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Excerpts from the Path to Entrepreneurship Top 100 Most Powerful Women Summit

"It is with admiration that I find myself seated between two highly successful entrepreneurs on this panel. Christine Magee, Co-founder and President of Sleep Country Canada and Rita Tsang, Founder and President of Tour East Holidays (Canada) Inc. Both of these women are highly acclaimed for their establishment of new market offerings based on their uncanny reading of the market, the development of their niche products and their skilful positioning – sustained over many years. It is indeed an honour to be recognized amongst these entrepreneurs and the other distinguished players on the Top 100 list.

The path to entrepreneurship - the topic of this panel has been of interest to me for over the past 25 years as both a player and strategist. The most powerful lessons I have learned; however, have come directly from my own experience. For the purpose of this panel – I have arranged my experience into a number of *Entrepreneurial Laws* – three of which I have excerpted.

The Laws of Poker

What sets an entrepreneur apart from other corporate and public sector players is the fact that they have their own skin in the game. The greater one's ownership percentage - the more the skin one has in - the greater the risk-reward ratio. While this is not rocket science – the laws are easy to forget.

Law 1: Do not risk anything you are not prepared to lose.

Law 2: Know your players (all key stakeholders) intimately – their style, posturing and strategies.

Law 3: Be an expert in the game that has been called - and the range of possible games coming down the line.

Law 4: Know where every card (dollar and cent) is or will be.

Law 5: Know when to hold them; know when to fold them.

Let's take the first one. *Do not risk anything you are not prepared to lose.* This seems so trite and easy to say - that is until the adrenaline rush associated with the play overtakes common sense. Entrepreneurship is at its core a family decision. The hours are long, the pay is highly variable and the emotional roller coaster is larger and steeper than any one found at Disney World.

I became an entrepreneur because I no longer wanted anyone telling me when I could and could not be with my family. (I was told by my employer at the time - a major oil and gas company - that it was unprofessional to be on the road with my baby son and nanny in tow. After all - all of my male colleagues had to travel internationally - sometimes for up to 18 months without their families. Just because I was breast-feeding, it was assumed that this shouldn't make a difference. Yes - this was the late seventies and times have changed.) The irony is that my entrepreneurial activities have consumed my life - evenings, weekends, family vacations. The skin in the game to which I am referring is not simply money - which is a significant reality. The fact that one is risking - as in my and my husband's case - the family farm - then all energy gets fully invested in ensuring the necessary return. Personal guarantees are real. They get called when the hand doesn't go your way. The pressure to stave off of the odds is enormous and mostly unconscious. It is all consuming - for you are risking the hours, days, weeks, and years that are irreplaceable in your life and those of your family. Money is simply the chip that an entrepreneur visibly counts - that is until one realizes that there is more to life than the poker game you are playing.

The Laws of the Race

I am a sailor. I have always admired those professional sailors who race long distances - especially around the world. Without question - there is no room for amateurs. In the race of entrepreneurship today in which growth is the race among professionals, the first law is *survival*. Racing to cross the line first while risking life and crew is a race driven simply by ego and ambition. This is where mistakes get made.

The second law is *to know where your buoys and shoreline are at all times*, especially in bad weather. Many entrepreneurs keep changing their markers, creating fluid indicators of success as the business case unfolds. While it may appear to be in vogue to instill flexibility in one's "game plan" - indicators that communicate progress and danger are quite clearly non-negotiable. In fact, these indicators become increasingly important as the weather changes and the shoreline becomes invisible.

The third law is that of *precision teamwork*. Each member must be highly skilled in all key roles, and exceptional in their designated position. Many entrepreneurs fall into the trap of believing that it is their race to win or lose - and not that of the team.

The Law of the Seasons

Quite frankly I get tired of hearing stories that illustrate success as double-digit growth, escalating profitability etc. What these stories give is false illusion – that success is only measured in one's hay day. I prefer to think of life and in this case – the world of the entrepreneur and his/her business as one that grows through four or more seasons.

The Law of the Fall – Success is realizing that things are changing, like for example - that the customer base is evolving beyond its current requirements, or that the market is maturing and getting overly crowded etc. The more sensitive we are to these changes, the more agile we are in our response. In my first book on turnarounds, I noted that the first step of demise was found in the moment of success when one starts to believe one's own press. These moments remove our aptitude for vulnerability. Vulnerability tells us its time to pay attention.

The Law of Winter – Success is being still. This is enormously difficult for those of us trained in the Nike school of "Do It". Being still, allowing new roots to develop, remaining out of the fray are all counter-intuitive to the entrepreneur who views progress as outward movement. Consuming precious incubation energy by simply appearing busy in the market no matter what the cost simply accelerates the inevitable – burn out.

The Law of Spring – New growth (business lines, operating processes, products, etc.) emerge in varying speeds and degrees. Some require more than one seasonal cycle. Success is allowing the new developments to dictate their timing rather than being forced by outside influences. Growth is a natural process – rather than a mechanistically engineered development. Entrepreneurs driven by ego needs fall in the trap of "demanding growth" one the nutrients of money and opportunity is applied. Growth produced by humans simply operates with different realities than this.

The Law of Summer - Success involves enjoying the fruits of ones labour. Summer brings with it the reflection of the cycle that has unfolded – the dynamics of positive influence and those that will need pruning through the next seasonal series.

In the world of innovation - celebration forms an integral part of all the seasons - rather than simply classic period of summer.

Questions & Answers

During the questions and answer period, I was asked if one had to become an entrepreneur to truly have the autonomy to make a difference. My answer in a word was "no". Curing cancer, finding solutions to third world famine, and the thousands of other day-to-day realities facing us at this time in our history require enormous resources, collaboration and work effort. Establishing oneself inside of a progressive corporate or public sector organization that sponsors peak performance serves as an attractive opportunity for women aspiring to make a difference. The challenge for many of these organizations, however, lies in cultivating the cultural environments that attract and retain individuals of this calibre. The figure of 14% (of those women who reach executive posts) still tells the story that the entrepreneurial root may still be faster – albeit riskier.