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CEO Perspective: Rapid Growth With a Female Touch

"I wanted to be the first woman astronaut and drive a beautiful red sports car!" As a child, Jennifer Schoenhofer's ambition was as big as her native town of Bingen, Germany was small. Today, she runs a \$20 million company that specializes in wireless solutions for clients like AT&T, Telus, Motorola, Ericsson, Sprint and Alcatel-Lucent.

Jennifer Schoenhofer founded [Axis Teknologies](#) (Axis) in 2003 as she wanted to make a difference. She was a managing director at Bell South and saw how much money the company was spending on outsourcing for expert talent on a contract basis. She thought, "I can do that better," and proceeded to launch her own company. She was determined to treat clients as true partners and provide fair prices. In fact, Axis has not raised prices for the services for eight years. Fiercely proud of being a woman and now a successful woman-owned enterprise (ranked #428 in the Inc. 500 and #15 for the industry, ranked #14 in the Women President's Organization/American Express Top 50 fastest-growing women-led companies, and was named a Fierce15 company by FierceWireless for cutting edge innovation), Jennifer believes that women manage organizations differently than men.

"We run our companies based on values of compassion, honesty, transparency, faith, trust and caring for the fellow human being. Men tend to take the personal aspect out of the equation and justify it by saying 'business is business.' We all use our intelligence, but women integrate their heart."

How has Jennifer's leadership style impacted Axis? According to her head of Sales, Axis has a more nurturing way of interacting with clients and employees. For example, many Axis employees are subcontracted out to client companies and thus have little daily contact with the home company. But each employee has a dedicated project manager back at headquarters who is charged with planning their future moves after the project is finished. Monthly face-to-face meetings, free lunches, a Culture Manager and a plethora of benefits help to cement the sense of belonging. And though Axis tries to avoid having any people working overtime hours, in the event the client company requires intensive overtime work, Axis has a unique pay structure for its employees. Like most subcontracting companies, Axis bills its employees out at a markup over what it pays employees. But if overtime is required, Axis pays the employee 100 percent of what it bills the client company for overtime (including its markup). The reasoning is that it's the employee who has "paid" for that overtime with lost leisure and time away from family, so the employee should get all the monetary benefit.

How else is Axis different? Lisa Schmidt, head of Resource Development (recruiting) and Account Management, says that Axis looks first and foremost for people who have the "right

attitude" and "fit" with the Axis culture in preference for the type of skills needed. They figure they can teach the skills, but they can't teach a "prima donna" to be collaborative and considerate. For a company that services a high-tech, cutting-edge industry that relies on highly talented technical specialists, this is a distinct approach.

Critics say that the rubber meets the road when a company must fire or lay off a talented individual. Axis is currently going through a strategic transformation from a "body shop" (supplying skilled personnel to its clients) to supplying wireless network end-to-end solutions (complete packages of products, software and talent). As with many companies going through strategic change, Axis finds that some people aren't able to keep up and adapt to the new demands. For those people, Axis actively works (often for several months) to help them find new positions outside the company that are better matched to their talents and aspirations.

Jennifer has bootstrapped her company and grown it organically by keeping a keen eye on costs while looking for innovative sources of new revenues. Unlike many women-owned businesses, but like many male-owned companies, Jennifer has high growth goals. She's aiming for \$30 million in revenues in 2012 and \$75 million by 2015. "I want to show the world you can grow a big company based on the premise that your people are the reason for your success."

Jennifer has paid a high personal price for her success. Her 27-year marriage dissolved a year after she founded her business, and her mother -- who instilled her independence and confidence -- passed away before she could see her daughter's success in business.

Although she missed the First Woman Astronaut title, Jennifer Schoenhofer is scoring many other achievements -- and that red sports car may be on the horizon.

Cross-posted from Forbes.com

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