

# How I ... Built a new venture from lessons learned in the locker room

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*It only takes a few minutes when speaking with **Cari Coats** to realize she's done just about everything, from working in television to being director of the **Rollins College's Center for Advanced Entrepreneurship**. But she'll be the first to admit she learned leadership through experience and practice.*



Cari Coats, co-founder of Accendo Leadership Advisory Group  
JIM CARCHIDI

*Take, for example, her time as part of the Orlando Magic startup management team. Her role was to focus on the fan experience, but her marketing plans didn't always sit well with the players and coaches. Coats constantly butted heads with others on the team — until she realized she needed to try to understand them.*

*So Coats went to the then-assistant coach (and later head coach) Brian Hill and confessed: She didn't understand the game of basketball. Coats asked Hill if he'd be willing to teach her, and he agreed. The following Friday, and many Fridays after, Coats met Hill in the locker room. She brought pizza, and he explained the game to her. The relationship formed a bond that enabled Coats to better perform her job and*

*compromise with the team.*

*It was her Magic experience and others like it that led Coats to start Accendo Leadership Advisory Group with her business partner, **Karen Dee**, the former president of Florida and the mid-South region for **Fifth Third Bank**. The company trains businesspeople on successful leadership behaviors — a perfect venue for Coats to apply the leadership knowledge she acquired over the years.*

*The year-old firm now has 10 clients that run the gamut from medium-size business owners to a Fortune 500 company it just signed. Here, Coats shares more on her latest venture:*

**What gave you the idea for this business?** Accendo is Latin for the word ignite. We think of ourselves as leaders igniting leaders. Karen and I both have run significant companies, and we both feel a really strong passion for the role leadership plays in helping companies move forward and achieve business objectives.

**What would you say are the fundamentals of leadership?** It's about understanding people, the organizational culture, the drivers of the business and where you're going. Whether you're running a technology or consumer company, the same leadership behaviors are essential for success.

**How was your humbling confession to former head coach Brian Hill a "leadership" moment for you?** That was where empathy and emotional intelligence really came into play. I realized I needed to walk in their shoes. I came to understand Brian, and he came to understand me. From that moment on, when I went to the coaches, Brian would have everybody listen and we'd be able to compromise. I learned that vulnerability, compromise, empathy and understanding where people are coming from is part of leadership.

**You've had experience in a lot of different industries. How has that helped you in this newest endeavor?** First and foremost, I'm a business junky. I love how business works — being a problem solver, putting the pieces of the puzzle together. I've been able to be successful in very different industries because, while having expertise in the technical subject matter is important, leadership is leadership. If you have that skill set, you can apply it in different settings and be successful.

**What are you really good at?** Relating to people. Any time I meet someone new, I try to make it a meaningful experience and find common ground. Subsequently, I think I have created a large network of people.

**What are you really bad at?** I am not a patient person. I work on that every day. I'm very much a driver.

**What's something people would be surprised to learn about you?** I am very sentimental. I will cry at the drop of a hat for anything that is heartwarming.

**What keeps you coming to work in the morning?** I really get excited to see what happens with great leadership, when there's real movement in the company, and they can meet business objectives and performance. When light bulbs go off individually and with teams, that excites me.

**Accendo Leadership Advisory Group**

Founded: September 2015

Description: Offers executive leadership training to a range of businesses

Headquarters: 3215 Greens Ave., Orlando

Top officials: **Cari Coats, Karen Dee**

Employees: 2

Contact: [cari.coats@accendoleader.com](mailto:cari.coats@accendoleader.com)