

Maria Proestou

Filling the Gaps

When Maria Proestou showed up on the first day of her new job at the Pentagon several years out of college, they didn't quite know what to do with her. She had responded to an advertisement sent out by one of her former graduate school classmates, now a Naval Officer, advertising for assistance in his office, but she quickly realized that her employers didn't really know what it was they needed. Her job didn't have a job description yet, so after several weeks, she decided to give it one herself.

"I looked for the gaps and sought to fill them," she explains today. "I created my job. I looked for what wasn't being done, and I did it." Now the Co-founder, President, and CEO of Delta Resources, Inc., a government contractor specializing in program management, Maria started her career looking for gaps, and she wouldn't have gotten to where she is today if she hadn't taken the initiative to find them.

Delta Resources was founded in 2000 and got its start supporting the Naval Sea Systems Command, the largest acquisition organization within the Department of the Navy as part of the Department of Defense's framework. The company Maria and her partners left had just graduated organically to large business status, and she wanted to remain tied to a smaller business field. "As well, at the time, the overall market was such that entrepreneurship was fairly easy to achieve if one did good work," Maria explains. "We were able to leverage contracting through the General Services Administration and subcontracting through existing organizations providing services to NAVSEA."

It was also right at the cusp of the government outsourcing surge, and Maria and her team had a history in providing government service. The federal atmosphere was locked in an internal hiring freeze and was looking for similar,

like-minded people to outsource services to, and Maria and her team were those people. "There was a market for people who viewed public service like we did, so we were able to focus as a company exclusively on support services," she says. "We don't build products or have any conflict of interest in that domain. We're exclusively focused on helping the government do the right thing."

Having always been drawn to public service, Maria and her team work on projects like the Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicle, a replacement for the vehicles that troops in Iraq and Afghanistan were previously using that weren't protecting them from roadside bombs. The Department of Defense invested in this alternate vehicle to help protect the soldiers, and Delta Resources is proud to be doing its small part to contribute to that cause. "Serving the public in this way, and doing the best we can to save taxpayer money, makes for very motivational work, and we're very committed to it," Maria explains. "I always wanted to contribute to something bigger, and this is how."

The three cofounders of Delta Resources actually met at their former place of employment, though they all heralded from different backgrounds and were working in varying capacities. Maria was developing national security requirements at the Pentagon, while Kevin was a former civil servant and engineer who had gotten involved as a defense contractor. Their third cofounder, Bob, had been in the military before joining that company.

As time went by, the three noticed they worked very well together and were ideal complements. Maria was strategic and big-picture oriented. Kevin excelled at closing deals and getting contracts in place. Bob was a people person, helping employees feel at ease so they



could get the job done. They all had young children at the time, as well, and wanted a more flexible work schedule that allowed them to be out with customers but also allowed them to respond to the needs of their young families. "Beyond all that, we also wanted to do some good things for our employees like telework or compressed work schedules," Maria outlines. "At our previous company, we used to get together for strategy sessions at Starbucks, focusing on how to best support our employees, and one day we realized that we needed a new framework and decided, why not go out and do it ourselves? That was how the discussion began, and Delta Resources is the result."

They resolved to leave on good terms, ensuring that the organization they had built would remain strong and solvent. "I learned a lot at that company," Maria says with gratitude. "They were very open about explaining the business process, and they were actually our first prime contractor. We still have a good relationship with them today, and I'm thankful for that."

Before they started the company, the visionary team sought the advice of a lawyer and made the decision not to launch their new endeavor until things were entirely wrapped up with their former employer. Maria can still recall the evening their three families got together for dinner. She remembers the sounds of their children playing together in the yard and the smell of the grilling steaks as she said she thought they'd all need six months in the bank before they were able to pay themselves. "We were fairly confident that someone would hire us, and we were able to successfully get all three of us covered with billable work within that first year," she reports.

Delta Resources was officially launched in October of 2000, and their first paycheck came the following January in the grand sum of about \$50 each. Kevin had left a big bonus on the table when they'd set out on their own, and Maria received some tempting phone calls offering her positions at big aerospace companies, but the team's conviction was unshakable. "From day one, we've had no regrets," she affirms.

At the outset, Kevin and Bob decided to make Maria the President, but the company has always been run highly collaboratively. They hired a part-time office manager the following summer, and their first contract came in late 2001.

Then, in 2002, they won their first GSA schedule, allowing them to compete for task orders. They were able to hire more employees, and they began getting hired to teams as subcontractors as well. The new company was enjoying its evolving success until, tragically, Bob passed away amidst the 9/11 attack while completing his two-week mandatory reserve duty at the Pentagon. He was working in the Navy Command Center when the hijacked plane struck.

"We had to do some serious thinking at that point about whether we were going to continue the company," Maria reflects somberly. Some of their partner firms offered them jobs, but they instead decided to stay the course. Today, Delta Resources has around 280 employees and earns just over \$40 million in annual revenue, and though they're now ranked as a large business by some of the contract vehicles in which they compete, they are still proud to maintain a culture that is well balanced between work and life. "It's more challenging now as the business environment is tougher, but it is still a source of pride for us," Maria remarks. "Our employees are expected to exercise professional judgment, and we're much more automated than most companies, which has allowed us to save on efficiencies and spend those funds on benefits for employees."

As a result of their efforts and focus on the employee experience, Delta Resources won *Washingtonian Magazine's* Great Places to Work Award in 2007 and 2011. It also won Great Places to Work by *Entrepreneur Magazine*, the Great Places to Work Institute Award, and the GovStar Best Medium-Sized Places to Work award through *SmartCEO Magazine*—all recognitions that were earned based on employee surveys and benefit package analysis.

So what does the future hold for Delta Resources? "We're definitely evaluating the new marketplace, as it's undergoing great change right now," Maria explains. "I always tell my employees that the testament of who we are as a company is how we handle the tough times instead of the good times, and now that things are tighter, we're really focusing on staying true to our principles and who we are. We're not afraid to take on our customers and protest contracts if we believe the government's decision is wrong. We can't be afraid to stand up for what's right, even when there's more at stake."

This strong commitment to values stems from Maria's earliest days growing up in Toledo, Ohio, where her parents settled in 1969 after emigrating from Cyprus. Her father's family had come before, working in coal mines in West Virginia and docks in Detroit before settling in Toledo and finding a niche in offering fast food cart services to factory workers. They then began opening restaurants, where her father first worked after coming to America. Maria was born soon after and grew up speaking Greek before she spoke English.

Little Maria attended public school and wanted to be a traveling diplomat when she grew up. "I never wanted to be a business owner because I saw the stress my father was under as he managed one of the family restaurants," she recalls. "I knew what it would take to be an entrepreneur." History, international relations, national security, and peacekeeping always fascinated her as a little girl, hinting at the innate draw toward problem solving that allows her to excel at the helm of Delta Resources today. "I was always leading the way toward solutions and compromise, not in an interpersonal sense, but in keeping the ball rolling on school projects or in extracurricular clubs, for example," she explains.

She worked in her father's restaurant for a couple summers as a kid, and the experience was so invaluable to her that she has since sent her own daughter to see what it's like. "I think it's so important to have experience in the customer service industry," she emphasizes. "It's a critical life skill. Aside from learning how to make the customer's happy, there's an incredible amount of multitasking involved."

Maria chose to attend George Washington University because it plugged her directly into D.C., with its currents of civil service and international relations. She interned on Capitol Hill, worked at the Smithsonian, researched in the Library of Congress, and served on student government doing campus elections, which taught her she didn't want to go into politics. She majored in international relations and then attended the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, where she earned a Masters in National Security Policy. One of her classmates there referred her to the first job that tied her to her current line of work, a position at a small consulting company serving the Saudi Finance Ministry with the Saudi National Bank.

She worked on monetary policy analysis and writing, but she didn't get any face-to-face customer interaction, which she yearned for.

After that experience, Maria came across the advertisement from her former classmate for contractors to come work at the Pentagon, and once she learned that contracting was the same as consulting, she responded. In that capacity, she worked with engineers to explain what they were building to Congress, indicating why it was important to the security of the nation. That was 1995, marking her entrance into the defense industry. After five years, Maria felt she knew enough that she could fill a gap she saw in a growing market by doing consulting on her own, and the rest is history.

Much of Maria's success stems from her goal-oriented, high-achieving personality, and her understanding that many of life's outcomes are under one's own control. However, she also readily acknowledges that there are outcomes that extend far beyond the limits of that control. This lesson came most harshly when her husband, a PhD electrical engineer at DISA, passed away six months after their marriage, in 1998. He was always very supportive of her, and wouldn't have been surprised in the least that she took a risk and started her own business, even in the face of single motherhood. "It's always surprising when you have a vision of how things are going to be and everything changes," she affirms. "But you adapt."

Understanding life's hardships and helping people through that adaptation process far exceeds the typical employer/employee relationship, but Delta Resources far exceeds a typical company, and Maria learned empathy from the best. Admiral Michael Glen Mullen, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was one of her first bosses at the Pentagon. Even though he was an Admiral at the time of her husband's death, he made the time to come to his wake, which had a marked impact on her. "I'll always remember that," she says. "He took an interest in what was going on with his people, and that's one of the reasons Delta Resources is so people-oriented today."

In advising young entrepreneurs entering the business world today, Maria urges a sense of humility. "Be flexible and agile, and don't be afraid to make copies or binders," she says. "I started working really young and resented

whenever someone told me I was too young to do something, so I understand that feeling, but you have to learn the job first.” Beyond that, she would advocate the importance of pursuing that inner voice without ever sacrificing one’s ideals. “I came to DC to be a public servant, but I guess I just have entrepreneurship in my blood,” she remarks, and the greatest aspect of all is that she’s accomplished what she has without sacrificing those values that keep her such a centered, compassionate, and compelling leader.

– **By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®**

*About Gordon J. Bernhardt
President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon’s Blog](#).*