



Reach Out Aggressively: A Lesson from *The Blind Visionary*

An amazing CEO shares secrets for success.

By Doug Eadie

You and I have talked about blindness being one of people's greatest fears. But, honestly, at this point in my life if you asked me, "Do you think blindness is one of the worst things that could happen to you?" my answer would be, "If you get the skills you need, there are many worse things. Many worse things." ...Let me tell you, my life now is so much fuller than it would've been if I were still at Purdue with my eyesight. Look, how often do you get to make a tremendous difference in people's lives?

This is Virginia Jacko talking in our book, *The Blind Visionary*, which tells the true story of Virginia's amazing personal and professional journey and shares lessons that can be gleaned from Virginia's experience. Her journey began at Purdue University, where Virginia was serving as a financial executive when she lost her eyesight. Her odyssey continued at the

Don't take "no" as a final answer.

Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, where she started over as a vocational rehabilitation client and only four years later became president and CEO of the Lighthouse. One of only a handful of blind CEOs in the United States, Virginia has worked closely with her board to more than double Lighthouse revenues.

In *The Blind Visionary*, Virginia and I discuss four major lessons that nonprofit board members and executives can put to work in leading their organizations: (1) Reach out aggressively. (2) Act on opportunities. (3) Don't let fear win. (4) Keep things in perspective. This article draws on our discussion of the first lesson, focusing on two aspects of reaching out:

1. Cultivate Stakeholder Relationships

One of the most important "hats" Virginia wears as president and CEO

of the Miami Lighthouse is "Relationship-Builder-in-Chief." This job involves paying special attention to the relationships that involve the highest stakes for the Lighthouse, including major funders. She goes out of her way to stay in touch with the chief honchos at those funding organizations, because one-on-one relationships matter.

Gentle but dogged persistence is an important part of relationship building, as a recent example shows. When the Lighthouse merged the Heiken Children's Vision Program into its operation, Virginia put together an advisory board of stakeholders who would be critical to the merger's success. This board included foundation CEOs, community optometrists, former chairs of the Heiken board, and the like. She asked an internationally known optometrist to be part of her board, believing his backing would be critical. Not taking his "no" as a final answer, Virginia kept in touch, making sure he received the minutes of advisory board meetings and offering to answer any questions he might have.

You can't wait till you need them to turn stakeholders into allies.

Her perseverance paid off. Not only did he eventually join the advisory board, this optometrist made more than 5,000 prescription glasses for the Heiken program at almost no cost to the Lighthouse.

Virginia invests in future relationships even when she's not certain what the concrete payoffs will be. For example, she pitched in to help the Alliance for Aging in Miami to secure a grant, even sending a Lighthouse manager to Washington to help sell the proposal, although the Lighthouse gained no immediate return on this investment of time and energy.

"My motto?" she says. "Reach out, reach out, reach out, and then reach out some more! You can't have too many happy stakeholders and loyal friends and allies. You might not know when you'll need to work together on something. It could come up in an instant, with no warning. So turning stakeholders into allies can't wait until you need them. That can be way too late."

One of the most important keys to Virginia's success in building relationships is her authenticity. Virginia defines authenticity as consistently being her true self, no matter who she's with. "People want to

know the real person, not some mask you've put on for the occasion," she says.

Another key to her relationship-building success is her passion for the Lighthouse and its mission. She sees that passion as "kind of like a magnet" that attracts stakeholders.

2. Make Use of Technical Assistance and Advice from Mentors

Virginia has never hesitated to pay for technical assistance when it's the most cost-effective approach to developing a critical function. For instance, soon after she became president and CEO of the Lighthouse, she realized that building a productive relationship with the board of directors would be critical. She knew that such a relationship would depend on updating her board's governing role, structures, and processes. Knowing that she couldn't accomplish this updating on her own, Virginia didn't hesitate to retain an expert in nonprofit governance to provide technical assistance. In light of the stakes involved, she played a hands-on role in managing the consultant's work. The outcome—actively engaged,

satisfied board members who feel strong ownership of their governing work—has validated her decision to seek outside help.

Virginia also looks for mentors from whom she can learn by observing and listening. And she hasn't hesitated to call on Lighthouse board members for advice. She describes her board chair as a "trusted advisor and teacher."

Keys to relationship-building success: authenticity and passion for your mission.

She never worries that asking board members for help might make her seem weak. "I can't worry about trivial ego things like that," she says. "I'd much rather have board members' best thinking on an issue than try to make them think I'm always in command and never need help." ■

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Doug Eadie and Virginia Jacko, authors of *The Blind Visionary*.



More on Reaching Out

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- **Building a Rock-Solid Board-CEO Partnership** (Vol. 27, No. 3)
- **Relationship Marketing: Guaranteeing the Future** (Vol. 14, No. 5)
- **Turn Your Board Members into Strong Owners** (Vol. 28, No. 2)
- **Secrets to Finding the Perfect Consultant** (Vol. 28, No. 3)
- **The Strategic Alliance Journey: Forging Outrageously Successful Relationships** (Vol. 28, No. 3)