

Small Dog LOUD BARK

PM/PC Direct provides project management and project controls support for mid- to large-sized engineering, procurement and construction projects. Its founder, Tracy Nichols, used her unique mix of principles and experience to bring PM/PC into existence, and now she's leveraging her understanding of business process to drive it into the future.

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Photography by Wes Battoclette

When Tracy Nichols founded PM/PC Direct in 2003, she intended to create an effective, client-based project management firm. Luckily, she had just the right mix of principles and experience to carry it out. But that wasn't always the case.

"With a desire to conquer the world, and a big outlook, I left college for a clerical job at an engineering firm," says Nichols, lending customary deference to the decisions of her younger self.

Nichols quickly learned the engineering firm's cost management and planning systems, and was pleased to discover she enjoyed doing so. Gradually, she suffused her assumptions about the world with experiences within it, in the process becoming both a better employee and a better-rounded person.

Nichols worked in the engineering and construction industry for several more years. "Construction was a great experience because of the people," she says. "They took me out in the field and showed me what they were doing. That made a real difference, because it was no longer about just doing cost reports and schedules. From a management perspective, you design it, you construct it and you turn it over. Experience in construction is invaluable. Eventually, what is designed on paper needs to be realized in a finished product."

Although she was learning about engineering and construction processes, Nichols didn't have a hand in bettering them, yet. Her affinity for holistic thinking and broad, process-based solutions had no outlet. She was becoming restless.

"I am strong-willed and I have a drive to solve problems," Nichols explains with passion. "Everything can be

done better, more efficient and more thorough. Some people do their eight then hit the gate. We need those people, but I am not one of them."

PM/PC grew out of Nichols' restive ambition. Since its creation, she's built the prospering project management firm from a kitchen table aspiration into a fully realized business.

"We don't run with the big dogs, but we do touch the community," she says. "We have direct impact on people's lives. We might be small in size, but we're making loud noises."

The Process

The success of PM/PC derives from Nichols' mature and balanced personality. "I am right-brained creatively and left-brained in getting to a result," she says. "If I see a problem I enjoy the process of building the data to get to a solution."

In short, Nichols is infatuated with the process. Admittedly, this word has become ubiquitous, appearing everywhere from company offices to post-game podiums to presidential pulpits. 'Process' is a modern-day shibboleth, a cant catchword that might mean anything or everything. Yet, in Nichols' demonstrative, passionate tone, the word assumes a more definite significance.

For Nichols, processes create links between the crude data of experience and the idealized categories of the mind. Processes bridge the enigmatic, incremental expanse between problems and solutions. And for someone in Nichols' trade, processes are an indispensable tool in managing a project from inception to completion.



PM/PC Direct Founder Tracy Nichols

"Part of my natural drive is to have things complete, I need things to come full circle. I am stubborn but flexible. I listen and gather data and come up with a result," says Nichols. She attributes this natural drive to a diligent work ethic and a characteristic lack of entitlement. "If you treat people well, you work hard and you combine being thorough with being solutions-driven, all the pieces come together and you can go beyond doing an average job."

Yet, Nichols also owes her success at PM/PC to the complementarities between her work and her personality. "I don't like seeing the same things over and over again. What we do here is projects that build to an end result, like consumer products and manufacturing facilities. I like it because it is always changing."

Nichols' version of the process is therefore iterative but not invariant. The projects she manages have repetitive, general characteristics, but they contain internal differences that both galvanize Nichols' work ethic and thrill her natural drive. The results always come full circle, but somehow no two circles are the same.

Limits and Boundaries

"The hardest part of this work is balancing people and projects," Nichols says. "I have to set the rules and regulations. It is difficult because not everyone is happy all the time, but I have to do what is in the interest of the company."

PM/PC's workload is highly diverse and its workplace culture is dynamic. Still, it is a business like any other, and Nichols understands that, like any business, it is imperative that there are controls in place.

"Creating boundaries and establishing what is important to you are integral core values for setting and attaining goals," says Nichols.

On a personal level she identifies core values from which she vows never to waver. Her values touch on personal responsibility, accountability, honesty and empathy. They are not all proscriptive, but when they are, Nichols adheres to them with pious fidelity. "Core values are very important. If you waver from your core values, it modifies who you are."

PM/PC promotes Nichols' legalistic approach to personal values throughout the entire company; just as she follows them to the letter, so too does the company adhere to its own limits and boundaries. The result is a structurally stable organization. Like Nichols, it flexes and sways when new challenges arise but it never breaks from its regular orbit.

"What we have built here in terms of personnel and processes is reliable," says Nichols. "We stand for having good, solid core values."

Building Credentials

One of the fundamentals for developing core values, Nichols emphasizes, is the importance of building your credentials; if only to guard against the turbulence inherent in business.

"Prepare yourself, learn all you can, build your credentials, build the boundaries of who you are as a person," says Nichols. "Some people become too complacent where they are, and they're not prepared when a better opportunity comes along. I encourage everyone to cross train; do two or three things well."

Nichols recounts stories of friends who lost their jobs in the recession, and couldn't get another job because they were not prepared. She doesn't want the same thing to happen to her current staff, so Nichols encourages them to keep learning.

"It's not telling them what to do, rather, showing them what they're worth. Whatever is good for them, whatever is good for their career, they need to continue to build that. I encourage them to listen to other leaders and learn from them, then apply what they've learned." Nichols explains. "They too can become leaders and teach."

Nichols also emphasizes the value of opening doors for those who deserve an opportunity. "In my career, many people opened doors for me. I want to repay that by opening doors for others. I believe in a hand up not a hand out. So, it's their responsibility to walk through the open door, and make good use of the opportunity."

Philanthropic Arm

Nichols never set out to create a business that would record enormous profits and make a dent in the universe just to satisfy her vanity. Her goals, like her moral philosophy, have always been far more restrained.

"I didn't set out to create a huge business, I set out to make things better," she says.

PM/PC has grown impressively throughout its decade-long existence, but not because Nichols' vision became turgid or fanciful. Rather, her vision remained consistent, and businesses began to recognize the tremendous advantage of working with PM/PC's well-trained, unaffected staff.

The distinction is small, but for Nichols it is not without difference. Her characteristic intellectual modesty precludes her from taking full credit for the firm she made prosperous. PM/PC's success is simply a happy accident of something Nichols would have created in any case.

"It's not mine to keep," she says of PM/PC. "I say that over and over and I don't think people understand. I am a pretty simple person, and don't need more than what I already have. I believe PM/PC was a gift, given to me by a higher power. But it's not for me, it's for 'things' bigger than me. It's not mine to keep."



Tracy Nichols and PM/PC partner with Hug the World to advocate for multiple non-profits

Nichols' natural drive and nurtured ambition wouldn't mean anything if she couldn't channel them into this numinous energy. Her insistence that "it's not mine to keep" is not a divestment of responsibility but rather a commitment to a higher purpose. This commitment allows her to focus the majority of her energy on her work at PM/PC. What energy she doesn't spend there she devotes to helping others through charity.

Giving Back Through Hug the World

Hug the World Foundation is Nichols' and PM/PC's charitable arm. "It is not designed for one cause, but for multiple causes where people need an advocate," Nichols explains. The foundation helps raise funds for organizations such as A Kid Again, the Spina Bifida Coalition and Making Strides against Breast Cancer.

"We are cheerleaders for these causes," she says. "We participate in charitable events, and do whatever they need us to do. Sometimes we organize our own event, like the annual Night of Thunder motorcycle ride for Spina Bifida. There wasn't one thing we wanted to support.

We wanted to help so many organizations, and with Hug the World we can participate in whatever we want."

Hug the World is small enough to be flexible. Nichols can prioritize individual, discrete points of contact within the community over sweeping and highly publicized campaigns. She can reach the people that are actually affected by diseases and misfortune. With Hug the World, she can have a tangible impact and see the actual results of her labors.

The case is not altogether different with PM/PC. "We have the mentality that we need to be in the community making an impact," says Nichols, whose unique marriage of ideals and experience and whose value-based philosophy set PM/PC up for success.

"We are not a large company. We're the little dog," Nichols says. "But we're making loud noises."

For more information, call 513.492.9250 or visit www.pmpcdirect.com.