
FEATURE

Athletic Club Owner Speaks Out on Success and the Future

Chester Billingsley's advice: "You can't do a good deal with a bad guy."

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Chester Billingsley, owner of the four Main Street Athletic Clubs, candidly shared his ideas with *The Woman's Voice* on the ups and downs of business, men and women in the workplace, and achieving financial goals. A Harvard business graduate, Billingsley started his first club in 1986 on the corner of Foxworthy and Cherry in San Jose with one thousand dollars and a suntan salon. Today sales from the four clubs (San Jose and Fremont) total four million dollars. Over the last ten years his venture capital company, Mentor Capital, has bought and sold businesses in turnaround to acquire the four profitable branches. Using Blockbuster Video as his mentor, Billingsley seems optimistic about the future of his company and willing to help others succeed.

Billingsley cites a number of factors contributing to his success, including the major role played by his wife, Jennifer, who provided two years of service in the company as an accountant. "She took a one-third cut in pay to come in and computerize and handle all our accounts. She did a superb job." Ultimately, they were both relieved to terminate their relationship in the workplace when Jennifer left Main Street Athletic club to stay home with their new baby. Billingsley emphatically cautions against such

business arrangements. “In a company, the boss is boss; a relationship is a team. The business relationship disrupts the team and creates a natural conflict.” He feels fortunate that their marriage withstood the stress.

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On the subject of women as entrepreneurs and in positions of authority, Billingsley is animated. “It is a mistake for women to act like men and vice versa.” He observes that men are more likely to employ a confrontational style which challenges the individual to do his or her best, while women use collaboration, team effort and praise to get things done. Billingsley uses the analogy of the family where the mom and dad each have their own way of establishing respect and motivating others.

With a philosophy that the best companies operate like a big family, Billingsley talks about the necessity for openness and honesty in the work environment. He realizes that employees can find things trying at times and that there are sometimes unearned ups and unjustified downs, but he urges them to have faith that “*A la larga*, in the long run good things happen to good people.”

His advice to anyone who wants to build a successful business is:

- Get a shoe box full of twenty dollar bills.
- Get a copy of *Small Time Operator* (Bernard Kamoroff, CPA Bell Publishing \$14.95).
- Understand that growth in sales is not as important as consistently generating a profit.
- Don’t spend a dollar if you can spend a dime and come close.
- Hire people better than yourself: salespeople who can outsell you, accounting people who top your accounting skills, etc.

And when it comes to acquisitions, Billingsley leaves us with this:

“You can’t do a good deal with a bad guy.”

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