



THE ACADEMY OF ELECTRICAL CONTRACTING

PAPER PRESENTED BY FELLOW
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WELCOME GENTLEMEN...AND LADY: A LOOK AT
OUR INDUSTRY THROUGH A WOMAN'S EYES

JUNE 2014

Back when I was a little girl and my friends were dreaming of being princesses and fairy godmothers, I was dreaming of the day I would start my electrical contracting business.

Okay, that was not the dream, not the one I had on my own. Ashford Electric was the dream I shared with my husband, Ken, in the mid-80s, when we decided to use a small inheritance to start our business. It went well until 1993 when Ken was diagnosed with a brain tumor and complications from surgery left him unable to return to work.

Honestly, we consider ourselves blessed. For so many others, a brain tumor is a death sentence.

I suppose we could have closed shop then and there but with a couple of mortgages, one son in college and another in high school, I decided to buckle down and keep going.

At that time, Public Works in Washington State had mandatory set-asides for minority- and women-owned businesses. They were hardly a panacea at roughly 10-12% for minority-owned businesses and 5-7% for women-owned businesses but nevertheless, they brought with them opportunities... and challenges.

As you might imagine, many general contractors resented having to hire subs based on anyone's requirements but their own. One general would even bring his crew in on the weekends and then call me on Mondays to inform me that we were behind schedule. On more than one occasion, we were "invited" to be pass-throughs, supplying labor or buying materials but not getting the full project.

I turned them down every time, offering to take even a small portion of the contract but refusing to be a front for mock compliance. Truth be told, I found the mandatories to be more of a hindrance than a help but only a fool would turn down the support they did provide.

In 1998, Washington State voters passed Initiative 200 which ended the mandatories. Getting work was a little tougher and led to the demise of several minority-owned businesses and most of the women-owned businesses in the state. For Ashford Electric, it was a milestone along our journey of going from a "woman-owned business" to an "electrical business owned by a woman," which is an accomplishment I value greatly.

It is tempting, in a world where meetings are started with a "Welcome gentlemen," followed by a self-conscious "and lady" to see all differences, discouragements and accomplishments as being gender-dependent. Some certainly are. I would hazard a guess that men in the industry have not dealt with being referred to as "little fellow" the way I have weathered more than a few "little lady" references. I am also fairly certain that most of my male counterparts are not racing home after a day at the office to make dinner for their families.

By and large, though, the lessons and stressors I have faced in the last 20+ years are those faced by all electrical contractors. For example:

- Anybody that is in a business where they have to assume responsibility of every aspect of the business, particularly the financials, is under a tremendous amount of stress. We all must learn ways to shake the cobwebs out of our heads, and we all must make our own decisions about when the workday needs to end in order to preserve time for the family and loved ones who are ultimately the fuel in our professional fires.

For me, one of the answers was to choose to keep my business smaller. Several years ago, I took on bigger projects and had larger crews but the sacrifice of my evenings and weekends was not worth the

financial reward to me. With niche markets and projects with smaller contractors, not only am I protecting the family time I so value, but I am also working with people I know. If payment does not come when it should, I can just phone the owner. More often than not, I find those relationships include extra courtesy, like the email I got recently just to let me know that payment was on its way.

Soon, my sons will be in a position to take over Ashford Electric and they are welcome to grow it into an empire if they so choose. The decisions I made were simply the right ones for me.

- Offering a little support and human connection can go a long way. Try it and just see what happens when you do something as simple as ask someone about their family.

I will admit to having a natural management style that is a little more motherly. I prefer to skip the confrontation and move straight to issue resolution. In my mind, confrontation is a waste of time and I have plenty else to get done.

When hiring, that means bringing the new people into the process. I do not tell people when and how they are going to do something. I show them what is in front of us and what I think we need to get from Point A to Point B. "This is what I see," I might say. "What do you see?"

Not only does this help people feel a part of the success of Ashford Electric, but it can also lead to innovative approaches and true buy-in, people who are personally invested in projects being as successful as possible.

- Along those same lines, every experience – every opportunity and challenge – can be a learning experience if we are open to it. I had to try the bigger contracts to learn I prefer the smaller ones. I had to move forward with the business I started with Ken to discover that I could.

Granted, there have been many things I wish I did not have to learn, but many more that left me grateful for the personal growth.

- When I meet young women in electrical contracting, they often ask me advice about how to be successful as a woman in an industry dominated by men. In my mind, it is not ultimately an issue of how to excel as a woman, but rather how to excel, period. I tell them to aim for being the best business person, the best they can be.

It is critically important to know yourself. Know your strengths and limitations. Be willing to stand by your vision and your beliefs about what constitutes a successful business with integrity.

Observe what is being done by others and, yes, ask for their insights, and then adapt what you find to who you are and your own positive qualities and personality.

It is this self-knowledge that helps us weather the storm of "no's" that is inevitable for every business. Women may face a few more no's than men but in a competitive industry like ours, rejection is inevitable for men and women, start-ups and veterans alike.

- We all have choices at every turn – sometimes they are just hard to see. I am reminded of a support group that I attended when Ken was in rehab after his surgery. There was a woman with a severely disabled child who was clearly being physically and mentally drained by the care of this child. “But I have no choice,” she said.

The facilitator looked at her and said, “Yes, you do. You have a choice. It may not be palatable or what you want to do, but you have choices.” And then she listed off the various facilities and home care options available.

That hit so close to home, and has stayed with me all this time. Times get rough for all of us and we have to stop and say, “Wait, I have a choice.” Sometimes the choice is simply to get up the next morning, hope our feet hit the floor and then put one foot in front of the other until the next crisis. But at least we’re still moving.

- Most importantly, no one does anything by themselves. Someone is always in the background giving support, advice and/or help. I am not at all certain I could have made it through the first years after the end of the mandatories without the support of the good people working with me.

I also received a lot of support from NECA since joining in the early 1990s. The chapter manager in particular was a big support and cheerleader from the start. At first, I found the support surprising but have discovered over time that our

industry as a whole is a family, sharing the overarching motto that a rising tide raises all ships.

For some, including myself, asking for help – or even accepting the help being offered – is not easy. Reinventing the wheel is neither clever nor tough, though. It is a waste of time. It is critically important to learn to ask questions because the old adage is true: The only dumb question is the one not asked.

All that said, I am sure there are still disadvantages to being a woman in this business. No matter how fully my male counterparts accept me into this world, there is still locker room talk I cannot be a part of and gentlemen whose wives would find their lunching with another woman a little uncomfortable.

Of course, there are undeniable advantages to being a woman as well. It was the rarity of my role as the woman owner of an electrical business that captured Governor Gary Locke’s attention when he was looking for greater diversity on the Washington State Electrical Board. That notice led to 12 years on the WSEB, five as the Chair.

Once, when in mediation, I was able to assert myself and demand that the outstanding payment be delivered to me, rather than taking up more of my time by having to pick it up at the general’s office. Though there are certainly unflattering words used to describe assertive women, there are also times when a woman will receive a laugh and handshake for assertiveness that would lead to unflattering words for a man. This was one of those times.

Speaking of handshakes, one final advantage of being a woman in a men's world is that while they're busy greeting with handshakes, I get to greet with hugs. Who couldn't use a few extra hugs in their day?

About Gloria Ashford

Gloria has been the President of Ashford Electric & Construction Co for the entirety of the company's nearly 30 years of serving the greater Puget Sound region of Washington State. Appointed by Governor Gary Lock, Gloria served for 12 years on the Washington State Electrical Board, five of which were as Chair. In 2007, Gloria was the first female contractor inducted into the Academy of Electrical Contracting. Other roles Gloria has served within the NECA family have included past Chapter President and current Governor for the Puget Sound chapter, member of the NECA Substance Abuse Policy Committee and IBEW Grievance Committee, and current member of the Board of Directors for the Academy.

Of highest priority to Gloria is her family: her husband of 44 years, Ken, their two adult sons, Michael and Mark, and their sons' families including two wonderful daughters-in-law and four amazing grandchildren. The family can be found gathering for tailgate parties, holiday meals, picnics, hikes and any way they can create time to spend together. A home filled with love, laughter, food, wine, family and friends is the fuel that has driven Gloria toward business excellence.

Learn more about Gloria at www.ashfordelectric.com.

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