

Cindy Clare

The Lifelong Learner

It's hard to believe that Cindy Clare, president of Kettler Management, has never had to look for a job in her life. An international relations major at the University of Virginia, she had always planned to go into the foreign services but found herself temping at Charles E. Smith shortly after graduating, learning the ropes at one of the leading commercial real estate companies in Washington, DC. After a month of temping, Cindy accepted an offer of full-time employment and immersed herself fully in the industry, taking classes and absorbing valuable insight into the business's nuance. Within three years she was promoted to Regional Property Manager, and she had worked her way up to senior regional manager within ten. In 1995, she left Charles E. Smith for the Mark Winkler Company to run their residential division and then, in 2005, accepted an offer from Kettler Management to serve as senior vice president. Within three months, she was promoted to president of Kettler, exemplifying the kind of career ladder ascension that most only dream of accomplishing.

It would be wrong to assume, however, that the road to success was always paved in gold for Cindy. The eldest of four children in a military family, she babysat for extra money from age twelve. She worked for Hechinger's, a Home Depot-esque chain, as a cashier and customer service representative on nights and weekends, and she was employed part-time for the athletic department during her college years. She had always possessed a willingness to work hard and to do whatever needed to be done, which translated well to her experience in the real estate industry. This can-do attitude, combined with her genuine patience and interest, allowed her to go from a recently graduated temp worker to president of one of the top-ranked housing developers in the nation.



At its founding in the 1977, Kettler Management focused primarily on home development work. As it evolved over the years, it took on land development and tax credit apartment development dimensions. Then, in 1980, it evolved further to include a management component that eventually undertook both conventional and affordable housing projects. This diversification of the development and third-party management aspects of the company is perhaps the major turning point in Kettler's history, transforming its business model and allowing it to offer ongoing supervisory expertise in addition to property building.

In an industry fraught with uncertainty and risk, the road Cindy took to achieve her current position is among her greatest fortes. With personal experience at virtually every level of the business, she has positioned herself as an expert and offers unparalleled insight—a trait that has proven invaluable in navigating the rough waters of real estate of late. As Cindy explains, the markets have decreased business in

the development sector while systematically increasing the demand for third-party management. She understands the real estate market as cyclical, posing the idea that management is ever more important when development is down because the rational owner aims to get as much as possible from their existing properties. These are the challenges that put Cindy's experience to the test, and with the healthy growth stemming from her influence, it is clear that she delivers.

Kettler has enjoyed tremendous expansion under Cindy's leadership, expanding from 8,000 units to 13,000 units in DC, Maryland, Virginia, and New Jersey in the five years she has headed the company. Kettler is truly unique in that it manages a full range of assets that span from affordable to high-end luxury, and Cindy

attributes much of its success to this scope. She also believes that their prosperity stems from their innovative web-based marketing techniques, with their well-designed website supplemented with profiles on popular networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Whereas most companies refrain from utilizing technology-based marketing for affordable units, Kettler's progressive vision fully endorses this practice, and their success speaks for itself.

The accomplishments of any company, however, can only be measured by the success and drive of its individual employees. Drawing upon her own experience in the workforce, Cindy strives to equip each staff member with all the tools necessary for accomplishment. She aims to provide career paths similar to the one she, herself, had access to, opting to promote from within whenever possible. For Cindy, success is living, breathing, and organic; it lives within the people of Kettler Management. A team builder at heart, her style of encouraging and developing people is among her greatest strengths and has allowed her to get where she is today.

With such an emphasis on people skills, one would hardly believe that Cindy was, in her own words, painfully shy as a child. She typically met friends through her younger siblings and hated to be put in situations in which she didn't know anyone—a stark contrast to her current extroverted demeanor. As she matured and found that her responsibilities demanded strong customer service skills and connections with others, she rose to the challenge, realizing that burdensome tasks become easier the more you work at them. Thus, through careful attention and strength of will, she was able to transform a personal challenge into one of the greatest assets in her professional repertoire.

In addition to serving as a testament on overcoming fears, Cindy's story is a how-to guide when one isn't quite sure what-to. For the individual who knew from an early age what they wanted to do in life and stuck to it, direction is hardly an issue. But for the vast majority of us without such pointed premonition, deciding what to do with our lives can sometimes be daunting to the point of paralysis. According to Cindy, however, you can never know what direction your professional life will take until you actually get out into the field and start working. Maintaining a flexibility of spirit and optimism of heart allows

one the openness to seize opportunities as they arise. As Cindy explains, she never intended to become the president of a company. Rather, she always sought to challenge herself and to perfect her craft. Success lies not only in consistency and reliability, but also in pushing the envelope and making a difference, always asking yourself what you can do and learn to evolve yourself and your pursuits.

Though she has reached what is generally thought of as "the top," Cindy does not stop asking the very same questions that got her there in the first place. In managing the overall operation of Kettler, she is continually building relationships, working with clients, pitching new business ideas, and strategizing for growth while maintaining the quality and integrity of the company that have become so integral to its reputation. In addition to promoting her own professional development, it is now her job to spur and inspire peak performance in the people and properties of Kettler Management. With her proven passion for challenge, learning, and advancement, it seems the road of life could not have led her to a better place.

Amidst these pressures, Cindy approaches the balance between work and personal life with a calm and matter-of-factness that is characteristic of her but surprising nonetheless. As the president of a fast-paced and growing company and also the mother of a teenage son, one would imagine a sizeable obstacle in managing work and family life. However, Cindy portrays a firm grasp on her responsibilities as both a leader and a mother and how those responsibilities interplay in her life. Her son, who she describes as her greatest success, is already an active member of society, participating avidly in school and sporting events. She understands that she cannot make it to every event, but if she puts one on her calendar, her staff understands the plans to be non-negotiable. Considering that women are still in the minority in senior leadership, Cindy's example is an inspiring one for anybody hoping to serve in such a demanding position while also raising a family. As the member of a group of several women executives pledged to advise and support one another, she demonstrates that, while sexism is still an issue in the workplace, women have the power to promote opportunities both for themselves and for each other.

Without a doubt, the interconnected relationships, partnerships, and support systems that Cindy facilitates create a web of mutual promotion and teaching that are the hallmark of her impact in both her professional and personal lives. As an instructor for the Institute of Real Estate Management, she claims that she learns just as much from her students as she hopes they learn from her. Always open to examining knowledge from different angles, she is a firm believer that every experience in life, whether positive or negative, has a lesson. By seeking and embracing these lessons, one can always expect that the next step taken in life will be forward, whether you're just starting out or an established veteran on the lookout for the Next Big Thing.

– **By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®**

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President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).*