

# Brenda Lawrence

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## Southern Gem in Pursuit of Significance

As a young girl growing up in the congregation of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, Brenda Lawrence received an opportunity. Ten-year-old Brenda worked hard in preparation to recite the Beatitudes in front of the church body, the largest in the town with over 1,000 members.

But when the time came to recite and Brenda took the stage, the words bubbled up but refused to spill out. She stood in front of the audience, tongue-tied and embarrassed, before a friendly face emerged from the crowd behind her. A member of the choir, sensing the young girl's consternation, stepped forward from the group, placed a hand on Brenda's shoulder and coached her through the passage, slowly and steadily helping Brenda complete her recital.

"That experience to me has really shaped who I am and how I see things and how I reach out and connect with people," Brenda says. "I do think it's about being our brother's keeper and knowing we are not alone, even when we feel we are failing and fumbling."

The combination of compassion, calming influence and coaching ability displayed by the choir member on that fateful day at Ebenezer Baptist is one that Brenda now embodies as a Vistage Chair for Vistage Worldwide, which prides itself as the world's largest executive coaching organization.

"Vistage is a home for CEOs who are looking to elevate their leadership, their presence and their ability to connect and build teams," Brenda describes. "Chairs like myself build teams of 12-16 CEOs who come together to support each other through the good, the bad, the wonderful and help other CEOs with feedback and unbiased opinion. It's an organization that provides CEOs with tools to think better, be better and connect better."

As a longtime CEO herself, Brenda feels her role as a Vistage Chair is less instructive and more facilitative. Her job, as she sees it, is to provide leaders a place where they feel comfortable to share their own experiences and be totally transparent with one another in search of the best possible solutions to issues they all face, solutions they can then take back to their companies and use to implement positive change in their respective organizations.

"It's a confidential environment," Brenda explains. "We create a safe space for them to come in and share their wins, their losses, whatever it is going on."

With this specific atmosphere in mind, Brenda places paramount importance on finding the right mix of CEOs and executive leaders for each group. She makes a point to prioritize diversity of background, industry and abilities to minimize blind spots, and she appreciates unique perspectives.

Brenda describes the ideal CEO for one of her peer mentoring groups as someone who works on their business, not in their business. Most of her participants are CEOs at businesses in the DMV with annual revenues between \$3-10 million. Brenda's most important requirement is that the CEOs she works with come to the table humble, open-minded, and willing to accept and offer feedback and learn from others' experiences.

"The value of every person is unquestionable," Brenda says. "It is always essential to have a diverse perspective at the table. A person interested in being a part of the group would appreciate the fact that there are diverse types of individuals at the table."

Brenda has been coaching leaders and executives for about 13 years, the vast majority of that time overlapping with her own career as a business leader in the technological services industry. But the relentless work ethic needed to



juggle such priorities is nothing new for Brenda.

From some of her earliest memories in Rocky Mount, Brenda was a go-getter – sometimes to her own detriment. She begged relentlessly as a young girl to accompany her grandmother to the fields where she would pick cucumbers for extra money. The elder members of the family tried to dissuade Brenda, but she would not take no for an answer and finally, around age 7, was granted permission to tag along on one outing.

“They told me, ‘You’re not going to want to work in the fields. It’s real hard work,’” Brenda recalls. “We were out in the field picking cucumbers, and I quickly realized it was difficult and started begging to leave, begging to go home. That was my very first lesson in hard work and perseverance.”

Those lessons were put to the test when, just one week after landing her first real job in high school at a local retail store, Brenda was fired because her manager believed she didn’t work quickly enough.

“I will never forget that feeling,” Brenda says. “I was so excited about getting the job and being able to work there. To lose it was a horrible feeling, and I never wanted that feeling again.”

However, Brenda made a point to learn from the heartbreaking experience, and from then on placed greater emphasis on staying engaged and working quickly and efficiently. It didn’t take long for Brenda to bounce back from her first bout of professional adversity, as she landed a job as a school bus driver for elementary school children at just 16 years old, a role that instilled discipline and responsibility beyond her years.

Brenda was a curious and engaged student, and she thrived in school with encouragement from her parents, who placed heavy emphasis on the importance of education. Though never one for sports, she found ample extracurricular opportunities in the form of National Honor Society and the History, Economics and French clubs, which she served as president and secretary at various points.

“My mother was a huge proponent for education,” Brenda recalls. “Everything for her was education. She was really big about making sure we were reading, that we were preparing ourselves for school, that we were doing all the things that would help us to excel. Anything that was learning where I could broaden my thinking, I

was interested in that.”

There was never a question whether Brenda would attend college – her parents insisted on as much – and she landed on North Carolina A&T State University, an HBCU in Greensboro about two hours away from her hometown. She originally intended to follow in her aunt’s footsteps and major in Political Science, and she considered studying Journalism, as well. Ultimately, however, she charted a totally different course as an Information Technology major. All the while, Brenda continued to display her stellar work ethic, holding year-round jobs at fast-food restaurants throughout college to supplement the money her parents had worked hard to set aside for her education.

“I had social things like homecoming that I was involved in, but mostly, I was working and going to school,” Brenda says. “For me, it was all about discipline. I knew, largely because of everything my mother had been saying to me all my life, that education was important. I wasn’t leaving, and in order for me to stay, there were a couple of things I needed to do. Working was one of them.”

After graduating in 1989, Brenda returned to her birthplace of Washington, D.C. at the urging of an aunt who lived there. She began working in the hospitality industry upon her arrival in Washington, a field seemingly unrelated to her degree and career aspirations. But her work at a pair of 5-star hotels in the nation’s capital actually ended up helping her chart the course of her professional journey for the decades to come.

“When I think about it, I just feel like I’ve been blessed,” Brenda says. “The hotel industry placed a huge emphasis on exceptional customer service and was actually my start into technology. We used point-of-sale systems from this company called Micros. I reached out to them one day, sent my resume and said, ‘Hey, I’ve got a technology degree. This is what I’m interested in.’ And they called me. I was excited. I went and interviewed, got the job and started working with Micros Systems. That was the start for me.”

After five years at the Columbia, Maryland-based company, Brenda moved on to a Project Manager role at Conquest Systems in which she worked primarily on a contract with the United States Postal Service. It was at Conquest where Brenda’s passion for engaged, effective leadership began to emerge. She describes the

company as the first place she worked where mentorship and leadership training were prioritized. Eventually, her experience at Conquest would become the inspiration for Brenda to found her own company.

Every month, the president of the company made a point to gather 10 employees for a roundtable lunch meeting and encourage open discussion about new developments inside the organization and ways they could further improve, all the while jotting down copious notes to take back to other leaders within the company. He also regularly invited outside speakers to address the staff on process improvement and sponsored several all-staff trips to international destinations each year over the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend to give his team a chance to reflect on the big-picture view of the organization.

“Everything he did was around building and developing leaders,” Brenda remembers. “It was his mission. ‘What do you think about this? What are some ideas you have?’ He was developing people, and they were dedicated to the work. It could be Thanksgiving, and we would still be at work. But he created a culture where you could leave and do whatever you wanted to do, and you would be prepared.”

And that’s exactly what Brenda did after five years at Conquest, jumping to Science Applications International Corporation for three years to work on federal government contracts of up to \$200 million, including with the National Guard Bureau. Thereafter, she founded LFG Technologies, a firm focused on advanced technological integrations in both the public and private sectors.

Just as importantly, however, the founding of her new company coincided with the discovery of another passion. Though still working in her field of expertise, Brenda began to discover a love for coaching – even before technically stepping into an official role.

“The passion that I have is helping other people live a life of purpose and inspiring them to reach for their true potential,” Brenda explains. “Even though I was working in technology, people were coming to me asking, ‘Can we talk? Let’s work through this.’ Even though technology is what I was doing on paper, I’ve always found myself in transformational roles, supporting people, technology and processes. I felt like I was always in a coaching role. People feel comfortable

with me. People trust me, because I see them, which allows them to feel comfortable to have conversations, whatever they may be. What you see is what you get, and I think people appreciate that.”

Once Brenda discovered the intersection of her talents and her purpose in coaching, she dove in head first in the growth process and wanted to help more people find the same joy that she had found. John Maxwell’s leadership training methods closely aligned with her own philosophy, so she became certified to teach his methods and began to share them. She has traveled with John Maxwell and the Equip organization to teach values based leadership and serve in countries Guatemala, Paraguay, and Costa Rica. She serves on the Presidents Advisory Council and is an Executive Director. She has since earned prestigious executive coaching certifications from Coach Training Institute and Coaching and Positive Psychology Institute. She also mentors Social entrepreneurs and organizations to help them align Social Impact and Organizational Purpose. She has served on Non-Profit Boards as an advisor in Africa and India. She has earned a Social Impact certification from University of Pennsylvania and an Entrepreneurship and Innovation certification from Harvard Business School along with credentials from the International Coaching Federation. Additionally, Brenda joined the Institute of Coaching Harvard Mclean Affiliate as a Fellow, to stay up-to-date on the latest research and its practical applications within the coaching field.

“I’ve always been an infinite learner,” Brenda says. “I’m always curious, always, always looking to see, ‘What else?’ You can’t give what you don’t have, so you have to always make sure that you’re pouring into yourself so that you’re in front of how to help and serve others.”

Brenda encourages young people she encounters today to take a similar approach – never stop learning, and never put limits on your potential.

“You’re worthy,” Brenda says. “Always remember that the possibilities are unlimited. Particularly now, the sky is infinity, and the world is yours for having. Make sure you’re listening for what isn’t being said, and stay curious. Make sure you have champions around you, people who are going to challenge you but also support you.”

When she meets with CEOs, Brenda boils

down her process to three simple steps. First, she guides the executive through a “360 assessment” to identify the patterns in their leadership and organization and ways both could be improved. Brenda then works alongside them to create an action plan, a roadmap of sorts with practical ways to improve their processes and focus attention on what really matters within their organization. Finally, Brenda and the executive move forward with occasional “accountability conversations” in which they discuss the leader’s progress and ways to adapt to ever-changing circumstances.

The common thread that runs through every step: while Brenda is always there to lend her expertise, the coaching experience remains a client-driven one. Brenda stresses the importance of allowing executives she works with to set the agenda, guide conversation and communicate their needs. Her role, as she sees it, is to meet them where they are and be agile enough to help them get where they want to be.

“I’m big on pushing them for action and then holding them accountable for it,” Brenda explains. “I adapt the way that I lead depending on what I’m experiencing, because things change so much. Servant leadership is transformational. I feel like my intuition is pretty good, so I assess what’s going on, and if you need me, I’m there. If you don’t need me, I’m going to trust but verify. I’m going to check in and make sure that we’re tracking the same way. I try to leave enough room and space for people to be creative and innovate.”

Through all of her professional exploits, family and faith remain the key pillars in Brenda’s life. When her parents moved from Washington back to their hometown of Rocky Mount when Brenda was 5 years old, she was immediately surrounded by a tight-knit – and rather extensive – familial support system. Brenda’s maternal great-grandmother had 24 children and, by the time of her death at 100, 159 grandchildren and 147 great-grandchildren. Brenda enjoyed a relatively idyllic childhood and kept herself busy jumping rope and playing with the neighboring children on Lincoln Drive. Her parents were working-class, her father a technician at the local Firestone Tire and Rubber facility and her mom a homemaker after a career with AT&T. They were very protective of the family, a quality Brenda has carried on. Her most valuable possession is an angel pendant given to her by her mother. She later learned her grandmother loved angels and

had gifted a similar angel to her mom for safe keeping.

“My mother said, ‘You always take care of everybody else. You’re always protecting and looking out for and caring for people, and I just want you to know that you’re my little angel,’” Brenda recalls. “I’ve kept it with me. I travel with it everywhere I go.”

Though she grew up in the church, Brenda’s faith took on greater meaning to her later in life. On two totally separate occasions, once when attending a church service with a friend in college and another years later after receiving a ride home from an off-duty police officer when her minivan broke down after work one evening, Brenda received identical messages from the strangers that resonate with her to this day: “God has something good for you.”

“I have to make sure that I’m doing things right so that whatever that good is He has for me, I’m able to get it,” Brenda says.

Though continuously striving for more, Brenda is confident that at this point, she has found what God has for her. Her pursuit of significance led her to her purpose of making a positive difference in the lives of those she serves, a purpose she takes pleasure in living out each and every day.

“I’ve been on this journey of thinking outside of myself and serving others,” Brenda says. “When you think about success, you think about the individual. But significance is when you’re impacting and imparting into others.”

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*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](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon’s Blog](#).*