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2019 Women Who Build: Ellen Feldman Ornato, Bolder Company, Inc.

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Name: Ellen Feldman Ornato

Position: Co-Founder

Company: Bolder Company, Inc.

How many years have you been in your current field? 20+

What motivated you to step out on your own? Entrepreneurship is in my DNA; both of my sisters are social entrepreneurs and I grew up in a family full of business owners. Although I hold a BS in Sociology/Spanish and a master's in City Planning it was always the plan to own a business. After two stints in city planning and three years in economic development, I jumped ship to retail community relations in 1993. I launched my first consulting company in 1997 offering PR/marketing & sponsorship services and in 2012 shifted exclusively to learning & development. In 2014, we launched The Bolder Company (originally as ConnectAnd Improv), melding my facilitation skills & content knowledge with the coaching & facilitation skills of my partner, Jenny Drescher. We now incorporate experiential elements of improvisation and theater into subjects, such as diversity/inclusion, supervisory & leadership skills, and communication & conflict management to accelerate learning and make the concepts "stick" in a noticeable way.

What project, transaction, honor or accomplishment are you most proud of? A game-changer for The Bolder Company was our long-term work with Electrical Wholesalers/USESI. We created a comprehensive program for their inside/outside sales groups as well as for their branch managers, including a public speaking bootcamp and sessions on emotional intelligence, personality type, and more. The substantial leaps that individuals made in EQ and communication skills validated our approach and its impacts.

We are currently entering a third phase of facilitation and work with the town of Windsor, CT. We began with inclusive team/inclusive leader sessions for all town employees then moved to a more in-depth program for their executive leadership team. We have developed a great rapport with the town's leadership and we know that our programs are making a difference in the lives of the staff and leaders in that town.

We JUST received our WBE/SBE (Women Business Enterprise & Small Business Enterprise)

certifications, which required a lot of paperwork and dogged determination! We hope this will lead us into work with larger entities, “Primes,” in the future.

What was your first job and what did you learn from it? My first job was with my father's store, Milt's Army & Navy in Bloomfield. My sisters and I worked there and learned a lifetime's worth of business savvy. I learned how to buy strategically to keep inventory and overhead low, to do math/discounts in my head, to interact positively with whomever walked through the door, and to be accountable for my time and activities. I also worked long hours, learned how to tailor clothing, and took responsibility for the business when our dad was away. I experienced the freedom and the hardships of business ownership in that little store that have guided many of the decisions I've made as an entrepreneur.

What were your biggest fears when you started out in your profession? My biggest fear when I stepped away from municipal government work and into retail community relations was that I was leaving all my hard-earned education behind for a newly created position - a jump into the unknown. The ultimate serendipity was that I was able to apply most of what I'd learned about networking, building alliances, and spreading good works in my economic development job to the role at Bob's Stores. This uncomfortable move made the next jump into entrepreneurship far less intimidating.

What is the best leadership advice you have ever received? Who was it from? We are constantly reminded to choose how we want our lives to be and to design our company to support those choices. Sharon Rowe, CEO of EcoBags.com and author of “The Magic of Tiny Business” espouses the “begin with your life in mind” approach, which has helped us to remember to be strategic and to consistently place self-care on our calendars.

We are also big fans of Simon Sinek's “What's Your Why.” We're here to support others in their desire to be bolder in their lives, to bring their best and boldest selves to their work and interactions. In order for that to be true we need to be that for each other, for our families, for our business partners.

Finally, there's a saying that “what got you here won't get you there.” We can't grow unless we learn new skills so we hire people to teach us, coach us, goad us, motivate us, and we invest in our own education heavily. Our recent in-depth certification in Emotional Intelligence takes our understanding of how to support the AEC industry to a much deeper level and it's our quest for constant improvement that has caused us to grow quickly over the past five years.