

Dawn Halfaker

The Persistent Patriot

When Dawn Halfaker first opened her eyes in the sterile hospital room, she was stunned. She let her shaken memory sift through what had transpired. A Captain in the United States Army, she had been deployed to Iraq five months before. Her platoon had been assigned to live and work in the city of Bacuba, where they had participated in raids, patrols, reconnaissance missions, forced protection, convoy escorts, and police training. One of her patrols had been ambushed, and a firefight ensued. When her vehicle was hit with a rocket-propelled grenade, the shrapnel had splintered through her right shoulder, and that's where the memories stopped. In her comatose state, she had not been awake to see the helicopter airlift her from the scene. She had been unconscious for the trip back to Washington, DC, and she had been unconscious during the amputation of her arm. When Dawn awoke in that hospital room, she knew her life would never be the same. She was twenty-four years old.

The road to recovery was not an easy one for Dawn, and her progress was further frustrated by the inevitable sense of denial that swept over her. Unable to see past her current condition, she would try to pretend it hadn't happened. The young woman suffered from a profound sorrow until one day, when her physical therapist led her down to a room where several soldiers were undergoing rehabilitation for their injuries. The first person she saw was a staff sergeant who had lost both his legs and had suffered severe facial burns. As the man wobbled hopefully on his new prosthetic legs, his wife and children chanted, "Go, daddy, go!" From that moment on, Dawn's perspective changed completely. "I learned that I was really lucky for what I had and shouldn't be dwelling on what I didn't have, and I got really focused on my future," she says.



Six years later, one would hardly imagine that the intelligent, poised, and successful young woman had ever had a moment of self-doubt. After the incident, she knew she wanted to maintain her strong military connection, especially the leadership aspects of her position. After attending several job interviews where nothing really clicked for her, she happened to meet an army colonel who had just started working with the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and needed a research program manager. He was looking for someone with recent combat experience who could envision the potential for research to save lives by leveraging technology on the battlefield.

Taken with this man's inspiration and passion to aid war fighters, she worked in a consultant capacity for him as she gained experience and developed a company of her own, which began to take form in January of 2006. Drawing on her unique skill set and nuanced knowledge of the national security community, she served on DARPA contracts investigating new strategies and materials that could be developed, commercialized and deployed to the armed forces to strengthen national security. She worked on these projects for two years while building Halfaker & Associates in the background and also attending Georgetown University at night to receive her Masters in International Security. The U.S. had undergone "a very transformative era throughout the last decade," Dawn reports, "and I felt that I had unlimited potential to contribute in different areas."

As Dawn took on sub-contracts with DARPA, she hired people with similar backgrounds and experiences—namely veterans hoping to continue serving the mission who possessed valuable skill sets. In this way, Halfaker and Associates continued on a track of organic

growth through the end of 2007, when it began winning larger contracts and adding critical mass to its staff. The company developed departments for human resources and finance, gaining a self-awareness that was strategic rather than tactical.

While Halfaker & Associates originally focused on national security policy, homeland security, and defense solutions business unit, it has since branched off into program management, consulting, PMO support, acquisitions support, IT solutions, and software development and integration. Though they have diversified their revenue streams, the majority of their business still comes from U.S. military contracts. It makes sense, then, that the company remains very mission-driven. In fact, the mission element of their service model accounts for much of their uniqueness as a company. "Personally, this company is a vehicle for affecting change in areas where I've been passionate," she says. "It is powerful that we can address an issue." From a business perspective, they have established themselves as a trusted partner to their clients through this mission-orientation, allowing them to invest in these clients both personally and professionally. Through sharing a common mission and vision with their clients, Halfaker & Associates is able to offer outstanding and highly-responsive service that tailors solutions to best fit the needs of each individual client. It is a partnership mindset and service model that larger companies cannot offer, allowing them to stand out amidst their competition.

Looking back at her business's evolution, Dawn points out that little things happen all along the way that cumulatively define the journey. She can, however, put her finger on one notable turning point for the company—a time when it was enjoying success and growth, but without a means to advance to the "next level." As she reports, "developing a long-term strategic plan turned us into a *real* business overnight." When the fledgling group won a considerably hefty contract with the US Army Recruiting Command, they were forced to put infrastructure in place. In the end, they had over fifty employees on the contract, successfully supporting the mission and recruiting soldiers to enter the military. It was indisputable that Halfaker & Associates had come of age, truly developing into a notable force in its field.

Because Dawn embarked upon her professional journey at such young age, she relied upon the mentorship of several key individuals to make up for the business and consulting background that she lacked at the time Halfaker & Associates was started. "Sometimes it takes people looking in from the outside to see what the possibilities are," she remarks. She would advise a young entrepreneur to identify their mentors early on—individuals who have your best interest at heart and can answer the "dumb questions" to help you understand how to leverage what you have and what is possible. Now that the company has been operational for four years, she's looking inward at herself and how she can repay the favor by advising and mentoring others. Focusing her energies on wounded veterans transitioning out of the military, she now knows what questions to ask to help people identify their own unique paths in life.

Consequently, one other defining aspect of Halfaker & Associates that renders it so unique is the fact that it is a service-disabled veterans company, with over 70% of its employee-base comprised of veterans. More specifically, they are part of the Wounded Warrior Hiring Program, setting aside jobs for injured veterans and working to train, mentor, and develop those individuals to assume careers with the sense of purpose that so many of them lost when they left the service. "That was what was so hard for me," Dawn reflects, referring to the mission-orientation she lost when she was forced to resign from the military. The company was a means for Dawn to regain her footing in a new life following her injury, and her efforts in turn now provide similar opportunities to people facing the same obstacles.

Dawn's current responsibilities at Halfaker & Associates include, first and foremost, the long-term success and strategic growth of the company. By laying out the path to success and honing the primary goals of the enterprise, she aims to set the gears in motion so that her employees can, in turn, act. She also identifies the responsibility she wields for the lives of others—a duty which she takes with the utmost seriousness. To Dawn, running a company is so much more than making sure the nuts and bolts are in place. More importantly, it is ensuring that her employees are receiving the tools they need to be successful and to reach their goals. Additionally, Dawn is constantly considering the company's role in the

community. Through her service on the advisory boards of a number of nonprofit organizations, she extends the boundaries of both the company and of herself.

Reflecting back upon the past several years, Dawn is most proud of the team she's assembled. "They can do anything," she marvels, "and that is a powerful thing. Whether it's focusing on Wounded Warrior, or a charitable event, or getting a proposal out the door, they will get it done." To achieve this level of success, she warns young entrepreneurs against a mentality of finality. As people enter the workforce, they tend to believe that their entire lives will be locked into the first field they go into. This mindset is misleading and can often be paralyzing. "Just go for it," she advises. "Take risks. Take chances. This will eventually lead to the path that was meant for you." If one never goes out on a limb, one never discovers their talents, preferences, and passions. This process of self-discovery coupled with hard work and determination go hand-in-hand with Dawn's leadership philosophy, which is focused around constant learning and evolution. Not only does this involve the acquisition of wisdom and knowledge, but also learning about your teammates. "Whether it's a combat mission or a business mission, you must look to people," she says. "Treat them well, know them well, know their strengths, and know how to pull the best out of them." When it comes to passion for the mission, it is readily apparent that Dawn's enthusiasm and commitment are representative of her entire team's sentiments. "They know it's more than just a job; more than just getting a paycheck," Dawn confirms. Indeed, it is a cause, a vision, and a lifestyle that truly unites her team in mission and purpose, allowing for a degree of commitment to their clients' success that is as sincere as it is rare and as powerful as it is poignant.

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

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