

Lessons from the General Store



THE Last Word

by Pat Miller

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In 1971, Pat Miller started a small office products business in Northern Virginia that today has grown to become a \$40 million plus company with more than 100 employees. Recently, she gave the keynote speech at a local women entrepreneurs' convention where she described the most important lessons she learned about running an independent business. Here's what she had to say:

Around 20 years ago, Robert Fulghum wrote a very popular book titled *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Most of what I Really Needed to Know to run and grow my own business—to live my dream—I learned at McGraw's General Store and Gas Station in Gate City, Virginia in the summer of 1961. Here is a summary of those ten lessons.

LESSON ONE: Show up. Other people depend on your work to get their work done.

LESSON TWO: Care and take initiative and reward others who do. Whether it is cleaning the top shelf, learning new technologies, or finding ways to save money, success finds the people who step up.

LESSON THREE: Find someone you trust who can help you make the right decisions. Two heads are better than one, and often someone else's head will be better than yours.

LESSON FOUR: Understand what you are asking of your people, even on the hottest day of the year. You don't have to be able to do their job, but you must understand, in your skin, the effort it takes to do their job well.

LESSON FIVE: Start with trust. Trust your employees until they give you reason not to. Though your trust will sometimes be challenged, living in a state of constant distrust slows you down too much.

LESSON SIX: Don't spend what you don't have. This one's important. It could be fatal. Don't spend what you don't have.

LESSONS SEVEN AND EIGHT: Take care of your customers and your vendors. Give them what they want and they will give you what you want.

LESSON NINE: Meet your competition, and swerve if you must to avoid a head-on collision. If they offer it, you offer it. If you can't offer it, offer something better.

LESSON TEN: It is hard to be a woman in business. Remember (like you would ever forget) that business is often not the first thing on a man's mind when he meets a woman. Let that be his distraction, not yours.