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Necessity may be the mother of invention, but DARE-ING are the mothers of reinvention.

By Liz DiMarco Weinmann

Twenty years into my career as a marketing executive, I decided I'd had enough of the world that shows like "Mad Men" glorify, as fun as all of that was. The events of 9/11 so catalyzed me that, with my 50th birthday approaching, I felt my "miles to go before I sleep" were fewer and fewer, despite Robert Frost's cheery anthem. I worried I would die without ever having done anything but "marketed soap and cereal." I wanted to do work to "save the world." Mostly, I wanted to save myself from an obituary that – whenever it materialized – could, well, *mortify* me.

The career moves I made between 2002 and 2006 almost derailed what had been a productive and satisfying career. In four years, I joined four organizations. For each one I was a poor fit, in spite of my marketing experience and expertise, because I could neither understand nor appreciate the mission, vision and culture of those organizations. I marched in - boots spit-polished, arms akimbo, lips pursed.

At all four of those organizations, there was no such thing as an executive orientation, and the notion that my new bosses would "have my back" was a fantasy. I found them very difficult to engage, let alone influence and persuade. I saw only flaws and insurmountable challenges which, in turn, blinded me to their many strengths and opportunities. As an executive over 50, I had all the answers. Was I ever wrong - I didn't even have the right questions!

In 2007, filled with self-blame, I decided to go back to school to earn my MBA, to learn in an academic environment where I went wrong as a leader. I was 55 years old. Most of my colleagues, friends and clients thought I was crazy to go to business school in mid-career, "at our age." What more could I possibly learn, they reasoned. As it turns out, a whole lot – and not just about my career, but about life.

There were only five students in our NYU-Stern Business School class over the age of 40 – all of us, women. Among them was the former CEO of a Fortune 500 company, who had spent 30 years there, and wanted different perspectives on leadership. Professors were very

respectful, but some of our younger classmates behaved as if they were far superior to the “old crones” in their midst. In fact, a member of one study group I was in once commented to another student who had praised my strategy skills: “*But, she is so frigging old!*” He thought I was out of earshot, but I heard loud and clear.

As I began to enjoy myself (despite the juvenile attitudes of some classmates), I began to wonder: how many other women over 40, let alone over 50, never attempt something new or frightening because they feel uncomfortable, inferior or otherwise unworthy? Do they just give up, rather than muster up the confidence to **DARE** through their fears?

NYU, for which I have the highest affection and appreciation for reenergizing my career, has to its credit several accomplished female professors who teach strategy and leadership. However, most of the cases and insights are about men, and I longed for insights and ideas about women leaders, especially those over 40.

Finally, in 2009, my MBA in hand, I emerged with a new appreciation for how bold, brave leaders succeed. I also gained new appreciation for my own strengths – no small feat considering how I had blamed myself for every single thing that had gone wrong in the early 2000s.

But, there’s a catch: ***I learned most of that from my own research.*** Being that there were few examples of women leaders to learn from, I set out to do my own study, focusing on strong women over 40 from various walks of life – not just business. I studied women over 40 in the arts, in politics, in nonprofits, in the sciences, and in other fields – seeking as many relevant examples as I could find.



Jean Nidetch

Among them, Juliette Gordon Low, who was 52 when she founded Girl Scouts of America. Jean Nidetch founded Weight Watchers, today the world’s most respected weight loss program, when she was 40. Liz Claiborne was a Seventh Avenue veteran in her late forties when she rightly perceived that the fashion industry was not serving the needs of everyday working women, and thus began and led a valuable fashion empire for decades. Today, these women, and/or the companies they began, are household names. Not one of them thought of herself as a “super-woman.” Basically, they just saw a need, and **DARED** to meet that need – despite several hardships along the way.

Business school aside, I learned more about leadership from researching these **DARE-ING** role models over 40 – their heartaches, as well as their triumphs – than I had in my entire career. What they, and their 21st century counterparts, can teach millions of women over 40 from all walks of life, is that conviction, commitment, competence and confidence are not the sole purviews of men over 40. Nor are “hoodie”- clad post-pubescent wunderkinds the only geniuses among us. These women were **DARE-ING** at a time when being over 40 meant you were “done.” Necessity may be the mother of invention, but **DARE-ING** are the mothers of *reinvention*.

All of us over 50 have the opportunity, power and duty, every single day, to become positive role models, whether for our peers or for the younger persons who look up to us. It’s high time we all do our part to mash the myths, slam the stereotypes and blast the biases that a

woman over 50 is “over” or on a “short runway,” a bias term that seeps like sewage into the daily parlance of leadership coaches and H.R. executives alike when describing professionals over 40 – of *any* gender. In the current economic environment, that bias is reprehensible. Assert at every opportunity that you’re nowhere near “done.” And, whatever you do, stare down and prove wrong anyone who calls you a cougar, “toast” or “so frigging old.”

As I look back to the years during which I felt I’d failed, I am grateful for what my challenges taught me, and what I went on to learn and apply to my current work as an entrepreneur, author and educator. My renewed respect for the “soap and cereal” companies that taught me so much about marketing now permeates my work as a marketing professor at NYU, an assignment for which several professors recommended me. I feel optimistic that my obituary, whenever it materializes, will not “mortify” me. And, best of all, I once again believe that Frost was right:

*Between the woods and frozen lake,
The darkest evening of the year.
The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
And miles to go before I sleep.*

BIO

Liz DiMarco Weinmann is the Founder and CEO of The **DARE**-Force Corporation (www.thedareforce.com), an educational resources company founded to inspire all women over 40 who want to pursue, develop and lead new and fulfilling ventures in their personal lives, careers and communities. She is the author of the new book, *Get **DARE** From Here! – 12 Principles and Practices For Women Over 40 To Take Stock, Take Action and Take Charge of the Rest Of Their Lives* – available on Amazon.com (paper and Kindle), on bn.com, and in bookstores everywhere.