

"Walk The Talk" When Valuing Employees

By Gyle Konotopetz

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Ex-teacher still learning HR life lessons - Schoolteacher to entrepreneur

It's hardly a textbook business success story, but to Gail Evans, the moulding of minds always did transcend any textbooks.

As a teacher, the adventurous Evans provided her social studies class with a front-row seat to view communism from inside the Iron Curtain of the former Soviet Union.

Today, Evans continues to think outside the box as president of her own company, the Wynford Group, an organizational consulting firm that prides itself for being innovative in a vastly changing work environment.

1. Growing up in Peace River, Alta., what was your childhood dream?

"I wanted to be a teacher. Moulder of minds. I taught for five years in the Calgary public school system (R.T. Alderman Junior High School)."

2. How do you reflect on your teaching career?

"It was very rewarding. And also very hectic. My teaching career culminated with taking 30 14- and 15-year-old kids to Russia (then Soviet Union). I'd always thought outside of the box. I loved traveling, and the only way I could get to go on a trip was to take my students with me. We were kind of at the forefront of taking students outside of the country."

3. So why did you leave the teaching profession?

"I wanted to gain more intellectual stimulation."



Mike Sturk, Business Edge

Gail Evans of the Wynford Group says optimism is the key to successful entrepreneurship.

4. What's your view of the school system?

"Oh gosh. It really is in turmoil right now. It needs to be better funded and the resources need to be focused on what the students need."

5. Have you been able to channel your teaching experience into your business?

"When you're teaching you have to be very client-focused, if you consider students to be clients. This is something I learned after my teaching career. And if you don't understand what their needs are, you're not going to, (a) get their attention or, (b) teach them anything. The same concept of being client-focused applies when you're in a human-resources or consulting position in business. You can't be effective in producing whatever results if you don't know what their needs are. So the client-centered approach is the same as the student-centered approach in teaching."

6. After working in human resources in the energy industry with Gulf Canada and Nova, what motivated you to start your own company, the Wynford Group?

"Having done some consulting, I realized how much I enjoyed the freedom of consulting and controlling my own destiny."

7. What's the greatest obstacle you've had to overcome as an entrepreneur?

"The freedom to be responsible for everything. The freedom is great, but with the responsibility of not only being the manager but also an administrator, accountant, marketer and gopher, the challenge is not having enough hours in the day."

8. In your opinion, what is the most important character trait for a successful entrepreneur?

"Probably perseverance. You have to believe you can do what you think you can do and persevere to make sure it happens."

9. One lesson you've learned in business?

"Not to be too much of an optimist. On the other hand, though, if you're not an optimist, you can't be an entrepreneur. You have to be an optimist. You have to believe in yourself and believe you can produce whatever it is to be successful."

10. One entrepreneur you'd walk over hot coals in bare feet to have lunch with?

"I'd really like to meet Bill Gates (chairman of Microsoft). What he's been able to do, his mind must be just amazing. You wonder: 'What was his inspiration?'"

11. Is any CEO worth a million-dollar salary?

"(Laughter) I have to be politically correct on this one. I think some of them are. I don't think that the salaries paid to CEOs are necessarily closely correlated to the value that they produce. There are some that are probably worth a whole lot more than they are paid."

12. How is the softening of the economy impacting the Wynford Group?

"Our growth has been less in some of our survey work because companies have disappeared or merged or they've had to reduce their resources. But we expect that to be very temporary. There will be more of a demand for our services because whatever your business is, there are critical skills that you need. The companies may need to be more focused on what some of those issues are."

13. What's your vision for Wynford Group for 2005?

"We'll be part of an extended network of consulting organizations across the country that work in a collaborative manner. The whole collaborative thing is a real big issue with me."

14. Does your company plan to expand into other areas of human resources?

"We're already looking at ways of helping organizations to adapt to the dynamic forces in our environment and economy, etc. Those are the organizations that will be healthy and remain healthy by learning to adapt and enabling employees to become adaptive as well."

15. What is the key to a company's success in getting an edge with its human resources?

"They have to clearly understand what business they're in, and, therefore, they will understand what kind of people they need. And then, thirdly, they have to understand the needs of those people so they can create effective fits with their organization and the people – which then leads to a cohesive sort of culture."

16. What has surprised you the most in your experience in human resources?

"I think most organizations say that human resources is their greatest asset, but there's a surprising number that don't walk the talk. If they understand the value of their human resources, then they can get the most out of their resources."

17. How are Canadian companies doing in terms of retaining top talent or curbing the so-called brain drain?

"They're probably doing better than they were last year. One of the reasons for that is that the bloom is off going to the U.S. That's a result of the (economic) impact on technology being much greater in the U.S. than Canada. So there's almost a reverse with more people coming back (to Canada)."

18. How do you foresee life changing in the workplace?

"I expect to see more flexibility in where people work and when they work. Technology allows people to do a lot more things at home or on a boat. I'm taking my laptop (on vacation) to Osoyoos (B.C.)."

19. Any regrets about the way your career has evolved?

"I don't really have any regrets because it's a kind of rich tapestry of various experiences that you're building."

IN PROFILE: Gail Evans

* **Born/raised:** Peace River, Alta.; Edmonton, Calgary.

* **Title:** President/founder, Wynford Group.

* **Education:** Bachelor of Education, University of Alberta; MBA, University of Calgary.

* **Family:** Husband Chris, two children.

* **Career:** Evans has spent more than 18 years in human resources, including stints in human-resource management with Gulf Canada and Nova. Prior to that, she spent five years as a schoolteacher at R.T. Alderman Junior High School in Calgary.

* **Passions:** Gardening, skiing, golf, walking on the beach.

THE COMPANY: The Wynford Group

* **Brass:** Gail Evans, president.

* **Profile:** The Wynford Group is an organizational consulting firm whose goal is to facilitate organization effectiveness by developing innovative solutions. Through its network of consultants, the company works with clients to identify unique requirements and provide programs and services.

* **Notable:** Wynford publishes the Information and Advanced Technology Survey.

* **Website:** www.wynfordgroup.com

* **Address:** #440-703 6th Ave. S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 0T9.

* **Phone/Fax:** 403-264-5166, 403-205-4312.