



SECRETS OF ENTREPRENEURS UNDER 40 EXPOSED! Excerpt

KATHERINE EDGAR

Katherine Edgar was born in Sydney in 1968. The youngest of three children, she was brought up in an active family that enjoyed weekend time on the northern beaches of Sydney. Itching to get out into the 'real world' Katherine left school, eager to learn all she could about the world, business and what made people tick. She began a degree in hotel management, and later went on to study psychology and business management along with extensive specialist training in adult learning and human behaviour.

Katherine played an integral part in the start-up of one of Australia's leading management consulting companies. She then spent 12 months consulting to numerous corporate clients in New York, before assuming the position of state sales manager and member of the executive management team with the Ericsson Group. Still very young, and one of the only women in the industry at the time, she spent six years developing highly professional and profitable market sectors and teams in Australia, Europe and South-East Asia.

In 1999, Katherine founded The Synergy Group, an international professional services firm that operates in 23 Asia-Pacific cities, delivering transformational development programs (in four languages) to many of the world's leading organisations. The Group recently extended its reach to two emerging economic powerhouses, India and China. Katherine leads the firm with a potent mix of entrepreneurial spirit, strong business acumen and a passion for people. Her vision of creating positive and lasting transformation in the corporate and social landscape keeps her constantly focused on providing relevant, value-driven business and people development solutions.

Katherine lives in Balmain, Sydney, with her husband Stefan and their baby daughter, Akira Grace. In her downtime, she enjoys going to the beach, spiritual retreats, and travelling fascinating parts of the world.

When did you first discover you had entrepreneurial talent?

As a young person I was very industrious and always had some kind of business venture going on outside of school – newspaper runs, making greeting cards, selling Avon door-to-door, car cleaning. When I look back, I guess my entrepreneurial flair was really ignited when I was in first grade. I was six years old and decided to set up a stall outside my home where I sold bags of passion fruit each Saturday. The thing is, I got one of my brothers to pick them from the vines, the other brother to bag them up and set up the stall, and then had my cousin man the shop front and collect the money! While all this was happening, I was busy coming up with the next idea for expansion (for example, lemonade), which I'd then delegate to my team to make the next week.

At age 16, you attended a course that had a profound effect on your life. Can you explain why?

At the suggestion of my brother, Anthony, I did a course with an amazing guy called Peter Honzatko, who was one of the earliest self-actualisation personal management gurus. He ran a course that covered things like personal leadership, meditation, goal setting, Visualisation, communication and the importance of values. I can remember noticing how odd it was being the only teenager in a room full of adults, because I believed the knowledge I learnt should be taught to students in every school. What Peter's course taught me was how attitude in particular has a huge influence on personal achievement.

As I spent the next ten years working my way up the corporate ladder in a traditional management role, I had this nagging concern that there was a better way of empowering people within corporations to be the best they could be; to bring their deepest values to work and embrace them in a way that welcomed diversity and built alliances and partnerships to make a difference. I pondered these ideals for some time, however, my 'aha' moment did not occur until I was 28 years old and working as a senior consultant for a major Australian pitch strategy company. I was working 16-hour days, doing Phenomenally challenging and interesting work with some of the country's leading public companies. I was being paid extremely well and was working very hard, but I was seriously burning out. All the while I was conscious that I wanted to contribute in a more meaningful and inspiring way, something that initiated positive change within individuals and corporations. I was so caught up in the fast pace and ego of my demanding job that I kept ignoring my gut instinct.

At the height of your corporate career, you contracted a life threatening illness. Why do you regard this as the best thing that ever happened to you?

After so many years of not listening to my inner voice and working in ridiculous conditions, I actually believe that getting sick was the universe – karma if you like – sending me a signal to stop and listen. I ended up very sick in hospital and a signature away from having an organ transplant that was expected to give me another three to five years to live. It was a reflective and enlightening time in my life, where I was forced to look within and reflect on what was important to me and what I wanted to create with my life. I was being asked to sign my permission to authorize my own liver transplant, a prognosis that was less than positive. I remember that at the time, I had absolute certainty and conviction that I did not need a transplant – even though I had a team of the best medical professors and specialists advising that it was my only option! My inner voice was loud and clear and it was time to listen to it. I knew that I was going to get well and this was all meant to happen. I was ready to listen to my instinct and trust my inner wisdom. Thinking back now, it must have caused my family and the medical doctors great distress, but the incredible strength I drew from my family believing in my decision still brings tears to my eyes today. I then embarked on a journey of recovery, where I put everything I'd ever learnt about the human spirit, holistic...

health, belief, meditation and determination to the test. Not surprisingly to me, but very surprising for the doctors, I started to recover almost immediately. After being told I would be in hospital for at least three to six months, I was out in less than two. Those long days and nights I spent in hospital were some of the most important of my life. Many nights went by where I couldn't sleep and it was in these wee hours that The Synergy Group was born.

I had finally stopped to listen to my inner voice and decided to start my own business. Sitting in my bed, I was flooded with inspiration and ideas. I mind-mapped what the business was going to be all about and I still have those scribbly mind maps. Those scribbles became the foundation of The Synergy Group business plan and capture who we are and what we do today.

What is The Synergy Group and why did you decide to start it?

That nagging voice in the back of my head was telling me to follow my dreams and start a business that empowered people to be the very best they could be. For me, it was about being a catalyst for positive change and helping organisations build real competitive advantage through their human capital.

I chose the name, The Synergy Group, because it alludes to the x-factor that makes the successful combination of two parts greater than the whole. I believe that when leaders build strong relationships they develop others to become good leaders, empower them to work at their best, and keep good employees in the organisation. When leaders do this something wonderful happens, and it is called synergy. An organisation operating with synergy has a clear competitive advantage over others.

In essence, The Synergy Group is an organisation that provides professional services to the corporate sector in the form of business consulting and a range of people development programs. We help leaders to maximise the talents and capabilities of people within organisations so as to positively shape the corporate culture and ultimately impact business performance.

Our team of consultants, located in six countries across Asia-Pacific, work alongside business leaders and teams at all levels, to unlock talent, drive productivity and empower them to perform at maximum potential. The Synergy Group developed from my innate drive to create positive change. With the help of my team, we initiate and guide change in how individuals see themselves and others, and how they see their role within their organisation and the broader community. We challenge their beliefs, mind-sets and values, and help them build their skills to find meaning and make a difference through their work.

When did you realise that it was time to take on your first staff member?

I often hear new business owners talking about how they are getting smarter by containing costs and doing a lot of the administrative tasks themselves. From my experience, I don't think it is smart and believe I will only hinder the growth of a start-up business. As an entrepreneur, you need to be focusing on what you do well and not getting bogged down by logistics and administrative tasks. I hired my first staff member on the same day that we started. The reason I did this was because utilising my time effectively has always been an important focus for me. This was especially the case in the early days when I wanted to create a structure that allowed me as much 'free time' with potential clients as possible. So I hired a personal assistant immediately to manage all of the administration and non-dollar productive activities, allowing me to spend all of my available time on tasks that were contributing directly to the growth, revenue generation and development of the business.

What is your company's mission statement? What is the purpose of it and why should all businesses have one?

Mission statement: to unlock the potential and talent of our clients and their organisations.

Our vision is to be a catalyst for positive and lasting change in the corporate and social landscape. We love being passionate about our clients and find it so rewarding to see them and their businesses change for the better as a result of our work.

It's easy to be cynical about mission statements. Often I enter an organisation with their mission statement and corporate values pinned up on the wall, only to find that their statement and values bear no resemblance to what they are really like. Part of my business's role is to challenge senior executives about what their mission statements and corporate values state, and all too often they don't know or understand them.

At The Synergy Group, our vision and values statements have been a compass guiding how we do what we do. What's more, I believe my team operates in line with our mission and values beautifully. For example, one of the major values we espouse is 'authenticity'. This means that if we can't achieve genuine change in an organisation then it is better not to try (this is something we learnt early on). Sometimes we have gone into an organisation that wanted to see significant change – to create a new culture or a more collaborative leadership ethos – but when we started doing the work we realised that there were a lot of barriers, hidden agendas, politics, contradictions and political forces at play, which were inhibiting the transformation from taking place. We went back and realised that our mission statement and values were at complete odds with theirs and chose not to work with them. On occasions, we have simply had to say goodbye to a big project because we know we cannot be authentic to our values. There was an occasion when we told a client that they were expecting unrealistic outcomes. They were quite shocked when we said 'no' to the opportunity of working with them. They ended up hiring another company that said 'yes' to everything. Their project failed and three months later they came back to us and said they 'had made a mistake'. I am delighted to say that they are now one of our most loyal clients, with whom we have achieved some excellent results. By no means do I say this with arrogance, but rather as a demonstration of how pointless it can be to have mission statements and values pinned to a wall if the culture within the organisation does not actively reflect them.

Is there a significant quote or saying which you live your life by?

Here is a quote by M. Scott Peck that aptly describes what motivated me to start The Synergy Group:

'The human race is in the midst of making an evolutionary leap. Whether or not we succeed in that leap is your personal responsibility.'

Your company runs leadership development training for many of the world's largest corporations. What does the word 'leadership' mean to you?

With so many philosophies, styles and bodies of work about leadership, it's not surprising that the idea of effective leadership has become confusing. I believe the leadership styles that individuals use are based on a combination of their personal beliefs, values and preferences, with an organisation's culture encouraging some styles and discouraging others.

Some philosophies define leadership by focusing on the skills that a leader needs to be effective – influence, organization and communication. Some say it's the qualities of a leader that determines their effectiveness – confidence, courage, determination and optimism. Others claim it's all about strategy and good management. My definition is one I adopted from a truly remarkable leader, Brian Bacon, CEO of the Oxford Leadership...

Academy: leadership is a potent combination of strategy, skills and character. If you can only have one, then its character that makes the difference – that deep inner knowing of what's wrong or right, and having strong values to live by. These types of leaders have a strong moral compass and live life with a clear sense of professional and personal ethics. A great leader has the character to never react, but to instead observe and act decisively. Great leaders share a common trait in that at critical moments they make good choices and decisions. They slow down their thinking and take time to reflect and pause. Great leaders have the wisdom to ask the right questions day in and day out. They have high degrees of self-awareness and understand their impact on others. They are generous, honest, compassionate, reflective and perceptive. They have a clear sense of purpose and meaning in life and a clear vision for the future.

Of course the skills and attributes of the leader are vital also. But they can be learnt. Character is something that is ignited through experience, reflection and contemplation, and develops at a deep inner level over time. Finding your values and purpose in life is not creative work, it's detective work. You already know what they are, but sometimes they're hidden deep within, and need rediscovering.

How does your business help develop leadership skills?

At The Synergy Group we help develop strong leadership skills through coaching, consulting, communicating, influencing and creating teams. We teach leaders how to understand, set and communicate their visions and strategies. However, when it comes to developing character, we facilitate creative and experiential sessions that allow the leader to discover more about themselves, their own leadership styles, what drives them, and what is really important to them. We act as a catalyst for them to develop their own individual character. As Confucius said, 'You cannot teach a man anything, you can only help him discover it for himself'.

Why do you believe that strong leadership is so important for achieving business success?

Strong leadership, regardless of the style, shapes an organisation's culture, as it does our social and family structures. Leaders, through their character and style, influence the beliefs, values and behaviours of other individuals within the structure, whether the leader is aware of it or not. We have a client, a global financial institution, who has been with us for years. We help this client by providing culture, leadership and skill development. The CEO of that organisation is a man of outstanding character, coupled with the right attitude, style and skills to effectively lead his organisation brilliantly in times of enormous change. The organisation is thriving and has a team of highly motivated, effective and happy individuals. But it wasn't always like that. Prior to this gentleman taking this leadership role, it was held by a CEO that had quite a different style – autocratic, dictatorial and competitive, with little focus on the values of the organisation – and it was a very different place to work then. Since the new CEO has taken the helm, we have seen phenomenal transformation within this organisation. The CEO has transformed himself not only professionally (with clearer strategy and sharpened skills), but also personally (with greater self-awareness, strong focus on ethics, humility and empathy). People within an organisation look to the top to see how things are done and most of the time will then emulate what they see.

What are your top five tips for developing leadership qualities?

1. Discover your purpose and meaning in life, then design your life, work and home around that goal.
2. Use experience, reflection and contemplation to further develop your character.
3. Clarify your values in life and use them as a compass to ensure you are still on track.
4. Educate yourself and learn from your mistakes.
5. Develop the ability to focus, eliminate distractions, simplify and then execute tasks with ease.

What is one of the best business deals you have ever made and why did it work so well?

We were invited by a major global IT company to deliver a pitch to 500 salespeople to help develop their Asia-Pacific sales team. We won! It was the moment we went from a domestic to a truly global vendor of professional services, so how did it happen?

After bumping into one of their senior executives on a plane and being invited to present a pitch for a major international engagement, I remember panicking slightly and wondering how we were going to pull this deal off. I then decided that we were going to win.

Over the next three months, we ran our pitch and negotiated with their procurement team in Hong Kong. We were pitching against established, well-known, global training organisations, which were doing the one size-fits-all Americanised sales training. This is completely different from what we offer and I believe it was this point of difference that won us the contract. In fact, I don't think the company had ever been pitched the way we did it. This difference is a crucial part of the way we operate. We spend time inside a business, understand what they do at a deep level and watch what they do. We listen and we take the time to understand before providing solutions. It was great to see that flash in the client's eyes as they realised we'd nailed them with our understanding of their business.

There are many other things that we do to differentiate our offering from our rivals, all of which involve developing a deep and intimate understanding of corporate culture, real issues and pain points, and then developing solutions that address these issues. By the time we gave this IT company's executive team our final solution to their problem we already had such an intimate understanding of their business that they trusted us implicitly. The deal actually came easily. We walked the talk, and demonstrated the skills and approach that they wanted their team to demonstrate. It was the single largest sales training engagement ever in the Asia-Pacific region.

We have since won numerous other engagements with that client, enabling us to leverage all the knowledge that we picked up along the way. It has opened the door to the Asia-Pacific market completely, the Chinese and Indian markets in particular.

What do you think are the essential qualities or attributes of a successful entrepreneur?

I've often skimmed through business success books at airports and shops and groaned when I read glib advice like the importance of discipline, courage, determination, risk-taking and laser-like focus. These books are sprinkled with mind-numbing jargon words like 'paradigm', 'leverage' and 'strategy', while never actually explaining or describing the true essence of what makes an entrepreneur. It's ironic really because my company name, The Synergy Group, uses one of the most-abused business jargon buzzwords of all. But the true meaning of 'synergy' is the essence of what my business does. While I believe those qualities of discipline, focus, courage and so on are important, there is something else that has helped me tap into my entrepreneurial spirit, something that drives who I am and what I do and ...

that I haven't seen explained in a book before. And that little secret is: listen to yourself, find your deepest motivations and then have the courage to live in alignment with them.

I believe that all people have the ability to achieve great things, but they often don't take the time to listen to themselves or their instincts. I believe that I always knew what I wanted to do with my career. Once I realised that for myself and began my journey, those attributes (and business buzzwords) of courage, determination, focus, risk taking and discipline all came naturally to me. As soon as I started to truly listen to my inner-self and not look externally for all the answers, my life changed.

How has becoming a mother changed the way you see and develop your business?

Before my beautiful baby daughter, Akira, arrived, my partner and I assured ourselves constantly that life would not substantially change once our little bundle of joy had arrived. I mean, how hard could it really be?

Oh, how silly we were!

The funny thing is that before becoming pregnant, everyone always said, 'This business is so much your baby'. It is only now, as a mother, that I realise just how accurate a comment that was, even if my colleagues and friends did not realise it. In the same way that we raise and nurture a child, I learnt that the good parenting of my business in those early years learnt that stepping aside from that 24/7 role to have my child was entirely possible.

Nothing prepares a woman for the impact of her first child. It is a wonderful and humbling experience. Early in my pregnancy, we arranged for me to have a nanny three days a week so that, in part, I would be able to continue the same degree of control over my business (my other baby).

What I have learnt in the first few months of being a mother is how to delegate and outsource. Becoming a mother has forced me to step away and allow the business to grow and flourish without me. My wonderful staff members have had to make key decisions and judgments without my input. The lesson I have learnt – and it is a wonderful one – is that by laying the foundations for a healthy business I could retain the control and direction from a distance, while still being a devoted mother.

What has The Synergy Group taught you about life?

If you are consciously aware of something not being quite right about where you currently are, or you sense that there is another path for you – one that will bring more meaning and purpose to your life and allow you to live in alignment with your deepest motivations – then take the time to stop and listen (really listen). It might just be the beginning of a great new adventure!