

A Leap of Faith

Michael Ferraro on how to step into new career possibilities



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In 1995 Michael Ferraro founded TSI, a global provider of performance development training programs, human resources services, and executive and workforce coaching. Prior to consulting, he spent the majority of his career training and developing managers in the retail industry. Ferraro is chairman of the Bite Me Cancer Foundation's Board of Directors, chair-elect of the Greater Reston Chamber of Commerce, and public policy advisor for ASTD.

Q What sparked your initial interest in the training and development profession?

A At age 20 I was a store manager at a retail company when senior management asked me to help train assistant store managers. It was an in-store training program, one-on-one mostly. My role was to manage my store and train my assistants to manage and supervise their own retail outlets. They were tested after the six-month training program, and if they passed, they were promoted to store manager. I was fortunate to train more than 25 assistants while I worked there.

Q What skills or competencies helped you to advance in your career?

A I think the skills that made me successful in my retail career have helped me in my consulting career as well. The ability to communicate, listen well, and build relationships helped tremendously in my retail career. Also, the ability to effectively market and sell products and services in the stores has helped me to sell the products and services for our company.

Q How did your experience recruiting and training employees in the retail industry prepare you to establish your own training and development firm?

A At the end of my retail career, I was working as the training manager for a

firm that eventually declared chapter 11 bankruptcy. I decided to do some networking—using my “people skills”—to see what other training jobs were available. I joined my local chapter of ASTD (MetroDC) and met a great group of consultants who provided products and services to their clients and worked from their homes. Many of their programs were similar to those I offered my internal clients at my prior employer. So I decided to try my hand at starting my own firm. I had always thought about establishing my own business, and it was the right time to do it.

Decide what your business focus will be; you can't be all things to all people, so know your niche.

Q What advice would you give to professionals who are considering breaking into the consulting world?

A Start building your professional network now: Join your local ASTD chapter and other associations, volunteer your time, and build relationships. You should decide what your business focus will be; you can't be all things to all people, so know your niche. Join your local chamber of commerce; it will teach

you about the local business environment and connect you with decision makers who can purchase your products or services.

Q How do you stay current in the field today?

A I talk to our customers on a regular basis to get a sense of what they are working on and their upcoming plans and challenges. I try to read as much as I can, and I participate in business and workforce-related conferences to remain connected with the local business environment. I meet with local consultants and exchange thoughts about what we see happening with our customers. And of course, I attend ASTD's international conference every year to stay updated on trends in the profession.

Q What is one of the greatest lessons you have learned from your career journey?

A My ability to accept and manage the ups and the downs of my career is one of the greatest lessons I've learned. The journey is never as great as you think it is; and similarly, it's never as bad as you think. Enjoy the good times—the work promotions and business successes—as much as you can, but not too much because the tough times will come. When you are unemployed (like I was), or business is not as great as you want it to be, do not worry; things will be better. To quote my daughter Nikki: “Anything is possible, if you just believe!”