

CHAPTER 1: SHANNON MILES



Shannon Miles, COO & Co-Founder

Organization: Miles Advisory Group: MAG Bookkeeping, eaHELP

Industries: Bookkeeping, Executive Assistance, Staffing

Year established: 2010

Organization size: \$5,000,000 - \$7,500,000

Mission: Miles Advisory Group (and/or its brands) exists to glorify God by sourcing people and services that ignite a leader's possibilities and results.

Website: www.milesadvisorygroup.com/

THE STORY

I met Shannon at the referral of a business partner in October 2012. She was curious about what an executive roundtable could do for her as an entrepreneur. Her company was about a year old. Over breakfast, she told me about her family, the struggle to find an answer to the age-old conundrum of all working moms: how do we find balance? Out of her struggle to reconcile her call to leadership and raising her children, she birthed a new child: eaHELP.

Shannon's story begins in Ohio in 1977, the product of divorce at the age of four. Her mother remarried and their family became a military family, moving to North Carolina, Louisiana and then South Carolina. While in South Carolina, at age 13, she and her parents came to Christ when her parents sought counsel from a Christian couple they admired. Shannon's family moved back to Ohio a couple of years after losing their home in Hurricane Hugo. She went to Mount Vernon Nazarene College immediately following high school and double majored in psychology and business with the intent of going to law school. This is where she met and married her husband, Bryan Miles.

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Bryan and Shannon married after her sophomore year in college. After they graduated in 1999, she and Bryan moved to Atlanta at the height of the dot-com boom.

Shannon says her first real job was working for a law firm. From there, she was able to get a job at McKesson (a Fortune 500 health care information technology solutions company) as a contract specialist, writing contracts for the sales team.

Shannon was probably the youngest person in the contract review department when she started in 2000. Eager and bold, she kept seeking opportunities until she landed a job leading women twice her age as an assistant manager.

Years later, she went back and talked to her previous boss who promoted her during that season. “ Shannon asked her, ‘Why did you do that? Why did you take a chance on me?’ She just said, *“I knew you were special. I knew you could do it.”*

On the personal side, in 2005 Shannon and Bryan started talking about expanding their family. Little did they know that the birth of their daughter would be the catalyst for eaHELP and its larger mission, to give women “a third option” in employment.

After the birth of their daughter Rainey, Shannon took a three-month maternity leave then went back to work full-time, employing a nanny, but that was just not what they wanted for their family. With Bryan and Shannon both in sales, the demanding travel schedule for two parents with an infant created more stress than they wanted.

[SM] And at that time, I thought, okay, the option was to work full time or stay home full time. So I thought, “Well, working’s not working, so I’m going to stay home.” While I was on leave, they appointed a project manager to backfill what I was doing and it was a part-time position. And so when I came back, I said to my boss, “I want to do that. I was doing it anyway, it was part time, let me just get through this mess of a conversion, I’ll get paid out my back commission and I’ll be done.” And he said, “No.” I thought, “Okay, that’s not what God told me.” Because truly, Caroline, in my life, that was one of the most—probably one of the first, but clearest callings I felt from God. Like God said to me, “You need to go part time. This is the right next step for you; we’ll figure out the rest.” And my boss said, “No.” And I thought, “Well, you weren’t supposed to say NO...”

I didn’t like that answer and so I went to his boss, Mark, and I said, “Mark, I want to do this.” And he said, “Okay, let’s make it work.” And I said, “Okay, that’s the answer I was looking for.” So that’s how I ended up doing a 20- hour a week position at McKesson, which leads into what we’re doing today and why I’m so passionate about it. Once I got into the part-time work, I realized I never wanted to stay at home in the first place. This was the perfect fit for me.

That whole experience of going from full time to working part time transformed into the option that we give women around the country today - the opportunity to not have to make the choice between working full time and staying home and not contributing financially. We’ve provided this third option that allows them the best of both worlds—a legitimate “work from home” opportunity where they can use their

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minds and the gifts that God has given them, their professional experience, but still keep their families first. And that's huge. That changed the trajectory of my life and, Lord willing, the lives of all the women who work with us.

In 2010, Bryan and I individually felt like God was calling us to make a big change in our careers. We've always wanted to own something of our own but we weren't exactly sure what that should be. Bryan worked in the construction industry for churches and had a lot of interaction with pastors who needed help in the area of executive assistance. With my background at McKesson in legal, contract management, sales and project management, I was very comfortable in the operations space.

So we had this idea - to offer virtual executive assistance to pastors. We knew that this could be a very difficult niche to fill, but there was also a huge need. Bryan had a great experience working with a virtual executive assistant for a number of years. So, in 2010, we started Miles Advisory Group offering executive assistants, or 'EAs', to pastors across the country. In early 2011, we added on bookkeeping as a service. We intended to stay focused on the church world, but something kind of big happened in 2011 that changed our minds.

In July 2011, we were on vacation driving from Salt Lake City to Jackson Hole where Bryan was going to climb the Grand Teton with a friend.

During the drive, we see on Twitter Michael Hyatt [author and speaker] saying, "Hey, I'm looking for a virtual assistant. Anybody have any experience?" And a few of our clients responded back and said, "Yeah, we use MAGEa. Talk to Bryan." And you know, Michael Hyatt's a very influential person in our industry and so for him to reach out, we were like, "Yeah, he's not a pastor, but he gets the church and he's worked in this area for a long time." So after a very quick sales cycle, we got started with him. It was just one of those turning points in our business where, over the course of working with him, it raised awareness that there are actually a ton of leaders outside the church that we can serve and not deviate too much from our core and what we know that we're good at. And that's where the rebranding in 2011 came in with the conversion of MAGEa to eaHELP. So January 2012, eaHELP was officially launched as a brand focused on businesses and it just took off.

[CM] Would you share, when you started, what your revenue was versus where you are now?

[SM] *In 2010 we had three or four contracts, so teeny tiny revenue. And then in January, when we got started with the bookkeeping business, there was a good funnel of opportunity. And as it turns out, MAG Bookkeeping actually fueled our business for 2011 because we signed a lot of clients very quickly and I think we were still maybe six figures, then, in revenue for that year. But then the momentum with eaHELP really took hold and now it's 80 percent of our business, whereas MAG Bookkeeping is 20 percent. We closed out 2014 at right around \$5,000,000 in revenue.*

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THOUGHTS ON LEADERSHIP

Over the years, Shannon had several women mentors, especially during her time at the sales management level while at McKesson. She looked for women who she liked and whom she felt did their job really well. Her approach was “teach me” and “here is what I will give back to you.”

The most powerful lessons from her mentors were:

- *“Just do what you say you’re going to do.”* It speaks to your credibility, it speaks to your commitment, it speaks to how you value that person.
- To actually care about people. *“And that’s natural for me; I do that anyway. I’m a high S. (S = Steady - Passive DISC Personality Style, People-Oriented) I’m always concerned about what other people think. When you establish those relationships in business, it affords you the opportunity to be real and to make mistakes, but without condemnation.”*

Ways that Shannon learned leadership:

- She always sought out people who are smarter than her to learn from. She was always looking to people who had been doing what she had been doing much longer and much better than her and learning from them.
- She reads - a lot – and has book studies with her team on business books quarterly.
- She often had a mentor (either one on one, or a roundtable of peers).
- She seeks out peer group settings with like-minded people who challenge her.

Her management approach:

- Is based on five key values: God, Team, Gratitude, Passion and Vision.
- Their values and mission are lived out and modeled every day. She and Bryan intentionally create a culture where every team member can speak about the company values, what they mean and give practical examples of how they’ve seen them lived out.
- Their company is not satisfied with the status quo.

Shannon’s personal management philosophy is simple and powerful:

- She focuses on empowering each team member and continually ensuring that they have goals and that she is doing everything she can to help them meet their goals.
- She is open and honest with them and balances that with credibility.
- She believes that leaders ask questions (and managers answer them).

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- She believes that she does not have all the answers.

Who influenced her leadership most?

- When it comes to who has influenced her leadership most, she points to Jesus. Her approach and posture is of a servant leader – not only in serving her staff, but also the clients and partners of MAG.
- An academic essay called *Servant as Leader*, by Robert Greenleaf <https://greenleaf.org/products-page/the-servant-as-leader/>, which is required reading for all staff members at MAG.
- Her female mentors (women managers and senior saleswomen) at McKesson.

Faith at work practices:

When it comes to faith at work, the staff prays openly and often, in their team, leadership and corporate meetings. She personally prays for her team members. When Shannon and Bryan have big decisions through the course of the weeks, months and years, they pray together over them.

They are upfront in their hiring process when screening applicants. As they like to say, “You don’t have to be a Christian to join our team, but this is what we do and this is how we do it, so it can’t be offensive to you.”

Early on she says, she had an opportunity to share her faith and blew it when she was working at McKesson. *“It was a corporate environment, and we live in the South and so talking about your faith is acceptable and common, but I don’t think I was as overt about it as I should have been. So one of the things, I think, that my boss saw in me was the ability to be calm in the face of pressure. And we were in a tough negotiation via conference call and I have a tendency to talk people off the ledge, like, ‘Let’s methodically figure this out, and it’s not the end of the world.’ One of the senior leaders said, ‘How are you so calm? Where do you get your peace from? And how perfect of a question is that? Like, ‘Jesus Christ,’ that’s the right answer. That’s the answer I had in my head; it is not the answer I said out loud because I was trying to be ‘PC’ and I missed a really cool opportunity to be overt about my faith and I’ll never forget that and I never let that happen again. You know, it was like the perfect tee up and the Holy Spirit was like, ‘Jesus Christ—say it!’ And I was like, ‘AAHH!’ I said, ‘I don’t know, I’m just really calm,’ - it was the worst answer ever.”*

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Personally, as a leader, she cites her called4women's¹ group (monthly Christian businesswomen's executive roundtable) as the most consistent practical integration point she uses to view her leadership through the filter of faith and make sure that if there's anything off, it gets re-calibrated.

What she wants other Christian businesswomen to know:

- *“Women sometimes have to have all the answers in order to take action and that's not life and that's not fair because God teaches us all along the way. We get paralyzed by this need to look like we have it all together, to look like we've got all the answers - that 'never let them see you sweat' kind of thing, because it's scary when you're vulnerable. But if you do it in an appropriate way, there's a lot of strength in that. Just have direction and a good compass to say where you're off, that the Lord can lead and direct you as you move. “*
- *“Just get out there and try it and don't be afraid to fail. How do you even know if it's going to work until you get out there and start trying it? I came from a broken home; my mom and dad were very poor. I remember days of scraping up change to buy bread. We lived in a trailer. So for me, I had nothing to lose. I already have now more than I ever could have imagined in my entire life. So what's the harm in going out there and trying something new?”*

What she would have liked to have known at the beginning of her career:

- *“Knowing the importance of having somebody who believes in you. You've got to have people in your corner who support you. And it's funny, when you put it out there, you find them. “*
- *“Trying to do everything on our own is futile. Find somebody who's going to be in your corner; just know it's going to change over time as God progresses you through your career.”*
- *“Be humble and be willing to learn and course-correct and dream big. Also, it's super cliché, but if your dreams don't scare you, they're not big enough. And I am not a dreamer. I'm not. I'm learning to be. Because I'm learning that God has bigger things for me than I could have imagined for myself, so why limit Him?”*

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<sup>1</sup> Called4women was a marketplace community of Christian businesswomen leaders that meet monthly in peer advisory boards, to grow their organizations and leadership skills, to God's glory.