

The high jumper

Nancy Tower

Executive vice-president, business development, Emera; CEO, Emera Newfoundland and Labrador



Nancy Tower saw from an early age what it looks like to jump in with both feet. Her father grew the family's Bathurst, N.B.-based firm Tower Jewellers from a single store to 16 locations. Spending her summer holidays working in the business, and chewing through HR and marketing talk at the dinner table, ultimately helped drive her to a career in business. Today the 52-year-old mother of three, who exudes a confident, athletic energy, has risen to the highest echelons of Atlantic Canadian business.

MY DAD IS MY BIGGEST INFLUENCE. Every night at the dinner table my three siblings and I would listen to him and my mother talk about the business. He had a lot of success but like any entrepreneur he had to make tough decisions. Should he take on more debt to open a new store? In the early days he had to justify putting up his home to secure financing. I watched what he did and learned as much as I could. And the most important thing I learned was not to be afraid of taking risks.

THE BEST WAY TO GET THROUGH THE TOUGH TIMES IS TO PUT ALL HANDS ON DECK. We at Nova Scotia Power Inc. thought we were prepared for hurricanes based on our previous experiences. Then Hurricane Juan tore straight through the backbone of our transmission system, taking out 75 per cent of our customers. We said we'd restore power to 90 per cent of those

affected within five days and we did that by pulling together and working hard. It was the biggest challenge of my career but I learned that when you go through a huge challenge like that, you come out the other side stronger, wiser and a more tightly-knit team.

NEVER UNDERVALUE YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE – OR YOUR INSTINCTS. When I became vice-president of customer operations for Nova Scotia Power, I was perhaps the first non-engineer ever in that role. Early on I had to present our \$40-million capital budget to our regulator. I reviewed in detail all the information, grilled our engineers and asked a lot of questions. As it turned out, my “non-engineer” bottom line questions were similar to what the regulator wanted to know – business is business after all. The lesson? Don't be afraid to jump out of your comfort zone. Sometimes when you're mired in the details, you can't see the big picture.

MY ADVICE TO FEMALE EXECUTIVES: PUT UP YOUR HAND.

If you have strong leadership skills and you think you can handle a new challenge, go for it. I am so thrilled to be leading Emera Newfoundland and Labrador. To be part of an historic project to connect Newfoundland and Labrador to the North American power grid, to be a part of Atlantic energy cooperation, and to build a \$2-billion company from the ground up – that's incredibly exciting. And I'm here because I put my hand up and expressed a desire to take it on.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO KNOW EVERYTHING.

But you sure better know that you don't know everything – and be willing to ask the questions and do the work to get yourself up to speed. Three weeks after I took over as CFO of Emera we had to release our quarterly earnings and review them in a call with our analysts. I was determined to answer all the financial questions on that call. So I asked lots of questions of my team and spent three weeks poring over our financial statements and results. In the end, I felt comfortable with the material and handled the call well. Accepting that I didn't know everything helped me be as prepared as I needed to be.

MY KIDS KEEP ME GROUNDED.

The other day I was working on a speech and my daughter asked me what I was going to talk about. I told her and she laughed and said, “That again?” I think my kids are proud of me but they also like to keep me humble. | ABM

Interviewed by Tony Case, HRC practice leader for Knightsbridge Robertson Surette – Atlantic Canada's leading recruitment and human resource consulting firm. Leader's Insight conversations are published in each issue of Atlantic Business Magazine. Feedback: dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com