



STRATEGY

# TALES FROM THE FRONT LINES OF ENTERPRISE

What does it take to be a successful entrepreneur these days? Just ask Paula Morand, Roxanne Fairweather and Nancy Mathis. They come from wildly different backgrounds, but they're united in their message: *never give up and love what you do*

By Alec Bruce

**"Through experience with failure, I have learned that the best way to rebound is to find what is awesome for you, and to rely on that and start forging ahead."**

**Paula Morand, founder, Paula Morand Enterprises**



## MENTORING THE MENTOR

Paula Morand isn't altogether sure, but she suspects that somewhere along the road to expanding her business into the rough-and-tumble world of information technology, she contracted a bad case of mentor fatigue. "I don't even know if that's a real thing," laughs the author, radio broadcaster, motivational speaker, success coach, and (almost) IT entrepreneur.

"One thing I've learned over the past seven years is that when you're learning new things and you are starting, maybe, to grapple with your own confidence, you grab onto mentors as you need them. And everybody has an idea of what you should do. I forgot that the most important ideas actually come from me."

It's an odd admission for someone who is, for all intents and purposes, a mentor in her own right. The company she owns, and which bears her name, Paula Morand Enterprises — with offices in Moncton, N.B. and London, Ont., employing two full-time staff and 14 contractors — specializes in helping private organizations, institutions, governments, and individuals improve the way they measure success. As a "globally certified speaking professional" [yes, that, too, is a real thing], the themes on which she lectures include: Unleashed for Impact; Leading Change, Growth and Possibility; Communicate, Collaborate & Connect; Bold Courage or How Owning Your Awesome Changes Everything; and The Brand Called You.

For this and other work in the field of inspiring people to exceed their own expectations, Morand has garnered a bevy of honours over the past 23 years. She's been nominated for the Peter Legge Philanthropic Award; the PROFIT/Chatelaine Top 100 Women Award; the RBC Canadian Woman Entrepreneur for Innovation Award; and the Ernst and Young Woman of the Year Award. She has received the Canadian Committed Entrepreneur of the Year Award, and the Phenomenal Woman Award. She has been recognized as one of Canada's Top 10 Mentor Rock Stars, and ranked 25th among the Top 100 Leadership Experts on Twitter.

Not surprisingly, a socially progressive, even charitable, theme runs through Morand's commanding career. For example, her work as a career specialist with the Government of New Brunswick's Youth at



Risk program has helped young mothers and marginalized men and women get back on their feet.

"Tailoring economic development to need is a priority," she says. "With New Brunswick, it's been about assisting individuals and marginalized communities develop better career opportunities. We have supported single moms in their workplaces as well as newcomers to Canada. We have worked with school boards and had hundreds of stakeholders involved. Because of that effort to get people back to work, we were able to help impact the economy of the province, producing \$30-million in savings over a 12-year period."

There's more. Morand has worked with the Government of Ontario to craft strategies using entrepreneurship as a quality-of-life booster to help people with serious illnesses. She threw herself into fundraising following the devastating earthquake in Haiti in 2010, generating donations totaling \$60,000 in 30 days through her Mission Possible campaign. She has raised substantial amounts of money and investment to bring clean water and bathrooms to an orphanage in the central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan; there, she also trained 350 women in skills development and entrepreneurial thinking at a time when the unemployment rate was 84 per cent.

For these reasons of evident success, perhaps, Morand decided, in 2009, to move out of her wheelhouse and embrace the burgeoning world of information technology. "I took the methodology that I had been using for 18 years and tried to digitize it as a technology tool," she says. "Essentially, it was to be a tool to do what I had always been doing."

At the time, she described her new ConquerPro platform this way: "[It] is the standard by which organizations measure employment engagement in a meaningful and tangible way. Creating insight through data is one of the fastest ways organizations can develop a competitive edge by understanding their culture,

processes and bottom line impact — all from their investment in developing their people."

As she might say today, it all looked good on paper. The global marketplace for such software seemed immense. Some research pegged the cost of "employee disengagement" (measured by absenteeism and low productivity) somewhere in the neighbourhood of \$900 billion a year.

The problem was, she wasn't the only player noticing the trend. "We just couldn't raise enough money to keep going as fast as our larger competitors," she says. "So, we had to put the technology to bed. You can only leave it so long before you have to put it to bed."

Not before, apparently, anyone and everyone with an opinion (i.e., mentors) happily proffered their advice — an irony that does not escape career-counselor-extraordinaire Morand's attention.

"So, there I was, 20 years into this business, and I'm developing mentor fatigue," she smiles.

"But here's the thing: Success now comes to me in the form of wisdom. Wisdom is gold. Failure never feels good. When you are in the midst of it, boy it hurts. It hurts bad and you don't want to let people down. But you keep working and you keep doing your best. The more you gain knowledge, the more opportunity will come to you in the future. Through experience with failure, I have learned that the best way to rebound is to find what is awesome for you, and to rely on that and start forging ahead."

For Morand, business is still good. She puts in long hours and continues to travel extensively. "I've spoken in 16 countries and coached in 26," she says. "I always operate at a very high level of energy. I always have three or four ventures on the go. I still have my service-based company. That has never changed. The interesting thing about trying to build something new is about going through the hard work to find that I am very strongly a speaker. Now, when I am working with people, I always say, I'm not the only voice in the room. I may only be a guide to help you get through."

Which might simply be another way of saying: mentor heal thyself.

## RIDDLING A SOLUTION

Roxanne Fairweather likes to joke that she is a work in progress. If that's true, then her progress has been truly convincing over the past seven years. With her business partner David Grebenc, she has transformed a small, one-client eLearning company (which they purchased from Bell Aliant in 2009) into a multinational, award-winning knowledge-management enterprise — Saint John, N.B.-based Innovatia Inc. — employing more than 600 professionals.

How? That, too, has been a work in progress. The usual tropes apply. "We have a core of people, a team and they are brought into the vision," says the entrepreneur who holds a bachelor's degree and who was once Innovatia's chief operating officer when it was under the phone company's umbrella. "We talk about turning information into knowledge that really produces client business results. So, we make our clients' business better by using information more effectively."

The bottom line, she adds, is that "the core of what we do is go in and practice knowledge management. We look at this from the client's point of view and also the user's point of view and then we architect proprietary content."

Uh... "architect content"? Is that anything like riddling a solution, in the sense that just about everything in her line of work involves clients who don't always or fully understand what Innovatia has to offer?

Fairweather is as ebullient as she is declarative. "Look," she insists, "we have Fortune 500 clients who rave about our products and services. . . We kick the customer's problem, and we create things from that problem."

Spoken like a true entrepreneur. Specifically, and in the simplest terms possible, Innovatia is a classic knowledge-management company that develops and deploys



software for large organizations in the information, communications and energy sectors around the world. Says Fairweather: "We deliver management services in four primary areas: information architecture consulting, documentation, learning solutions, and technical support. These solutions span the entire solution set from custom design and professional services engagements, through to long-standing business process outsourcing models. . . There are always obstacles, including the ones we create for ourselves. It's about building, improving, growing."

In this, innovation is the iron bar of the company's operating culture. Says Fairweather: "How do you innovate internally for productivity and how do you innovate around your client's problems and create new products and services? From the very early days, we have been in the development cycle to produce software as well as methodologies to solve customer problems. Currently, we are also investing heavily in a systematic approach to execution through lean sigma six tool sets."

At the outset, Innovatia was involved in broadband development and was one of the first purveyors of IPTV (Internet Protocol Television) for personal computers. As it evolved along with the marketplace, it focused more heavily on services, but as, Fairweather notes, always with a development shop that plucked creative ideas from its sales and operating units to develop solutions to its internal challenges as well as, of course, its customers' needs.

For example, she says, "Innovation and development of software is ingrained in a product that was developed to solve an internal problem. A web-based ProcedureFlow was created, which took our level-one contact centre training time from eight weeks to two; our customer calls from 20 minutes to seven; and our ramp to proficiency from one year down to two months. This product has been commercialized and spun out into a company called Gemba Software Solutions. This is one instance of understanding your internal requirement to serve your client."

If overcoming obstacles and solving problems comprise Fairweather's stock in trade, these are not limited to the scope of Innovatia's business. She casts a wide net over the ecology of entrepreneurship, itself. For example, she says, she and Grebenc believe "literacy is a crucial cornerstone in building and sustaining our social and economic fabric. We focus our charitable contributions on early childhood literacy and youth at risk."

To this and related ends, Fairweather is a member of Future Greater Saint John, vice chair of Enterprise Saint John and chair of Opportunities New Brunswick. She's a board member of the Elementary Literacy Program in New Brunswick, co-chair of Achieve Literacy, member of the University of New Brunswick's Board of Governors, member of the Business Community Anti-Poverty Initiative, and a member of Living SJ.

All of which paints a picture of a dynamic, fiercely inventive company unimpeded by the normal bumps of entrepreneurial adventure. It is a picture that is, for the most part, accurate. Innovatia posts



  
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**Roxanne Fairweather  
Co-CEO, Innovatia Inc.**



annual revenues in excess of \$20 million, representing a three-year growth rate of 42 per cent.

Still, that’s not to say the sailing has always been smooth. In 2014, Fairweather recounts, “a large, signature client of ours who had just expressed performance satisfaction called us in to a face-to-face meeting to say that their CEO was considering moving to another vendor. We were not measuring up on (certain) metrics. First, we had to understand, from our customer’s perspective, what the root cause and core issues were. Then, we needed to understand how we could meet the challenges. Finally we had to put a plan in place. Although the turnaround is not totally complete, we have moved three of the four indicators into an excellent position. . . Our client is again very satisfied with our performance.”

Indeed, at Innovatia, it does seem clear that everything is a work in progress.

## **BACKING THE BASICS**

Nancy Mathis rarely gets discouraged. But if she did, she might point to the anemic condition of the Atlantic region’s economy as a source of consternation. After all, it’s the sort of thing that would trouble anyone in her position.

That position, as it happens, is executive director of the G. Wallace F. McCain Institute for Business Leadership, based in New Brunswick. She’s been running the show there since the organization’s inception some 10 years ago. In that time, she’s witnessed many changes in the entrepreneurial habitat – many of which have been positive. Less so, perhaps, for the East Coast in general.

The tale of the tape serves as a useful reminder of the broader economic challenges entrepreneurs face in this corner of the steppe. Here, virtually all provincial governments are running annual deficits and sometimes crippling long-term debts. Here, high unemployment is almost structural except in the largest cities. Here, persistent outmigration (especially among the young and well educated) is a daily reality. Here, great ideas are born every day; few of them, it seems, penetrate the halls of government power.

These are not her words. Still, she does say, “Every time I see the results that (New Brunswick Chief Economist) David Campbell presents, I keep waiting for that blip where I can say ‘hey, you see, here’s the stuff that we (at the Institute) are touching.’ Instead, the





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Nancy Mathis, executive director, G. Wallace F. McCain Institute

Photo: © Kelth Minchin, from the Faces of New Brunswick

numbers are increasingly saddening. I only have to believe that what I am observing qualitatively would suggest that without the things we are doing (at the Institute), the results would be even worse."

There's a good chance she's right. In fact, the focus of the G. Wallace F. McCain Institute at the University of New Brunswick has been, for most of its tenure, to support the next generation of business leaders in meeting the complex challenges facing the province. In essence, it's a catalyst for shifting the business culture and promoting and advancing the values of entrepreneurship and innovation — something its late namesake held dear to his heart.

"The developing and deepening of relationships and networks is fundamental to how the Institute delivers on its mandate," says Mathis' information circular about the organization she leads. "Programs range in depth, from a very intensive cohort program where high-potential leaders will interact in a series of experiences, to one-off workshops and lectures on themes relevant to New Brunswick business issues. (These use) innovative pedagogy to convene people, share best practices, assist

in the application of learning, and inspire change." Mathis' personal mission is to build and nurture the most highly connected community of entrepreneurial leaders in North America.

It's a role that comes naturally to her. In the mid-1990s, Nancy Mathis and her husband, Chris, established Mathis Instruments based on her research as a PhD candidate in chemical engineering. Though the company was sold in 2007, Mathis easily transferred the passion for entrepreneurship she had developed to her current duties. "I just spent the morning organizing promotional material for a new program that will help entrepreneurs formalize their structure and implement a board of directors or board of advisors," she says.

Lately, the Institute's mission and mandate have broadened geographically from New Brunswick. Says Mathis: "We thought, 'why throw down barriers and borders to come and participate in these programs?' When we first (included) Nova Scotia, we found that the richness of the conversation exploded. It was broadening for our New Brunswick entrepreneurs. It was actually enriching the experience. . . I'm always monitoring

our 250 dues-paying members and looking for opportunities to take them further."

The specific programs are, indeed, targeted and tailored. For example, the Entrepreneurial Leaders initiative invites a small, exceptional group of high-potential entrepreneurs to "exchange insights and experiences." Typically, their businesses are between five and eight years old and are ready to "bust out" with new products, export opportunities and expansion.

The ECHO program provides a network of peer-to-peer support to the next generation of family business leaders with an explicit goal of improving the success of succession. Meanwhile, the Second-in-Command initiative targets chief operating officers, general managers, chief financial officers and vice-presidents of business development.

Then, there's the Our Top Talent program which aligns top graduate students with N.B.-based employers. It focuses on high-achievers who seem destined to leave the province, and gives them an opportunity to showcase their capabilities.

Sara Taaffe, one of two winners of Our Top Talent, was awarded the title of most hireable new graduate in New Brunswick: "At OTT, I learned that there are many individuals who are investing in the future of New Brunswick, and that not all good jobs are out west — there are countless opportunities to make a positive impact, develop one's skills, and earn some money along the way and they are right here in New Brunswick."

Does Mathis ever get discouraged?

"Business owners are giving up their time and money to participate, which is the biggest indicator I have that they are deriving value," she notes. "Does that necessarily result in an increase in employees? Not all the time, but it means they are still in existence."

Given the stubborn economic challenges facing the Atlantic region, that's more than a little heartening. •

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