



SERIES EPISODE 3

Women In Business Leadership: A Story of Resilience

- Intro:** Welcome to Strategic Insights, brought to you by PrideStaff. On each episode, we bring you interviews with leading management and employment experts from across the country. Your host for Strategic Insights is Brad Smith. Now, here's Brad.
- Brad Smith:** Hello, and thank you for listening into Strategic Insights brought to you by PrideStaff. This is part three of our three-part series on Women in Leadership. Today's episode is all about overcoming adversity and strengthening yourself and your business. My guest today is owner and strategic partner of the Phoenix Metro-East Valley and Scottsdale PrideStaff offices, Ann Gilbert. Ann, thank you so much for joining us today.
- Ann Gilbert:** Thank you for having me.
- Brad Smith:** So, Ann, success in life, as you and I both know, often doesn't come without challenges, without sacrifice, without adversity, and I'm really looking forward to hearing your story and how you overcame that. But before we dig in, if you don't mind, give us a little bit of background on where you are today. Give us a brief overview of your business.
- Ann Gilbert:** Yeah, I'm the owner and strategic partner of the PrideStaff Phoenix Metro-East Valley and Scottsdale locations. We are a small business. We are woman-owned, and we are certified. We are consistently in PrideStaff's present circle of top-performing offices, and we are also celebrating 13 years in business.
- Brad Smith:** Congratulations. That's awesome. So, over a decade in business, I know it's challenging to get that far, so congratulations.
- Ann Gilbert:** Thank you.
- Brad Smith:** So, Ann, let's start by talking about your background, if you don't mind. So, we heard where you are today. It took a while to get there. So how did you first get started in the staffing industry?
- Ann Gilbert:** So, I started in staffing for a small niche staffing firm in Minneapolis-St. Paul back in 1998. So just yesterday, I started as a recruiter and I was moved into a

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sales role, which I absolutely did not want to do, but the owner convinced me to give it a try for at least 30 days.

Brad Smith: Interesting. So, you were enjoying the recruiting side of things, as many people do. You get to talk with candidates of all different backgrounds, you get to match people with great opportunities. I can imagine that's rewarding. Then you're voluntold to go into sales. So that must have been a challenge. How'd you get past it?

Ann Gilbert: You know what? I really had to change my mindset. I kept thinking of sales as being the used car salesman, so I had to get over my preconceived notion of what sales was, and what I learned is, this was a lot more about being a consultant. After a few weeks, I realized that I actually loved being in this position. I love the idea of meeting with companies and thinking outside of the box to provide them with solutions to their hiring challenges. I really enjoyed working with decision-makers, honing in on what those challenges were, and then coming up with a solution that was going to work for their business and help their business grow. So, once I finally decided to embrace sales, I really enjoyed it and I was good at it.

Brad Smith: It's interesting because when people hear the word sales, I think they have this same visceral reaction that you did, the used car salesman. Nobody wants to be pushy. Nobody wants to do that. But I love how you reframed that, and when you were really into it, thought about how, "I'm not really selling anything. I'm consulting with businesses to help them solve strategic challenges." And I think that's probably just as fulfilling or more fulfilling as the recruiting side.

Ann Gilbert: Absolutely.

Brad Smith: So, you were doing great in Minneapolis, working for a smaller niche agency. You were recruiting, you were being successful in sales, and then you moved out west. So, tell me more about that. Why'd you move, and where'd you go?

Ann Gilbert: My husband and I decided to move to the Phoenix Valley back in 2003. I was working in a small business, a small niche staffing firm, and so I thought, "Hey, I'm going to interview with all the big staffing companies." So, I started the interview process and I stumbled across PrideStaff, and when I interviewed with PrideStaff, my heart just said, "That's where I need to be." It was much more of a family feel. I felt like they were really genuine about what they were doing. So, I had the opportunity to come on board in a sales position for their Mesa team, and we started to grow. I was able to grow a great book of business for them, and I was also moving into doing sales for their other two locations, Biltmore and Scottsdale. Then I finally had an opportunity to become a branch manager. Believe it or not, in 2005, we began negotiating for me to become an owner, and I became the owner in December of 2006.

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Brad Smith: Wow, congratulations. So, you went from working in the business to being a key leader in the business, and being the rainmaker of the business and then transitioned into ownership. That's amazing. How did that transition play out? So, you were probably working with a lot of those people that you were then managing, and you went from managing a lot of people to being the one writing the checks. How did it all go at first?

Ann Gilbert: At first, it was amazing. We were growing, things were going really, really well. The business was taking off. I feel like we kind of made it when you first get started and you take over something, and it had been years in the making, and then our little friend, recession, came right around the corner, and we weren't really prepared for it. I don't know that anyone could have been prepared for the recession. In about three months, we lost 80% of our business at the beginning of 2008.

So, at the time, Mesa and Phoenix were really heavily vested in the home building industry, and we were very tied to that industry, whether it was from the mortgage and finance side of the business or working with local home builders. So, it had a huge impact on our clients, and it hit us really hard and really fast. During that process, there was a clause in the buy-sell agreement where the previous owners had an opportunity to either come back and take back the company or to close, and they decided to close. So, in May of 2009, we officially closed up both locations at the time.

Brad Smith: Wow. I'm sorry to hear that. That must've been crushing. You were doing so amazing. You launched your business. Like you said, things got off to a great start, and then you had this unforeseeable downturn, and so many businesses at the time were impacted. There were so many businesses that closed. I'm sorry that impacted you. What did you do? How'd you rebound?

Ann Gilbert: It was a really tough time, and I dug in and said, "Okay, now I need to find a job." So, I started interviewing with other staffing firms in the valley, and luckily Tammi Heaton called me and she said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "I'm looking for a job." And she said, "Why don't you come to Fresno and sit down with us and let's explore a couple of opportunities that we have that we think might be a good fit for you?" So, I picked up my family in 2009 in July, and we relocated to Fresno, California. I started with PrideStaff Financial there, and then I had the opportunity to move into the PrideStaff branch manager position for our Fresno location. Then I was promoted again to vice president field consultant, working with other business owners in the PrideStaff system.

Brad Smith: So, you continually reinvented yourself at every single spot. You faced some challenges, faced some roadblocks, but just worked hard and got through that. So, after inventing yourself as a corporate leader, after proving your value, after continuing to work your way up and getting promotion after promotion, how did you finally end up back in Phoenix?

Ann Gilbert: Everything was going great in Fresno. I definitely enjoyed my time there. I enjoyed the experience there. I really feel like it helped me regain some of that tenacity that I had and drive that I had. One day the PrideStaff owner and founder, George Rogers, sat down with me and he said, "Did you find your dream job?" And I said, "You know what? I love what I do, George, but honestly, I feel like I have unfinished business in the Phoenix Valley." And he said, "Okay, so how do we make that happen?" And so, we started working together on a plan for me to come back and reopen and finish what I started.

Brad Smith: What a powerful question from a leader. Asking your team members, a key person in your organization, "Are you living your dream job?" And you have to not be afraid of the answer to that question.

Ann Gilbert: Right.

Brad Smith: Yeah. But it worked out on both sides. You went back even after facing setbacks during the recession. Were you scared to go back to Phoenix?

Ann Gilbert: A little bit. I was a little bit afraid. I definitely had a desire to finish what I started. I believed in the potential to make a difference in the Phoenix market, and I definitely had a passion to help clients and candidates in this area.

Brad Smith: So, you're going back and reinventing the business, reinventing yourself back in Phoenix, finishing up that unfinished business, as you mentioned. Did you carry any lessons with you from your previous experience that really helped you relaunch in the market?

Ann Gilbert: Oh, absolutely. The very first thing I thought about was, I need to be diversified. I need to make sure that I don't have all of my business in one business sector. I also knew that we always had to focus on business development. You can never stop building those relationships. Even when times are really good, you have to continue to drive again to diversify your business. You just can't stop. You can't get complacent. That really helped our success for the first several years. Of course, our good other friend, COVID, arrived, something that no one would've ever anticipated. A lot of companies were scaling back. They were definitely cutting staff, but in my heart of hearts, I knew that that was the wrong direction to go in. That was the wrong thought process.

So instead, we hunkered down and we spent a lot of time on training and developing the team and just really honing in their skills. We focused on business development, we focused on building relationships, we focused on what would be important to our candidate and their experience and what would be important to a client and their experience, and we came out stronger. We had one of the best years that we've had in business coming out of COVID.

Brad Smith: Yeah, and that's from your experience and those lessons you learned the first time through, and I love that you took those lessons, you shared those, and

taught and trained your staff. It would be easy to curl up in a ball and make excuses that COVID really impacted our business and there's nothing we could do about it. But because you learned those lessons, because you had that initial experience, you were able to just battle through, double down, and, like you said, come out of it stronger.

Ann Gilbert: Absolutely.

Brad Smith: So, if you can think back to when you initially reentered the Phoenix market, so when you first launched, did you find you were able to just regain momentum, or were there some challenges at that launch?

So, Ann, when you think back to when you first relaunched in the market, did you find it was easy to regain momentum on securing new clients, or were there some challenges?

Ann Gilbert: I'm not going to lie. It was a challenge. I thought I would come back to the market and start where I finished and walk into companies that we had built strong relationships with, and everyone would be there. That's not what happened. Companies closed. I closed. They closed. Contacts left. In the relationships that I had with individuals, they relocated out of the Phoenix market. I was able to find individuals that we had partnered with in the past, and we reestablished those relationships as quickly as we could. But we also knocked on doors. We made a ton of phone calls. We worked really hard. I had a very dedicated team, and success came through perseverance and building the right team members to get us to where we needed to go.

Brad Smith: That's really a theme in this discussion today, is that perseverance and realizing that you're going to face roadblocks, but also understanding that you can overcome those and you have, consistently, time and time again. When you look back on things, how long do you think it took you after you relaunched to actually feel comfortable, to feel like you had momentum?

Ann Gilbert: I feel like it took a good year. We had to find the right team, and we had to connect with the right companies. We had to build on the momentum, and of course we became members of the Chamber of Commerce. We started to join different networking groups that would support the clients that we were currently servicing as well.

Brad Smith: That's amazing. Congrats again to an amazing 13-year run here and continued future success. I'd love to talk a little bit about some of your influencers. So, throughout your professional career, throughout launching a business, I'm sure there were people that were influential in assisting you along the way. Who helped you?

Ann Gilbert: Of course, George Rogers, our president and founder, he always believed in me, even when I doubted my own talent. Mike Aprile and Tammi Heaton, our co-

CEOs, have always been extremely supportive of myself and my business. I also, young in my career, had the opportunity to be part of our vision group. So, I worked with other owners in the PrideStaff system, such as Linda Donahue, who owns our San Jose office, Chris Rupp with Carlsbad, Amy Linn in Dallas, Texas, and, of course, Gary Carmichael in Mississippi. They were very supportive. We were also in a vision group that kept each other really accountable, so pushing each other to the limits, asking each other the tough questions. So had I not had that exposure, I don't know that I would've always been able to overcome the diversity and some of the challenges that I've had in my career. So, it was nice to have that experience behind me and know that I could grow from the accountability side of the business as well.

Brad Smith: Yeah, I think that's a great point, and one I want to reiterate. It's important to align yourself with the right people. People who you can learn from, people who have been through similar experiences, or even peers that you can work through and hash out things that are happening in the business, bounce ideas off of each other, sometimes maybe even commiserate, and knowing that somebody else is challenged as well, and that you will in fact get through this together. I think it's very important.

Ann Gilbert: Absolutely.

Brad Smith: So, Ann, as you've outlined, you faced and overcame a lot of adversity in your career. Why have you stuck with staffing and not moved into another industry?

Ann Gilbert: Staffing gives you such a great opportunity to have such a big impact on people's lives. I've been asked before, "What else would you do?" And I really don't know. I feel like it's an industry that gets in your blood, and you just don't know what else you would do. I love the opportunity to help people find jobs, to put food on people's tables, to gain purpose in their life. I love the chance to sit down with companies, find out what those challenges are, and help them work through that to increase their profitability as well. I like to have an impact on individual team members' lives as well.

Brad Smith: I know you're certainly doing that, and you've been doing it for 13 years, and I'm sure there's countless more years of doing that. So, let's talk about that a little bit and talk about how rewarding it has been. So up until now, we've talked a lot about adversity, but anything rewarding in life is you're going to face some adversity. You're going to have to stick to it. You're going to have to get through the tough times so that you can truly enjoy the good times. So, talk to us a little bit about the rewarding parts of launching and owning your own business.

Ann Gilbert: Watching my team members be successful is really important to me. So, somebody who comes in and says, "I just landed an appointment with this great company that I've been having lots of conversation with, and I'm finally going to get some face-to-face time with them." That's huge. Or somebody coming into my office saying, "I know that client was looking for this really challenging skillset, and I'm so excited to say that I found them the right person for their

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team, and they start next week." That, to me, is huge. Just the opportunity, like I said, to impact other people's lives.

Brad Smith: If you think about it, in 13 years, the number of people who you've impacted in helping them find a job, helping people put food on the table, helping organizations stay in business through rough times, through downturns, through COVID. You're doing some amazing work, and congratulations on that.

Ann Gilbert: Thank you.

Brad Smith: To wrap things up, and for the women who are listening, for everyone that are listening to this podcast that want to start their own business, who aspire to be entrepreneurs, do you have any closing words of wisdom for them?

Ann Gilbert: Yes. I would say that you need to know how to hustle. You have to want to do things that nobody else wants to do. You have to make a lot of sacrifices. If your dream is to be a business owner, I will tell you, it is 100% worth it. As your business continues to grow, you do get to the point where you do have a lot of freedom in your life. Don't get discouraged. Always push yourself to get out of your comfort zone and be okay with someone telling you no, because the next person might be the one that tells you yes.

Brad Smith: I love that. What a great tip to end on. If you're not willing to be told no, you're going to miss out on a lot of great opportunities.

Ann Gilbert: Yes, absolutely.

Brad Smith: Terrific. Ann, I want to thank you so much. I hope everyone listening or watching this episode finds value. I know I certainly did. You've motivated me to reach for the stars and get out of my comfort zone. So, thank you, and thank you all so much for listening. Take care.

Closing: Thank you for listening to Strategic Insights brought to you by PrideStaff. Whether you're looking for high-level workforce consulting or staffing help to meet demands, PrideStaff is here to help.