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Liz Cornish:
Business and
Adventure



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Liz Cornish:

Blazing a Trail to
Career Success

By Robin Roenker



Liz Cornish is part of a very rare subset of people who could compete equally well on “*The Apprentice*” or “*The Amazing Race*” should the notion of joining a reality TV show ever arise.

Cornish, half savvy businesswoman, half outdoor adventure enthusiast, is as at home facilitating corporate leadership training seminars for Fortune 500 executives as she is canoeing alone in the Arctic Circle.

Since earning her general studies degree from UK in 1975, the former honors program student and UK cheerleader has literally trotted the globe hiking, kayaking, canoeing, rock climbing, and even dogsledding her way through some of the Earth’s most extreme environments. As CEO of her own consulting firm and a divorced mother of two children, Carolyn, 15, and Kenneth, 12, she’s also honed her skills at navigating the often tricky seas of being a working mom in the corporate world.

These days, Cornish also finds herself crisscrossing the country sharing the message of her leadership book, “*Hit the Ground Running: A Woman’s Guide to Success for the First 100 Days on the Job*,” published by

McGraw-Hill. In it, Cornish offers success strategies from interviews with over 200 women executives who’ve managed to find ways to chip through the glass ceiling on their way to high-power leadership roles.

With a life like hers, who needs reality TV?

Going for Extremes

Before enrolling at UK in the 1970s, Liz Cornish lived what she describes as a “pretty traditional life” in her native Lexington. Since graduating, though, her life’s been anything but traditional — and she wouldn’t have it any other way.

While Cornish enjoyed the fact that her general studies program at UK allowed her to “see about a

variety of different approaches to learning” because she was “able to take classes in a variety of subject areas and be exposed to a wide range of thought,” perhaps the most lasting educational experience of Cornish’s UK career came outside the classroom when she encountered adventure travel.

It was through a then newly-formed UK outdoor group called Sage, which offered outdoor, extended educational opportunities, that Cornish discovered her “real love.”

“I took whitewater canoeing and a couple of other programs that absolutely changed my life,” she says. “Once I got introduced to outdoor adventure travel, that was it. I found my passion.”

After college, Cornish worked for a short while as a professional skier at Cyprus Gardens in Florida (where her doubles stunts from her one year on the UK cheerleading squad came in handy, she says) and then for several years as an instructor with Outward Bound and other adventure companies.

By that time Cornish was already an experienced canoer and kayaker, and companies were willing to train her in other adventure sports, like rock climbing and caving, she says, in order to meet their growing demand for female instructors.

Since then, Cornish has tried it all: rafting the Mekong River in China and Omo River in Ethiopia, climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro, kayaking the Colorado River, mountain biking in Idaho, diving in Barbados and Belize, and even solo canoeing the Arctic Circle. And that just scratches the surface.

A weeklong dogsledding odyssey was one of her most difficult journeys, says Cornish, who took that trip with a group of former adventure travel guides.

“It was minus 20 and we were sleeping in tarps and cooking over fires and things like that. That was

Top Three Things Every Good Leader Knows:

1. They can’t do it alone.
2. They’ve got to be able to make quick decisions on insufficient data.
3. They have to be able to listen for the whole message.

— Liz Cornish

difficult,” laughs Cornish. “It was hard to stay warm. My mom couldn’t believe it, because I always get cold really easily, and there I was in minus 20 degree weather, hiking through five feet of snow trying to find wood so we could have a fire. . . . It was only a week, but it was a long week.”

Her most extreme trips? That award goes to canoeing 90 miles above the Arctic Circle and her 30-day voyage on the Omo River, where she says she met isolated ethnic tribes and had to cautiously navigate through waters that were home to very territorial hippos.

Business Challenges

Professionally, Cornish has not shied away from challenges, either. During her time as an instructor and manager with Outward Bound, when she found herself routinely leading business men and women — often from companies that had merged or undergone other leadership transitions — on weeklong adventure trips as a bonding tool, Cornish realized something that surprised her: she liked business.

“I realized that I had had misconceptions about what business is . . . I really enjoyed many of the bright, committed and caring professionals who attended our programs,” she says.

That realization led her to seek an MBA, which she earned from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1985. Since 1986, Cornish has lived and based her work out of California, except for the two and a half years that she and her ex-husband, a physician, ran a rural health clinic in a small village in Kenya, itself an adventure. At the time, malaria was claiming the lives of many infants there.

“It’s exciting. It’s depressing. It’s rewarding. It’s frustrating. Working in a situation like that is the personification of every emotion. . . .



Photo: Courtesy Liz Cornish

On a trip to Lapland in 2005, Liz Cornish, center, is flanked by her friends and former adventure guides Betsy Dalglish, left, and Judy Futch, at the Tjaktja Pass on the Kungleden Trail about 200 miles above the Arctic Circle in northern Sweden.

Working with the children was the most rewarding part,” Cornish says of her time in Kenya. “We got the vaccination rate from way less than 50 percent to over 90 percent, which is better than this country. It was very rewarding.”

For some, skirting volatile hippos, kayaking the Arctic, and surviving subzero weather on a dogsled may sound risky, but not to Cornish.

“I don’t think of it as risky, because once you know the rules, and once you understand how to do things, then you just play by those rules,” she says. “In the natural world, I think risk is often what you perceive it to be.”

It’s a message that she shares for women in the business world as well.

Sharing Secrets of Their Success

If there’s one thing Cornish has learned in her work with women in business, it’s that being afraid to take

risks can be the single biggest roadblock to a burgeoning career.

In researching the book, “One of the things I noticed about the women who were very successful versus the ones who plateaued more prematurely was that the women who were wildly successful always made the braver decision,” she says. “Women usually have an internal debate team saying, ‘Well, should I do this, should I not?’ ‘Should I ask for the promotion, take the raise, take the risky assignment?’ Those women who were the most successful always chose the braver decision.”

After years of working as a leadership and organizational consultant and seminar facilitator, Cornish — who has worked for clients such as Birkenstock, Apple, the U.S. Navy and PricewaterhouseCoopers — got the idea to write a book about helping people “stick a landing within their new jobs,” she says.

While Cornish’s plan was originally to write a general book about the first 100 days of a new leadership position, she quickly changed her agenda to focus on women’s first 100 days after noticing key differences during her interviews with men and women corporate executives regarding how they tackled their jobs.

Keys to Success in Your First 100 Days on the Job:

1. Recognize the opportunity to negotiate.
2. Don’t let naysayers detract you from your focus.
3. Tame your inner critic. If you take a hit, don’t take it personally. Don’t allow yourself to get cynical or whiny.
4. And keep your sense of humor.

— Liz Cornish

“About one-third of the way through my interviews, I noticed this pattern . . . that the men were very focused on what to do: ‘Here are the tasks you do in your first 100 days.’ The women were focused on both what to do and how to do what you do. How to be,” she says.

The concept of the “first 100 days,” Cornish explains, is really more of a metaphorical one. Some people’s transitions into their new leadership roles may take only 30 days; others who are new to a company or who have more territory to cover, may require six months. “It’s really more about a series of activities and things that you’ve accomplished, as opposed to a numerical number,” she says.

Cornish’s book is full of checklists and bulleted points to help women executives stay on track as they find their own leadership niche. Tips like understand your abilities and limitations, develop an entry plan, or manage your message offer specific suggestions for helping women take advantage of those crucial first days in a new job, a time Cornish describes as “the pause between the flash of lightning and the clap of thunder.”

It’s a time, she says, when you’ve got everybody’s attention and you

can use it to either make or break yourself. During those first couple of months, you’re seeing the organization but you’re not of the organization. So you can really be objective about what’s going on and what questions to ask, she says, to move the company in the right direction.

Corporations are beginning to foster female executives within their ranks, Cornish says. It’s a change she attributes partly to the need to replace retiring baby boomers and partly to research that underscores the advantage of having female minds in the boardroom, since the majority of purchasing decisions in America are made by women. Yet women still have to work to subdue their own self-doubts if they want to break through the glass ceiling, she says.

Women have “so many tugs on their timing and psyche. We want to be good parents. We want to be good daughters, mothers, etc. . . . We’re always going ‘Oh, I should be a better mother. I should be more productive.’ So we have all these tugs.

Want to Know More?

To find out more about Liz Cornish and her work, see her Web site at 100days.com.

But the women who are successful really know what they want. They’re absolutely committed to the next step. They have the will to lead. And they’ve banished the inner-critic, meaning they were willing to say, ‘You know what, I may not be perfect, but I’m good enough. And this is what I want, and this is how I’m going to go about getting it.’”

Another stumbling block for women is their fear that if they negotiate hard, people will think they’re not being nice or that they’re not being a team player, Cornish says. Also, she says, women allow themselves to be interrupted or they limit their communication patterns to hide their own opinions. Cornish says she believes the corporate climate is changing, though, especially as a new generation of female workers — women who have grown up in an age of Title IX — rise in the ranks.

“Putting women out there on the field playing team sports helps them recognize that you can be competitive on the field and be friends outside — that’s making a huge difference,” Cornish says.

For her part, Cornish enjoys knowing that she’s helped so many women find their own keys to success. “I love it when people come up and tell me that I really inspired them. That means a lot to me,” she says.

And while she’s loving her voyage on the corporate seas, still always in the back of her mind is her checklist of outdoor places to see and adventures to explore. Someday she hopes life will find her climbing Mt. Aspiring in New Zealand, swimming with whale sharks off the coast of Australia, and running this certain river in Pakistan that she’s got her heart set on.

“Now is not the time,” she says. “My kids come first.” But, like the successful women she writes about, Cornish knows what she wants. She has her mind set on it. So it’s a safe bet, she’ll get there.

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Liz Cornish was a UK cheerleader in 1972-73.

