

DARING WOMEN PROFILES

## Seattle Entrepreneur LeeAnn Baker Steding's Story Shows That Bouncing Back Is a Path to Success

The owner of the nearly 17-year-old LeeAnn Baker Interiors found the confidence to overcome a business failure early on in her career

BY: BILL CONROY



Image Credit: Courtesy of LeeAnn Baker

LeeAnn Baker Steding, the founder of LeeAnn Baker Interiors Ltd., in Seattle learned a big lesson of entrepreneurship early on: Never give up. Her first business venture, a glossy New York magazine targeting professional decorators, succumbed to the vagaries of the publishing industry and “breathed its last” in 2001, after three years of publishing — as [Crain's New York Business](#) described it at the time.

Baker Steding, who had graduated from the New York School of Interior Design only five years earlier, didn't play the victim, however, and give up. She put all of her experience and lessons learned into starting a new venture, LeeAnn Baker Interiors Ltd. —a full-service interior design studio in Seattle launched in 2003 that is still serving clients in the Pacific Northwest nearly 17 years later.

Her design focus is on “elegance, understated and refined homes that capture the unique personality and lifestyle demands of each client,” according to her [company's website](#). Baker Steding, who earned an undergraduate degree in art history from the University of Washington, lives in the Seattle area with her husband and two children.

What are the most important characteristics of a good leader and what leadership traits are overrated? To me, a true leader is someone who has their eye on the big vision, knows how the small factors in — but isn't going to be distracted by that. It's a lesson I've learned from being an interior designer, where I'll set the overarching vision for a project and see all the details (the thousands upon thousands of them) that will be needed to bring the vision to fruition, but then I'll step back and let others bring their skills and talents to making it happen.

Something that I think ties right into that is another important characteristic of a good leader — someone who knows there are other people out there who are more skilled than they are (in a particular area) and has no ego about going out and hiring them. And from there, that (same good) leader will help their individual team members apply their skills for the greater good of the company.

Ultimately, a good leader has to pay attention so she can understand who her team members are at their human core, and then she has to know how to meet them there. Perhaps that's called, empathy? And I think it's so much

more important than the notion of leadership that I think is overrated, which is the (mistaken) notion that the leader has to be the smartest person in the room. True leaders look outside and find the smartest who need to be in their room to make their business succeed.

As a woman, what is the most significant barrier to becoming a leader? When I started working in this industry, I often found myself as the only woman in construction meetings, surrounded by architects, contractors and subcontractors that were all male. Being the only woman, and often the youngest in the room, it took a while for me to find my voice and be assertive in my role as a designer.

With age and experience, I have learned to have confidence in myself that I deserve a seat at the table. That I have experience and value to add to the conversation.

How can women achieve more prominent roles in their organizations? Confidence is a key driver in achieving more prominence in organizations, and I believe it comes from having clarity around what your talents are. With that clarity, what comes into focus is the value you bring to your organization, and seeing your value and believing in your value is fundamental to getting ahead in any business culture.

What key lessons did you learn from a woman who has inspired, mentored or sponsored you? I actually have surrounded myself with a team of mentors, people who propel me to know my core strengths and acknowledge my own talent. I won't speak for all women, but something I have struggled with in myself is something I see in other women, too, and that is the need to apologize for or diminish our achievements. I use humor to do that, but my women mentors have pointed it out to me, and I'm learning to not do that anymore and instead to graciously own my accomplishments.

What advice do you have for the next generation of female leaders? Find your passion, find what fuels your soul and then go for it. I absolutely believe that if something does fuel our souls, then we are going to find a way to make a living doing it. So, ignore what the naysayers say (even if they're the ones that live in your own brain) because if you believe you can, others will soon too.

How important is networking and how do you expand your contacts? While I've always been dedicated to my craft of interior design and equally dedicated to my clients, networking is what really propelled my career. But networking only works when you instill confidence in those you want to refer you that you will follow through with any leads they send your way. Most all of my client referrals can be traced back to one friend who championed me early on and many referrals took off from there.

Today I attend industry events and follow up regularly with new contacts because I believe that I need to keep planting seeds — because I never know which ones will eventually blossom.

What would you do differently in your career? I wish I had learned earlier in my career that I didn't have to do everything myself. And flowing right from there comes an understanding I've arrived at over the years where I see that it's good to lean on others for advice and counsel. With the support of business and communications coaches, today I reap the great rewards of an expanded team offering counsel to my business.

And finally, where once upon a time I may have seen people in my industry as competitors, today I see them as peers. I'm fully aware of the value of their advice and truly grateful for their help in elevating me — and my whole team.

Where will we find you on a Saturday afternoon? On the sidelines rooting for my kids.

What would be the title of your autobiography? "Views & Hues: Living Life by Design."