



## A ONE WOMAN DYNAMO

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Tanya Neiman

I'm one of the luckiest people I know. Not only do I have a great job — interesting, challenging, a place to make a difference — but my mentor is Tanya Neiman: a one-woman dynamo of vision and energy. Perhaps you've seen her at national conferences — with her signature bowtie, pinstripe suit, wingtip shoes, and foun-

tain pen. "She's a real character," you've probably thought, "I wonder what it's like to work for her, though."

It's amazing, is what it is. Sometimes it's exhausting, too, and occasionally frustrating, but it's always amazing. Here's a glimpse of what I've learned from her.

### Work with passion

Tanya carries her passion for her work with her everywhere. It's not so much that she is a workaholic, it's that her passion for, and commitment to, what she does is so all-consuming that it follows her everywhere. For example, when all else fails, it generally falls to Tanya to get some wine donated for our annual volunteer thank-you party. We were just wondering how she was going to pull that off, in this economy, when she reported that she had exchanged banter with some fellow who was sitting in front of her at the baseball game the day before, and he was going to donate eight cases from the winery he runs.

Tanya also enjoys the opera — she likes the music almost as much as her chance, during intermission, to slip into the private bar area for the very wealthy and shmooze with the tuxedo and satin ball gown crowd. Somehow she manages to give out many of her cards, and collect those of many others, while leaving them feeling only that they have had a very pleasant and fortuitous encounter with an interesting person (as indeed

they have). We have gotten quite a few donations from those encounters.

When people meet Tanya and see her passion for her work, they often cannot resist becoming involved themselves. It is easy to feel embarrassed about having passion for your work, or to worry that that passion could swallow you up. But it has such power, if you trust it.

### Seek change

Tanya truly embraces change. Not half-heartedly, not with resignation, not even realistically. She rushes out to greet change and bring it into our midst, even when it could still be kept far from our door.

As every employee starts at VLSP, Tanya's mantra is repeated. "If you are doing your job the same way in six months, then you are not doing your job." She wants us to be constantly asking ourselves: How could I make my project better? What could I do that would make my work more effective? Or efficient? Or productive? How could I address an unmet need? Our work changes all the time. We add projects, we take them away, we reshape them.

This drives some people crazy. Can't we just find a good way to do something, and stick to it? But I have found it a real inspiration. Real life changes, and so should our work. VLSP is the only place I've ever worked where people regularly come in with wild ideas they thought of in the shower, and we sit and talk them through and, sometimes, implement them. That is part of our work — brainstorming ideas, many of them wild or improbable, and talking them through with others. What a great job!

### Program to needs, trust that the funding will follow

It is so tempting to program based on what funding we believe is available. What is the point, after all, of going to all the trouble of designing a program (or even all the trouble and expense of actually launching it) when

no funding is in sight? This, however, is not how Tanya Neiman sees things. Her view, rather, involves both an enormous commitment to the low-income community, and a tremendous reserve of faith. She asks herself, what needs doing out there? What needs are there that are not getting met? Where are people struggling? Where are the barriers people are encountering? And then she sets off to solve those problems.

Perhaps the most famous example of this approach is the Homeless Advocacy Project. Without a funder in her pocket, Tanya learned from a survey of homeless people that they ranked help for their legal problems high among their priorities. She set out to provide them with that help. Armed only with her sense that homeless people frequently face multiple interrelated problems, only some of which were legal, she crafted the approach now famously known as holistic services, with lawyers, social workers, and other volunteers working together to address the multiple needs of the clients. The funding came after she was able to explain — and demonstrate — to funders how critical it was (and is) to provide this type of holistic support.

Tanya also used her “if you build it, the funding will come” approach to respond to a crisis about 10 years ago, when a legal services provider that ran a pro per clinic for tenants drastically cut back its services. Since California law only gives a tenant five calendar days to respond to an eviction complaint, the loss of this clinic would have had a terrible effect on tenants.

VLSA and other full-representation legal services providers could not do an intake, screen the client and place them with a lawyer within the narrow timeframe provided (particularly since the tenant did not always find a provider until time had almost run out). Tanya summoned tenant organizations and advocates around the city to a series of meetings, and overcame all of their objections to forming a collaboratively-run pro per clinic for tenants, funded out of the pockets of ten organizations. That same organization is still at work today, now with a budget of half a million dollars, and nine employees. Once again, the funding followed the vision.

### Envision, and share the vision

Tanya is a woman of vision — perhaps that is clear already. She seeks what is needed in the community; she talks and analyzes with people, and then designs a program to meet the need. She sees an opportunity — funding? a gap in leadership? a popular cause? and she seizes the day. She also shares her vision generously. Many are the times that we have been asked to share

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information, materials, or our expertise, with another program, and Tanya always embraces that request. I have learned to be generous — to share our intellectual wealth, to not hoard resources or ideas or volunteers or clients.

### Pay attention to people

Tanya’s management style reflects a careful attention to our psychological make-up. While she is talking with you, or arguing with you, or negotiating with you, some part of her is clinically observing you. What motivates you? What makes you tick? Why are you so upset about this issue? How, given that, can she expect you to deal with the next challenge? What will be most effective in dealing with you, and what skills does she need to teach you? This thoughtfulness makes her a very effective manager, because she is able to personalize her approach.

### Don't just supervise, teach

Tanya also actively teaches. She does not just reach in and solve my management or budget problems for me; she tells me how she approaches it, and why her solutions might work. She tells me about problems and issues that are not my problems or issues at all, but she explains how she deals with them — so that I will learn. She mentors and supervises consciously. Because she takes the time to do this, I have learned an enormous amount from her, much of which I am now able to share with those I supervise.

### The power of optimism and of perspective

Perhaps it is clear by now that Tanya has enormous vision, and is a strong and charismatic leader. I admire her as a manager, a fundraiser, a visionary. But I admire Tanya most in a different role: her role as a patient.

When I first started working with Tanya, I knew that she had had breast cancer many years before, but it was a thing of the past. The Tanya I was working with was practically vibrating with energy, and worked all

hours of the day and night. (I used to dread the mornings after Tanya had worked till 3 or 4 am, knowing that my inbox and voicemail would be full with her ideas and projects.) Then, about five months after I started, Tanya told us that she was again facing another very serious illness. Still, she seemed just as energetic as ever, and boundlessly optimistic and reassuring. A little surgery, some treatment; she would be available by phone, she would get a fax machine for her house. There ensued a long year where Tanya was working part-time; she was clearly struggling, but still, periodically my inbox would fill with her enthusiastic ideas. She got better, she came back to work — then a second round of treatment and surgery. It has been six years since the news broke, and while she has been blessed recently with good news of a complete remission, and although her cancer has been termed chronic and controllable, nevertheless a recurrence is always a possibility.

It is remarkable how optimistic Tanya has remained through the whole thing. No matter what comes her way — and this stuff was pretty serious — she tried to be realistic but hopeful. She was upbeat even when she was so ill she could not get up from bed at all. If I had a dollar for every time she called me from a hospital bed or her sick-bed at home to give me directions or comfort, our program would be fully funded for several years to come.

In some ways what is remarkable about Tanya's illness is how much the same she was. How no matter

what came her way, she was always upbeat, always positive, always finding good things where glum faces predominated.

But in other ways, what is remarkable is how she changed. I must admit, she did micromanage a bit before she got sick. After all, she had been with VLSP for twenty years, and when she started there were only two staff people — so she really *had* done everyone's job, and she knew so much. I know it must have been hard to see us bumbling around sometimes. She would leave us to manage our projects, but every once in a while she just could not stand it, and would step in and start issuing specific directions. But once she got sick, she really started to let go. She trusts us now, and can see that we know a lot; that we have learned a lot from her — and she is also more willing to let us make our own mistakes. She got sick, and now she is better; we will make mistakes, and then we will fix them.

Tanya is passionate about her work — it is not that she takes it home with her, it is that she lives it; her love for the work and her caring for indigent people is with her all the time. But she has also taught me the value of gratitude — of really seeing what you have, your loved ones, your home and community, and being immensely grateful for it, not taking it for granted.

And having Tanya as a mentor is one of the things for which I am immensely grateful.

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## MIE listservs for Fundraisers, Managers and Administrators

MIE has set up three listservs — for fundraisers, managers and administrators. If you use internet e-mail, in one quick message you can ask questions, share tips, brag about your successes, and provoke discussion among your colleagues. MIE listservs are intended to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and information among fundraisers, managers and administrators who work with programs that deliver legal assistance or legal information to low income persons (including LSC-funded,

IOLTA-funded, pro bono, protection and advocacy, and elderly legal services programs).

If you are a fundraiser, manager or administrator, and would like to subscribe to one or more of the MIE listservs, send an e-mail with your name, position, program and address to Patricia Pap, MIE executive director, at [ppap@m-i-e.org](mailto:ppap@m-i-e.org), or call 617-556-0288.