



Female Founders: Denise Dupre' On The Five Things You Need To Thrive and Succeed as a Woman Founder

By Candice Georgiadis | Dec 26, 2022



You have much more experience than you think. Life experience is valuable and should not be discounted. A lot of skill comes from juggling your family, and work priorities, for example. Look at personal experiences and how they apply to your career. I was an athlete in high school and college, and I often think about what made good coaches and what made terrible ones. I strive every day to apply those learnings in my leadership journey.

As a part of this series, I had the pleasure of interviewing Denise Dupré, the Founder and Managing Partner of Champagne Hospitality, a luxury hotel design and development company. Denise has an interesting background, with years spent in education, hospitality, and entrepreneurship, and has learned some important lessons about how to thrive as a female founder. Her formula for running a successful business starts with trusting and empowering her employees to work proactively and think entrepreneurially – to give them the liberty to make important decisions and remain accountable for these choices. As a female entrepreneur, she supports and mentors other women in their career progression. Her focus on investing in people and building lasting relationships amid a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination is passed from company leaders to employees, and keenly felt by the guests at her hotels located in St. Barts and the Champagne region of France.

Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit more. Can you tell us a bit about your “back story”? What led you to this particular career path?

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was born into hospitality and have kindled and re-kindled my love and commitment to the industry throughout what’s become a life-long journey. Each hospitality experience prepared me for the next one, and throughout my career and its various transformations I’ve had the great fortune of getting a 360-degree view of the industry.

My experience with hospitality started with my grandparents, both of whom emigrated from Germany in the 20s, worked very hard, saved every penny, and were able to buy some land in Pennsylvania. They, along with my father in the next generation, built “The Seven Springs Mountain Resort,” a hunting and fishing inn that was among the first ski resorts in the U.S. This family enterprise was my training ground, and where I got firsthand experience working in hospitality operations from a young age.

After college at Dartmouth, I reached a point in my life where I wanted to break out and try something new, so I joined Leo Burnett Advertising in Chicago and was serendipitously selected to represent a large restaurant chain. The firm's success with that client and my close involvement reinforced for me the truth that I love hospitality.

Shortly thereafter, I enrolled in the master's program at Cornell University's School of Hotel Management and became a teaching fellow. After graduating from Cornell, I worked for a stretch at Lavenenthol and Horwath in New York at the time, one of the largest hotel consulting firms in the country.

But I was drawn back to teaching, so I made the decision to move to Boston and took a full-time position at Boston University, eventually becoming Dean of the School of Hotel Management. When I got married and began raising my own family, I sought a better work-life balance and moved into a part-time position at Harvard University teaching graduate students international hospitality management and delivering guest lectures.

In this current chapter of my career, I seized an opportunity to dive deeper into the industry and open an international hotel, Le Barthélemy in St. Barts. It was an opportunity of a lifetime – and though I miss the classroom, it has been so gratifying that I pivoted away from teaching and gave business expansion my fulltime attention. That was the birth of Champagne Hospitality – with one hotel turning into three and a vineyard business.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began leading your company?

Two words: Hurricane Irma.

We opened Le Barthélemy in St. Barts in October 2016 and had a spectacular first year. Eleven months later, on September 6, 2017, Hurricane Irma hit, destroying much of the island and our hotel.

While I've always believed in the importance of sustainability and the necessity of combatting climate change, Irma was visceral and showed the significant and real-world impact climate change is having. All connectivity to the island

was gone. The hotel's general manager called me using a satellite phone – thankfully, we had the foresight to equip the hotel with one. He had walked to the hotel, as most of the roads were closed due to fallen trees and debris, and tearfully shared that much of the hotel was destroyed. It had been hit by a 30-foot wall of water, collapsing even the hurricane shutters.

This experience led us to double down on our company-wide efforts to make sustainability and environmental consciousness central to everything we do.

But before we could put our focus on sustainability, we had to navigate the human impact – a situation where putting people first was the clear and only choice. Gratefully, all of our staff were safe and alive, but we had to make a quick decision. Though many hotels on the island were laying off their teams, we decided to keep every employee who wanted to stay. And importantly, we started to rebuild right away. That proved fortuitous as we were one of the first hotels to reopen.

I didn't have all of the answers that day. I didn't know what everyone's jobs would be in the coming year as the hotel wouldn't be open, and we would have

to rethink how everyone would spend their time. But that declaration and the power of thinking forward and having a firm support system firmly in place was one of the best leadership decisions I've ever made.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

I can't think of a funny mistake – but I can share one I will never make again.

Years ago, a conflict between two senior team members went unchecked. It was a tricky and hard situation. Because it was left unresolved, one team member quit, and the organization was negatively affected – we lost talent and missed a growth opportunity for the person that stayed, and they eventually left anyway.

Nowadays, a communication breakdown like that among staff at Champagne Hospitality gets flagged as an opportunity for coaching and development. Teams ultimately want to learn and grow, but they also need solid leadership when things break down. I believe every business leader holds responsibility for

offering an enriching environment, confronting issues as they arise so teams can thrive.

As a leader, I am not shy to step in to provide guidance, mediation and motivation – and kindness. I think kindness and being human in the face of errors goes a long way toward creating strong teams. This holds great importance in our business and we're always assessing what it really means to take care of our people and our guests.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

There are many people who've helped me along the path to where I am today, and I am eternally grateful.

I couldn't have done any of this without the support of my family. My husband has been the most extraordinary partner and is generous with his many skills.

My children have also been extremely supportive and are pleased to see their mom working and achieving.

The importance of family is fully baked into our value system at Champagne Hospitality as well. Families have needs and we think deeply about how we can meet our team where they are at and offer flexibility so they can be great employees and be part of great families. There are so many silver linings that come out of taking care of our people in this way and not creating situations where family and work have to be competing priorities. Quality of life and quality of work go hand-in-hand.

I also have deep gratitude for my team. Having grown up in this business, I've never lost touch with the challenges of a hotel's day-to-day operations – and every single person influences the guest experience and each of their contributions makes a difference. They are extremely skilled at what they do – and it's not just me who notices. We are very proud that Condé Nast has recognized the Royal Champagne as the Best Resort in France and has also named Le Barthélemy the Best Resort in the Caribbean multiple times. Both hotels have been named in the Best Resorts in the World.

Ok, thank you for that. Let's now jump to the primary focus of our interview. According to this EY report, only about 20 percent of funded companies have women founders. This reflects great historical progress, but it also shows that more work still has to be done to empower women to create companies. In your opinion and experience what is currently holding back women from founding companies?

Creating companies is not easy. There's a lot to juggle and a significant level of complexity is involved with building a business. It requires sacrifice and family support. Unfortunately, women often have to give up their entrepreneurial aspirations when they start a family. I don't believe it should be that way. Women bring so much to the table and have good ideas and vision for new businesses, products, and services. We need more positive female role models who show that it's possible.

A story that stands out for me about the power of women and our ability to lead involves a recent fundraising initiative around the 50th anniversary of co-education at Dartmouth that broke records. In this alumni-led campaign I was proud to be among the first to join the Centennial Circle – initially 100 women

raising \$100k. This evolved to a larger goal, 100 women giving one million dollars. This has become a leading national model for women's philanthropy. Women represent more than a third of the alumni body, have taken on leadership positions in their communities and at Dartmouth, and are playing a greater role in charitable giving. Together, these women made approximately \$379 million of campaign commitments and another \$61 million in bequests to support diverse and far-reaching initiatives, including endowed scholarships, professorships, coaching positions, academic programs, and capital projects. It demonstrates that women are strong contributors — and as one friend said, when we stand together, we are unstoppable.

Can you help articulate a few things that can be done as individuals, as a society, or by the government, to help overcome those obstacles?

In our work at Champagne Hospitality, we have overcome many obstacles that get in the way of greater gender equity. Here are some of them:

We seek out people's greatness and help them build the skills they may not have. We find this builds and reinforces people's confidence to reach higher and achieve their potential.

We encourage people to take chances — and we mean it. There's no penalty for pushing boundaries and improving the business. A typical question at Champagne Hospitality is "What are we going to try next?"

We make work/life balance at priority for our staff. One of our team members had family in Ukraine and took an extra-long vacation to assist them. Another got divorced and was a single mom who wanted to live closer to family. Instead of leaving the company, we helped her relocate and work remotely — and she didn't miss a beat and remains a strong member of our executive team.

We've built gender equity throughout our leadership. Our management teams are equally divided between men and women.

This might be intuitive to you as a woman founder, but I think it will be helpful to spell this out. Can you share a few reasons why more women should become founders?

I would reference the 2015 McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) report, *The Power of Parity: How Advancing Women's Equality Can Add \$12 Trillion To Global Growth*. This article focused on the economic implications of lack of parity between men and women. The study talked about gender inequality as not only a pressing moral and social issue but also as a critical economic challenge. "If women – who account for half the world's working-age population – do not achieve their full economic potential, the global economy will suffer," it reported.

Despite the progress the world has made toward making it possible for women to reach parity in the economy and society, there remains a disparity. We must encourage women to start businesses and clear more hurdles to help them. To not do so robs us of their talent. The reason more women should become founders is pretty straightforward: It's fun. Building and creating something helps women build the confidence to keep going in the face of the inevitable obstacles.

Women make great managers, as many of them know how to juggle a number of tasks at once. Women do it naturally in their daily personal lives – and are experts at prioritization.

The contributions women make at Champagne Hospitality are invaluable – and if any of them asked me if they should start their own company, I would give them my support and encouragement.

What are the “myths” that you would like to dispel about being a founder? Can you explain what you mean?

One significant myth to break down is: “Be tough and focus primarily on profitability and losses for the greatest long-term financial returns.” It’s simply untrue. Heart, empathy, caring, as well as focusing on doing the right thing are just as important to delivering financial results.

For example, my teams are looking closely at ways we can conserve energy at our properties and trying to deeply understand our impact on the planet and how our hotels can make a significant difference in our sustainability efforts. In the short term that might mean that it’s more costly, and that we have to invest more in understanding the most effective ways to accomplish our goals. But in the long-term it will pay off for the environment. and ultimately for all of us. The short-term answer is not always the best medium- and/or long-term play.

Another myth is that innovation means coming up with something completely new. Innovation really means creating something in your own way. For example, at one of the vineyards in Champagne, Leclerc Briant, we age some of our champagne by submerging it for months under the Atlantic Ocean. While there are not many who do it this way, we are not alone in this practice – the bubbles of our Cuvée Abyss, a product of experimental curiosity, is incredibly unique compared with anything else on the market.

The influence of our grapes, our winemaker and the water with its energy, movement, temperature, aromas, and pressure make our product very innovative and absolutely exquisite. This also relates to the first myth because though aging under the sea is more expensive than traditional methods – and at the onset may have seemed a little crazy, it was worth it. But we took a risk to enhance our long-term results. The quality of the champagne and the love in the marketplace has more than paid for the incremental costs.

Is everyone cut out to be a founder? In your opinion, which specific traits increase the likelihood that a person will be a successful founder and what

type of person should perhaps seek a “regular job” as an employee? Can you explain what you mean?

If you can look at your own history and see moments of entrepreneurial instinct when you have started something from nothing or found it comfortable to take a little extra risk, then you probably have entrepreneurial spirit.

To be an entrepreneur is to be a leader, to be optimistic, and to have the ability to attract a whole set of people who will follow you and believe passionately in what you’re doing together. You also need to be grounded in a way that ensures the wheels won’t come off the bus. Entrepreneurs must know when it’s okay to take risks without being reckless. They are ambitious and forward-thinking, able to lead with hope, seize opportunity and err on the side of innovation. However, they also have to strike a good balance and be grounded.

Ok super. Here is the main question of our interview. What are your “5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Started” and why? (Please share a story or example for each.)

Don't dodge conflict. In fact go right at it. Unresolved conflict does not just go away. The opposite pays dividends. Resolving conflict can unlock potential in an organization.

Stay curious. No matter how far along you progress in a career, remain curious and eager to learn new things.

Don't be afraid to hit the pause key. Pausing can help you sort out what's really important and what does and doesn't need to be decided right away. Not everything is urgent. Sometimes the pause key will allow you to make a better, more thoughtful decision.

Don't undervalue balance in your life. It's okay to take time for yourself and prioritize your family and wellness — and feel good about it. It may take some wisdom and time in the saddle to implement but thinking about balance as an important long-term strategy is critical to long term success.

You have much more experience than you think. Life experience is valuable and should not be discounted. A lot of skill comes from juggling your family, and work priorities, for example. Look at personal experiences and how they apply to your career. I was an athlete in high school and college, and I often think about what made good coaches and what made terrible ones. I strive every day to apply those learnings in my leadership journey.

How have you used your success to make the world a better place?

I believe each one of us can have an impact on making the world a better place.

Even seemingly small things can ultimately have a significant impact.

Family has always been an important focus for me. I am tapped into my family, and I've organized my life and work to be able to invest the time and attention needed to be influential in my family's success and well-being. We take pride in having raised four children who are conscientious, entrepreneurial, and aware of their responsibility to society at large. They know the importance of empathizing with others, making solid decisions, and solving problems in their own lives and work.

At Champagne Hospitality with the help of countless team members, we have had the pleasure of bringing beautiful experiences to others through our hotels and vineyards, giving them a true taste of home away from home. I'm proud that reviews of our properties reference the kind attention and personal touch of our incredible staff — often by name. It is energizing to lead these teams of individuals who work so hard, are so dedicated to their craft and who also are

conscious of ways to improve sustainability and attention to environmental concerns.

Through our philanthropic efforts, I am able to help organizations pursue ambitious efforts aimed at making positive change in the world. Some of the groups we've partnered with provide outstanding educational opportunities to those in need, promise to mitigate and reverse the effects of climate change, and work to develop cures for diseases. We've committed important resources to improving sustainability and energy efficiency at our hotels and are partnering with local government entities in St. Barts to nurture and protect the coral reefs and the local sea turtle population, an endangered and critical part of the local ecosystem.

And finally, as an educator, I am profoundly grateful to have had the opportunity to help train the next generation of hospitality professionals.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good for the greatest number of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.

I'd like to inspire people to use their businesses, entrepreneurial energy, investment dollars, and charitable giving power to be a catalyst for positive change in education, the environment, and in lifting up women leaders. Each of these is necessary to improve our planet and the lives of individuals for generations to come.

If we each leave a legacy that has a positive impact on others and the environment, we can all build something that grows and grows so we influence others to influence others. That can have an incredibly positive ripple effect.

We are very blessed that some very prominent names in business, VC funding, sports, and entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them.

I would love the opportunity to meet Sandra Day O'Connor, who served as the first female associate justice of the Supreme Court of the United States from 1981 to 2006. She was a woman ahead of her time. I appreciate her exceptional sense of humor and that she was a pragmatist in the face of a complex job and

a complex court. I also admire her decision to step down from such a powerful position to spend time with and care for her husband who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. She is a powerful inspiring woman.

Thank you for these fantastic insights. We greatly appreciate your time.