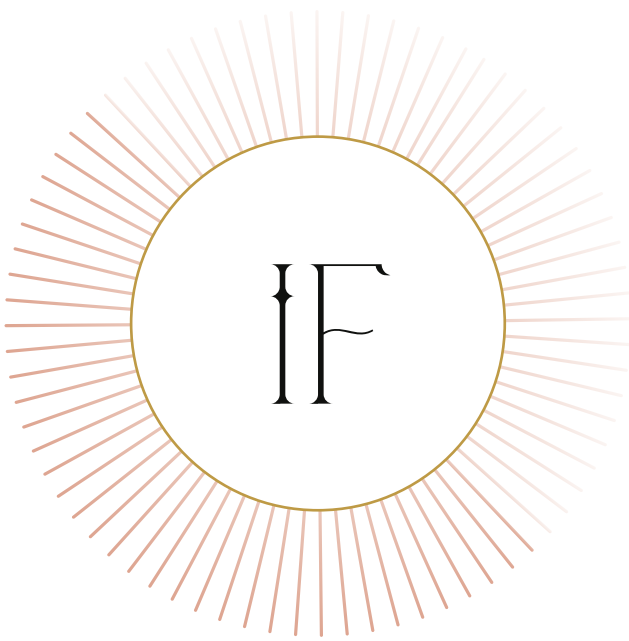


CHOOSING COURAGE

FOCUS AND FLEXIBILITY—SERIAL ENTREPRENEUR
DEE ROBINSON'S GUIDE TO A FULFILLING LIFE

PHOTOS BY ANDREW VAN TILBORGH





YOU HAVE EVER FLOWN FROM BOSTON, Chicago or Washington, D.C., chances are you have Dee Robinson to thank for making your journey a little more enjoyable. That airport Hudson News where you bought a magazine? The Ben & Jerry's or Potbelly's where you treated yourself? She owns and operates them.

Though her name isn't up there in lights, as founder and CEO of Robinson Hill, behind the scenes Robinson oversees a multifaceted concessions management company specializing in food and retail services at airports—among them O'Hare, Midway and Ronald Reagan National—and other tourist markets. She sums up her gifting this way: "I believe I see niches and then I see opportunities."

Having found success in different markets that require different expertise, Robinson is a sought-after leadership speaker and board member for her varied experience and insights. She has learned that good business vision twins an eye for the big picture, the opportunity, with an eye for the important small details. Both are needed to get ahead, she believes.

Take the airport market as an example. A concourse location may seem like a small footprint, but business volume is five to 10 times greater than retail on a regular street, she says: "I'm all about the metrics and measurements, and thinking how we're going to drive a business."

The serial entrepreneur's formula for success: "Looking at what's going to add value and maximize profitability. When you bring a national brand or even a really popular local brand, that's

going to guarantee customers, elevate offerings and drive sales. And then, you have also got to go about finding some of the best people [to employ]."

'Prepared to pivot'

After almost three decades in the concessions world, Robinson is now both well established and well regarded, but some thought she was unwise when she first chose to leave the security of the corporate world to go out on her own.

With an economics degree from the University of Pennsylvania and an MBA from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, Robinson began her career with spells in finance, marketing and branding (Northern Trust, Johnson & Johnson, Leo Burnett Co.).

"A lot of people think, 'Well, you took a big risk.' I just realized that it was more of a risk for me to stay than to leave," she explains. "I also recognized I did not want anyone to have that kind of control over my future. We've seen many people in corporate America rely on a corporate job. That's fine, but then when that rug is pulled from under your feet, you have to be prepared to pivot."

Having worked 30 days straight at one of her corporate positions, she decided to take a closer look at what she was actually earning in an hourly rate. "It was an important moment in my life to understand that I might as well go work for McDonald's or something and not have the health and stress concerns that I had,"



she recalls. “And so I said it was just time for me to leave... I did not want to turn over my life to someone else who may not value me or the work that I was contributing. Plus, there were not many who looked like me in senior management roles, that alone inferred what and who they valued.”

Robinson credits her mom for instilling in her the drive that has brought her to where she is—indeed Robinson Hill is named in part after her mother, Helen Hill. In her, Robinson saw “a woman who worked hard—multiple jobs, doing various things, those little entrepreneurial side businesses.” She didn’t think of herself as an entrepreneur, however: “It was called, I’m taking care of my family.”

If Robinson had to boil her business wisdom down to two things, they would be faith and flexibility. “I say I’m a faithful entrepreneur,” she says. “I built a company on faith. When things got hard it was faith that God never gave me more than I could handle and I was going to figure it out.”

Exercising that faith she speaks of involves having a little bit of grit. She recalls her mom’s mantra: “No one ever said it would be easy.” That piece of wisdom has been formative in Robinson’s

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becoming the serial entrepreneur she is today, she says. “Some of us give up too fast. Some of us think it’s supposed to be easy... and then we let ourselves off the hook. But when you embrace that concept, so when it gets hard—because it will—if you’re determined enough to get this, if this is your dream, you’re going to figure it out and you’re going to stay with it.”

Robinson is speaking from experience: she has had to push through her own setbacks. When she first learned about a concession opportunity at Midway Airport, she had no experience in the space. However, she hired the best help she could find to develop her RFP (request for proposal) and presented what she believed was a great opportunity—only to be turned down.

“I always like telling people that no does not [necessarily]



mean no,” she says. “It might mean maybe. And, yes, I had to learn a lot of things while on my journey. In fact, I talk about success in failure: I was glad that I did not get that first airport concession because it forced me to learn how to navigate doing business in Chicago.”

‘Get up and bat’

If faith means believing there is going to be a way through, it also requires being open to that coming via an unexpected route—hence the need to be willing to pivot as she did during COVID-19. “Remember, I’m in the airport space; we shuttered every single business,” she notes.

“Don’t be afraid to change who you are, what you do,” she says, leading into her second key ingredient for success—flexibility. “I had to do that from the very beginning. They are not all going to be home runs, but you just gotta get up there and bat. And right now, there’s just a huge amount of opportunities out there.”

Robinson did her own pivoting during the coronavirus pandemic, when most air travel was halted and her airport locations were closed. She didn’t just sit things out: in addition to pursuing a new business venture, she also wrote two books (one a family cookbook), and launched a campaign encouraging people to donate unused food items to those in need.

As a successful Black female entrepreneur, she has faced some challenges and hurdles. She resonates with Ursula Burns, the former CEO of Xerox, the first Black woman to head a Fortune 500 company, who spoke of people not knowing she was there.

“I think what she was saying there is that, one, you do have to speak up, we as women of color in particular. We walk in the room and they’re assuming that we aren’t there deservingly. But they forget one thing, that we have worked really, really hard to be in that room, so we should be considered.

“But the other part of that is, if they want to undervalue us... don’t take that personally. Don’t see it as a negative: use it, leverage it. If somebody wants to underestimate who you are, that’s not your problem, that’s theirs. Your job is to show up.”

Doing so comes with a responsibility, she adds: “We carry the weight of what we do and how we do it when we walk anywhere. And we have just got to own that. It’s not a negative... we have an opportunity to show up in really great ways and then make sure that we’re also bringing others, because I never want to be the only one in a room. Oftentimes I was. I want to see multiple folks with us; our job is to pull them forward with us.”

There is still a lot of work to be done in regard to diversity, equity and inclusion, however. “We keep talking about DE&I,” she observes. “That’s all we’re doing. And if you held them accountable and you made them maybe tie that to their compensation, I bet you they’d figure out a way to make sure that there were more people of color in management roles. They are moving more toward diversity in the

boardroom. We still have a lot of work when it comes to the C-suite.”

‘Hiring the family’

In addition to leading Robinson Hill’s expansion, Robinson has also made the time to serve on a number of business, nonprofit and other boards (including Wintrust Bank, Accel Entertainment and the Illinois Gaming Board), bringing her entrepreneurial perspective to the table. “I love looking at challenges and opportunities and advising on those matters, whether you’re trying to drive growth, whether you’re dealing with, you know, new products or growing into new markets.”

She is a trustee of the PGA of America’s charitable foundation and was recently named chair of PGA Works, established to foster greater diversity in the sport. She is enthusiastic about her contribution there.

MY WAYMAKER: DEE ROBINSON

My mom was indeed my waymaker. I would be so frustrated with her because I would go to her for help or advice and she would say, “You will figure it out. You will figure it out.” Many times we want someone to hand us the answer on a silver plate. My mom didn’t do that; I think it’s because she understood how hard she had it, but little did I know she was teaching me how to be resourceful.

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“I do that work because something is important here,” says Robinson. “We want to make sure that we gain access to anything... anyone who wants to do something, I want them to go out there and realize their dreams.” Football, baseball, basketball (she played in school) and even soccer are more accessible and affordable sports than golf, which “a lot of people can’t play. And I want anybody that wants to do anything in this life to be able to do it.”

She sees her PGA role as an opportunity to make things easier for others. “I love the idea of us being able to shorten the runway,” she says. “I don’t want everyone to have to go through what I had to go through.” She speaks of the joy she gets from “being able to make sure that women and people of color have what they need, if they want to play or be in the business of golf.”

Robinson’s charitable interests can be traced back to her mother, who didn’t just instill a work ethic in her daughter; she also passed along a commitment to helping others. “We all have an opportunity to contribute in some small way and I think that’s what God expects of us,” Robinson says.

“I oftentimes will say, ‘When you see a kid, see yourself in that kid and know what he or she is

feeling.’ And then, in that moment, that’s when you know you have an opportunity to make a difference... Even when hiring people, we didn’t hire one; we were hiring the family. Because think about it, when you create a job, we are actually changing somebody’s life and their family’s life.”

It’s all about the universal law of how we are interconnected as “us,” she says. “When we understand that, as we give, then the universe gives back to us, and then we live a life of integrity, that’s powerful. You have to really think about what universe have you created around you?”

‘Manage the chatter’

Robinson has a word of caution for young people setting out on a career path: consider how the choices you make today could impact the choices you get to make in the future.

“Forget your balance sheet, you must manage your reputation,” she says. “That’s the asset that truly matters on this journey, that we are known to be good operators. I’m amazed how many people can’t do the things I do: I’m in regulated industries, I get background checks all the time... I couldn’t be here if there was something that I did in my background, back in my younger days, that would literally prevent

me from exploring so many opportunities.

“So, for those that are, particularly, young, start thinking about the choices you make.”

In addition to being aware of what other people might think about them, she encourages young people to consider what they think about themselves. “We must manage the chatter in our heads, this fear of what could go wrong,” she says. She sees a lot of young people held back by fear, thinking they are not enough. “Well, they are. But if you don’t believe you can, you won’t.” Courage is your choice, she says (that’s also the title of the latest book she has been working on)—it’s a matter of stepping outside of your comfort zone. “That’s where the growth comes. But if we stay too close and we’re unwilling to try new things, or even fail, then we’re going to get stuck, and we’re not going to live that life of joy, of fulfillment and of purpose.”

She calls it “the courage to hear”—listening to those voices urging you on. “That’s God trying to talk to you,” she says. “So, you’ve got to find that time, that quiet space. Most of the ideas I’ve had over time were when I’ve taken that time to listen.” ☺

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From an interview with Louis Carr