

# Listening is her strength

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Her commitment to a written plan kept her company together during a catastrophic year.

Photo: Owen Stayner

## **Consultant finds solutions by tuning in to clients**

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Special

Birmingham management consultant Kimberly Leslie-Patton understands better than most the value of a clear vision, a written plan and the intense focus both require as the keys to long-term success.

All three played key roles in keeping her business together during a catastrophic period in her life five years ago.

Her husband suffered a debilitating car accident that forced him to re-learn such basics as walking and talking. In that same year, as she was attempting to help him recover, Leslie-Patton's own physicians diagnosed her with life-threatening cancer.

But also in that same year, her firm, Leslie Patton & Associates, brought in more revenues than ever before and the consultant's client roster continued to grow.

"The business survived and thrived. I had good people who worked for me, who knew my vision. I had a written plan and they followed it, allowing me to heal and be renewed and restored," she says.

Leslie-Patton opened her management consultant firm 10 years ago after an extensive career that included serving as a district representative in Tuscaloosa for U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby. She has worked as an accountant for Alabama Power and auditor for Prudential. Her experience ranges from teaching as a professor at Miles College to owning a house-cleaning business. From each position, she says, she honed an array of skills and tools she brings to bear both for herself and for her clients.

"I learned how to listen without responding. If you're not responding, then you're really hearing what your client is attempting to communicate," Leslie-Patton says. "Everything starts with a story. You have to listen not just to what your client is saying, but also hear the gaps in their story, so you can ask the right questions-what is it that you want and what do you think you need to do to get there?"

## **Listening leads to action**

Customizing to suit the clients' needs, Leslie-Patton says, not only brings them to the table, she adds, but keeps them there.

"Her greatest strength is her ability to listen and understand what we actually need and put that into a workable plan," Birmingham attorney Yvonne Greene-Davis says. Leslie-Patton has worked with Greene-Davis, who primarily practices property law, for more than five years, putting in place organizational and tracking systems vital to Greene's practice.

"Other firms want to tell you how they want the job done; she understands my needs," Greene-Davis says.

That's because, the consultant says, those needs vary with the client.

"No one size fits all. They may want a Cadillac, they may want a Mercedes or they may want a Ford," she says.

Leslie-Patton says much of what she does as a consultant, besides frequent hand-holding, is centered on communication and negotiation - both of which must work in two directions to be effective.

"Good consulting is being able to have knowledge in the correct manner, at the correct time," she says. "You start talking, and you keep talking it through until you get what you need. Every interaction is an opportunity to learn something."

Another, and perhaps even more important, key to success is unfailing integrity, according to Leslie-Patton. Without it, she says, resources, knowledge, understanding and manpower are all meaningless.

"Credibility, integrity and honesty means always doing what you say you will do. If you don't complete what you have said you would do, the client will think you're lying, and it only takes one time to ruin you," she says. "Know your purpose and always be in pursuit of your purpose. You must constantly evaluate and assess - that's in everything I do."

### **Consultant-coach**

Today her firm offers a range of management consulting and coaching from project management, crisis management and human resources management to diversity management. She also specializes in organizational development, program evaluation and fiscal technical assistance.

Leslie-Patton preaches what she practices to a list of clients that includes the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, The Jefferson County Department of Health and Cooper Green Hospital.

With the assistance of some 25 other consultants across the country plus an administrative staff of nearly a dozen-who all work on an as-needed-per-project basis-Leslie Patton & Associates is able to offer an impressive list of professional services to clients that range from those based in Birmingham to Washington, D.C. to the Virgin Islands. Great Expectations Foundation Inc. in New Orleans, The Center for Black Women's Wellness in Atlanta and Pee Dee Foundation, Inc. in Florence, S.C. can be found on her client roster.

Underlying her success is Leslie-Patton's commitment to the power of imagination as evident in a favorite Bible verse: "Without vision the people shall perish." A vision, she maintains, is a "clear picture of a preferred future" that is based on the present, the past and the hindsight gained from those combined experiences.

To bear fruit, she adds, a vision is one that is "personal, active, specific and requires passion."