

Q&A

ROBIN WOLANER

Robin Wolaner founded *Parenting* magazine after working at a such publications as *Runner's World* and *Mother Jones*. After Time Warner purchased *Parenting*, Wolaner became CEO of Sunset Publishing, launched *Vibe* and helped develop *Martha Stewart Living*. She later became exec VP of CNET.



JENNIFER ROCHOLL

The New York Times once called Robin Wolaner a “corporate entrepreneur.” As such, she’s had an insider’s perspective on how companies run—more specifically, the different kinds of management species who push buttons that shape market performance. “Naked in the Boardroom: A CEO Bares Her Secrets So You Can Transform Your Career (Fireside/Simon & Schuster, March 2005) is a kind of “What Color Is Your Parachute” for senior executives. Making career choices, Wolaner writes, is not something that happens just as you enter the job force. It’s a process that’s continues every day you show up to earn a paycheck. Indeed, the higher up the professional ladder you step, the more important such monitoring becomes. Wolaner contends that women face different challenges in that kind of introspection than do men.

Your business card says that you’re at the top of your game, but you’re miserable. Do you quit, and move on to the next challenge or do you renegotiate your current job?

If the misery reflects your discomfort with a company’s culture or people, then move on—only the CEO can really fix that environment. Unless that’s you, life is too short for misery. And you can’t really be at the top of your game if you’re miserable.

As part of a management team, do you find mentors inside or outside the company?

Don’t overlook the value of the anti-mentor. I have learned more from negative examples—fellow members of the management team whose examples I vowed never to follow. Anti-mentors (also known as Tor-Mentors or De-Mentors) are plentiful. Mentors are more rare, and can be found in the temporarily out-of-favor senior executive, who may have more time on his hands to spend with a would-be acolyte.

If a valued senior-level employee undercuts you, do you fire her or try to regain her loyalty?

If I am confident that it was deliberate, I would just fire her. (I don’t look for loyalty in team members—I agree with Paul O’Neill, who states that true loyalty is informed inquiry. If that is what she was doing, fine with me. If it was politically generated backstabbing, not fine.) In fact, every firing I have done, whether for reasons of attitude as in this example or job performance, I should have done faster. I heard that repeatedly from the dozens of women (all CEOs or C-level executives) that I interviewed for the book.

What happens when a bad ethical decision is the business choice? Do you fight it, regret it, or just move on?

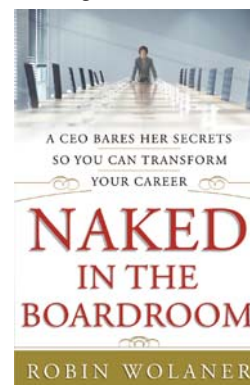
I’ve done the first two—and have never been able to “just move on” when I’ve allowed the wrong ethical choice to be made. And given a choice between the regret I feel (and wrote about in my book) and the valiant fights I’ve made, I would much rather tell my children about the fights.

You write about trusting your gut; what about research?

Perhaps because my first job was to prove that readers of *Penthouse* read the articles (which had advertising adjacencies), I have a strong distrust. I interviewed someone who knows a lot more about this: Dianne Snedaker, chief marketing officer of First Republic Bank. Referring to her previous company, Ketchum, she said, “We did a lot of work for food companies. I would put samples outside my office. If employees weren’t coming back for seconds—or if they didn’t even once pick up the free taste—I didn’t need to spend money to know the product would be a dud.”

NEW TIMES TRANSLATE TO NEW SUCCESSES

“Success follows when you use what you’ve got. You will succeed because of, not in spite of, your personal traits. The trick is to make your aptitude and flair work for you in a style that is uniquely yours. Maybe I’m a cockeyed optimist, but I think the last decade of changes in business tilted the balance in [the favor of women]. Business moves faster, and that means that developing your gut instinct really pays off. Which gender is known



for intuition? The biggest growth companies are in the information business: Who’s better at getting, and sharing, information—men or women? Men can be good at these. Women are better.”

—“Naked in the Boardroom,” by Robin Wolaner, Fireside/Simon & Schuster, March, 2005

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