

DARE Q & A with: Lyn McDermid



Margaret E. “Lyn” McDermid became chief information officer for the Federal Reserve System in 2012 after she retired as senior vice president and chief information officer of Dominion Resources, a \$15 billion power and energy company headquartered in Richmond, Virginia.

At Dominion, she led an organization of 1,200 people, overseeing all IT activities for the company. Before joining Dominion, Lyn worked for Virginia Power, where she rose to the level of CIO in 1998. During the course of her career, Lyn was named to Computerworld’s roll of “Premier 100 IT Leaders for 2004” and received, in 2008, the Executive

Women in Business Achievement Award.

Q: What is the most challenging thing you have ever had to do?

A: I volunteered to be the first woman in the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company Apprentice Program in 1971. Entering this all-male institution designed to train “strong young men” to become master craftsmen and future leaders of the company was certainly risky, but enrolling in the program provided me with an extraordinary opportunity to learn. Taking risks to gain knowledge would become a common thread throughout my career. Back in 1971, I was focused on furthering my education in a way that would allow me to support my family and eventually go on to college.

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Q: Where did you get the courage and confidence to do it?

A: The courage and confidence came from one of my internal voices, which always asks me, “What do I have to lose?”

I am an army brat, who moved twelve times before graduating from high school. Every year, as my brothers and I entered yet another new school, we grew more resilient. The apprentice program was a daunting situation, I admit, but, thank goodness, I didn’t know any better than to adapt and move forward.

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Q: What is the biggest mistake you have ever made? What did you learn and how did you recover?

A: The biggest mistake I ever made was also the decision that has given me the most joy in my life. I got married the summer I graduated from high school and had two children right away. I was not ready for marriage—certainly not prepared for the responsibility—but I learned to be self-sufficient, to conquer the infamous work/life balance at an early age, and to take life and career one step at a time. I learned that doing the best job in the job you have will open doors to jobs and opportunities you never realized were even there.

Q: If you had a young woman you cared deeply about entering the workforce today, what single piece of advice would you have for her?

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A: My advice would come straight from my earliest job experience: Do the best job in the job you have. I started out as a file clerk, but I was the best darn file clerk I could be, and soon my work ethic paid off. I moved up to secretary. It was my boss, an executive in the shipyard, who suggested I apply for the Apprentice School. From there, a job turned into a career.

Another word of advice to a young woman entering the work force: Take advantage of every opportunity to demonstrate your skills and abilities. I moved from middle management to senior management because I jumped into a huge, risky project that needed help. I

demonstrated leadership while focusing on the success of the project and everyone associated with the project. My strategy was to stay in the background and make the project leader look good. It worked. My contribution was recognized, and I was promoted to an executive position soon after the project.

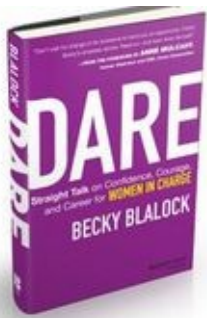
Q: What advice do you have for building self-confidence?

A: Building self-confidence comes with experience—both good and bad experience. It also comes from always being your authentic self. In my opinion, the greatest threat to a woman is when she tries to be someone other than herself. Spending time to assess your value system, aligning career and life choices to those values, and living every day in a way that, when you go home and look in the mirror, you can say “I was me today,” are the most important steps to building self-confidence. They also eliminate the risk of having to decide who you are in any given circumstance.

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Q: What is your greatest fear today?

A: My biggest fear is for my health and for the health of those I love. I am a breast cancer survivor. I also cared for my mom and dad as each succumbed to cancer. Hearing those words, "It's cancer," is life-changing. I realize that there are many things I cannot control, but I do everything I can to promote a healthy lifestyle, both physically and mentally, and to get joy out of each day. As a woman, I do have it all: a great career, a loving and supportive family, and women friends who share celebrations and sadness with one another regularly.



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