

Need to Negotiate? Here's the Best Way to Advocate for Yourself for Maximum Impact.



Cathryn Lavery started two businesses, one of which was funded successfully on Kickstarter.

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A Note From The Editor

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In this series, Open Every Door, Entrepreneur staff writer Nina Zipkin shares her conversations with leaders about

understanding what you have to offer, navigating the obstacles that will block your path, identifying opportunity and creating it for yourself and for others.

Fueled by burnout, Cathryn Lavery started a side hustle with less than \$500 and in two years sold more than \$600,000 of products. Now she's in the business of helping people achieve their goals.

In 2011, Lavery moved to the United States from her native Ireland to pursue a career in architecture after six years of undergraduate and graduate study. As much as she was passionate about the industry, she soon found herself feeling exhausted by long hours and pay that didn't reflect what she was capable of.

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As a way to channel her creativity into something that felt more restorative, in 2012 she started a design firm called Calm the Ham. Lavery's beautiful prints caught on and gained a following, and the next year, she decided to leave architecture behind to dedicate herself to her business full time.

In 2015, while she was still operating Calm the Ham, Lavery started another business, BestSelf Co., to help other entrepreneurs find their way. The company, which was launched on Kickstarter and raised more than \$322,000, makes products including calendars and journals and offers courses that she hopes will allow her customers hone their creativity and turn their ideas into a reality.

Lavery shared her insights about the importance of slow and steady improvement over time and what you need to remember when you go to the negotiation table.

Can you tell me about a time you needed to create opportunity

for yourself or others?

When I first moved over here from Ireland, I had a job lined up at an architecture company. A week before I was supposed to start, they told me they that didn't have enough work. [So they were going to put off my start date] for six weeks. But of course when I moved here I expected to get paid in two weeks. I had to figure out how to make money before I started the job. So I started using my design skills, logos and websites, basically anything I could to get paid.

What was at stake for you? Did this experience change how you think about leadership?

I was stubborn. I didn't want to call my parents and say, "Oh, this thing I told you I was coming out here for didn't work out." I didn't even tell them actually until a while later. I just learned that you have to count on yourself and create your own opportunities. As far as a job goes, a lot of people think that getting a traditional job is a safe way to go, but you can be let go or get fired [at any time]. Whereas if you start a business, and you [grow your own customer base] there's not one single point of failure.

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What personal traits or strategies do you rely on to create opportunity for yourself and others?

I always want to learn and better myself. When we're at school, we're told we should learn and then you get out of college and there's nobody there. Often I feel people don't really know that they love learning because nobody is forcing them to do it anymore. But I think if you're constantly learning and trying to better your skills, being a jack of all trades [in this economy] is going to get you a lot of different opportunities that might not have happened before.

My design experience and learning about entrepreneurship and business has helped me a lot. I didn't go to business school, I didn't get an MBA. I literally had no business classes prior [to starting my company]. I just learned a lot and read a ton of books. Just being open to learning every day and trying to make opportunities for yourself to improve [will help you go far].

It's that marginal 1 percent improvement. If you improve 1 percent a day, you'll be three times better in a year. You want to get that quick win, the instant gratification, whereas the things that will actually help you move forward are the things that compound on each other [over time].

**When you experience a setback, what do you do to keep going?
How do you get unstuck?**

I try to take some time off and do some thinking. I used to just try to push through it harder but I feel like I've learned that doesn't really work. I've gotten burned out from trying to just force it to be better. And now I stop, reflect on what actually happened and then see if there's like a way around it. Exercise works. If I do some sort of exercise then my head clears up. Pausing and doing something physical that moves your body, as easy as going for a walk is a really underrated thing you can do to get unstuck.

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People who want to advocate for themselves don't know always know how. What are actionable steps they can take to make themselves heard? What steps do you take?

If you can advocate for yourself while telling the other person what's in it for them, [that will make an impact]. If it's a promotion, [think about] what have you been doing and what do you want to do extra that will get you to that point. So really selling it on what does success look like for them,

if you got this promotion. Or if you're fundraising – I've raised money on Kickstarter and it's not because people want to support me. It's really selling them on what the idea is. What is the product going to do for their life? So I think it's finding out what the other person wants and then advocating for to yourself by telling them why it's going to work out well for them.

Has there been a counterintuitive or surprising way you've opened doors for yourself?

I'm an introverted person generally. I do like connecting with people, but I need my time alone. What I find is I like meeting people, but my way in is finding a way to help them with something. We got a huge blog post opportunity for our Kickstarter, because I started a relationship with this person over email [when I helped them with a design issue]. Then we ended up getting into a conversation. It's things like that. So it's really just helping people without asking for anything back. What can you do that's small? Make the most of these little opportunities [and that reciprocity will come back when you need help with something].

Was there a blindspot that you had about leadership and opportunity you worked to change within yourself?

I didn't like [the idea of being a] manager because I thought it was so boring. Our team has grown from myself and my co-founder to now 16 people. Now I see leadership is asking yourself: How do you motivate each person in their own way? Every time we hire someone we'll find what their love language is. If they did a good job on something, how do I motivate them and inspire them and be thankful in a way that they will actually appreciate? So now I see it more as individual leadership over the team instead of one-size-fits-all, which is what my perception was before.

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