, she adds, "made me think about things bigger than myself."

A bigger view

When Seidler left Charleston for the University of South Carolina, her world became even broader. "At Carolina, I started seeing people from around the country: D.C., New York, people from the Northeast coast." In the process, she lost her Charleston accent.

But she acquired a different way of viewing society.

It wasn't until after she left Charleston that she shared those experiences with her friend, Karen McDaniel Weihs. They met when they were 14. Weihs was a student at St. Andrews High School. They had similar experiences in an integrated Charleston.

"We were so young we didn't know what was happening in our own city because we were so sheltered," says Weihs, who left Charleston for the University of Georgia. "Margaret and I had to leave Charleston to understand what was going on in our city and our world.

"We used it to make sense of who we were as white girls in the South, in a closed society and how we became friends and how we became common thinkers." Weihs says. "It is only when we became older that we realized that we were forward thinkers; open to change and open to many kinds of ways of seeing the world."

Today, Weihs and her husband, Chris Weihs, live in Cashiers, N.C., near Asheville. They once owned The Colony House and Carolina's restaurant in Charleston.

Seidler and Weihs' friendship has extended to Weihs' son, Tyson, 30.

"The eldest of my two sons is like family to her," Weihs says. "She is his mentor, and I am so proud that he has a relationship with Margaret. That is the kind of person she is. She seeks out people of all ages and all kinds of people."

'Make a difference'

After earning undergraduate and graduate degrees at USC, it was time for Seidler to come home to Charleston. She had earned a master's in public administration with plans to become a lobbyist.

During graduate school, she worked for the clerk in the S.C. House of Representatives and later she was a page for a House committee.

"I wanted to make a difference in the way my state makes its laws," she said.

In 1980, she was a grants manager with a federally funded job-training program with Charleston County government. Two years later, Seidler was at the Chamber of Commerce.

South Carolina Electric and Gas Co. recruited her in 1987. With the utility, she became a lobbyist; but that move also placed her on a path to organization development and training.

As the utility prepared its work force for the possibility of a deregulated energy industry, Seidler was one of seven employees chosen to prepare the company for a new way of doing business. Deregulation of the energy industry didn't occur, but the

experiences opened an opportunity for her to join The Atlanta Consulting Group, creators of a book, "Managing From the Heart."

It's the story of a hard-driving oil tycoon who learns the hard way that to keep his business, he needed to change his management style. With the Atlanta company, Seidler was one of 50 consultants nationwide involved in a two-year business transformation project at United Parcel Service.

That's when Weihs saw a different side of her childhood friend. Weihs and Seidler were coincidentally together in San Antonio, Texas, where Weihs watched

Seidler speak to 100 UPS employees during a training seminar. "I began to see that she was born to be a trainer," Weihs said.

When the Seidlers left Minneapolis for Charleston, returning home was not just to start a business but also for her to semi-retire by 55.

She's now having second thoughts.

"I am just now starting to hit my stride, and I am really able to help people in organizations," she said. "I think to slow down is probably not a good decision. I can probably give more to people now than at any time in my life."

Margaret Thorne Seidler

Born: Charleston, July 31, 1952.

Family: Parents, Tommy and June Thorne of Bishop Gadsden on James Island; sister, Lynda Harrill of Charlottesville, Va.; husband, Bob Seidler, innkeeper, Wentworth Mansion; and "the boys," cats Guinness and Bass, black and tan tabbies.

Occupation: Organization development consultant and master trainer, owner of Seidler & Associates.

Hobbies: Exercise almost daily, teach indoor resistance cycling at a West Ashley gym, traveling with Bob, "who is the reason I've been so successful in business, because Bob is my rock."

Volunteer work: Co-chair Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce Women in Business Conference; Education Foundation Board of Directors; Human Resources Committee South Carolina Aquarium; graduate student mentor, The Citadel School of Business; and Center for Women.

What do you read?: "Nonfiction books to help my clients and me be more effective in gaining great business results. Some of my favorites are 'Good to Great,' 'Deep Change,' 'Primal Leadership' and 'A Little Book of Forgiveness.' "

Why do You like antique furniture?: "That is the Charleston native part of me, an appreciation of the past."

You say you are "fiercely independent." What is the source of that independence?: "The source is a family history of strong Southern women, sustained by my loving husband who values my independence."

If it is your job to help companies become effective, what must you do to make your business more effective?: "I must remain a continuous learner and maintain a network to call upon for help. One way in which I do that is through a select group of international OD consultants, the Polarity Management/Real Time Strategic Change Learning Community. I am thrilled to be hosting this group in Charleston next week.

Will you ever give in to Bob's desire to have more cats?: "So far, we've had Willie and Waylon, Link and Patty (the sausage twins) and now we have Guinness and Bass. Two just seems so balanced."

This article was printed via the web on 3/5/2006 9:37:36 AM . This article appeared in The Post and Courier and updated online at Charleston.net on Saturday, March 04, 2006.