



cover story

# Saunders



a student first  
a teacher, always

**K**ay Saunders is a teacher. Her students, however, are nontraditional. They are business people who are striving to build a better product, improve business systems and grow their companies with the aid of Saunders' team at Bellewether. Her career experience is rich and varied and includes stints at IBM and AT&T before she founded her organizational development business in 1995.

She is a member of Rockhurst University's Board of Regents and was appointed by the Mayor of Lee's Summit to serve a four-year term as a Missouri Downtown Economic Stimulus Authority Commissioner. Kay's work as a business coach and consultant was showcased in the June 2007 issue of *Fortune* Magazine.

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Interviewed by Sheridan Sechter  
Photographed by Amy Schlatter, The RyeStudio





**Please tell us about your background.**

I have a Bachelor of Education degree from Lincoln University in Jefferson City and an MBA from Rockhurst University. I taught for three years, but ended up entering the corporate world and working for IBM and Digital Equipment Corporation in sales. From there, I went to work for Jostens Learning. I was a salesperson there for one year, but then had the opportunity to become a distributor. To do that, I had to start my own business and that's when Bellewether was born, in 1995. My first account was Anheuser Busch. They were very progressive. They set up learning labs in their company to foster the development of their employees in a number of areas, including literacy. Anheuser Busch referred me to one of my next clients, Miller Brewing Company.

**Please tell us about your business.**

Bellewether is an organizational development firm. We help other businesses be better by analyzing and improving their "four P's": people, processes, practices and performance. When these areas improve, then they typically will also see a better product.

Our clients include corporations, schools and community-based organizations. We also work with the Federal Government which includes contracts with FEMA, USDA, FAA and the Department of Labor.

**What has been the biggest challenge of your career?**

I work to overcome other people's perceptions of my limitations. I try to separate the fruit from the seeds or the value from the noise.

**What do you think has been your greatest accomplishment?**

In 1997, our company built and trademarked Human Asset Imaging courseware. It's a series of online assessment and training modules that assists with identifying strengths



and development needs in the areas of social, life and employability skills. We have touched and improved hundreds of lives across the country through this program and we continue to develop it over time. Our latest module is "Effective Professional Social Skills", which is currently being used by NASA to improve the interpersonal skills of its scientists. The objective of this particular course is to teach and promote the fact that trust improves when others see us as authentic and likeable.

## What is your passion?

My spiritual commitment is to be a bright light in the world. Though I used to fight it, I've come to embrace the fact that I'm a teacher. Rather than being in a traditional classroom, I teach through coaching, managing and training. To be a good teacher, you first have to be a student so I'm constantly seeking a new level of awareness.

## Do you have a mentor?

I have been blessed to have had many people who have encouraged and enlightened me along the way. A sampling would include Sharon Tillman at the Kauffman Foundation, Marvin Carolina of J.E. Dunn and Lonnie Scott of MidAmerica Minority Business Development Council.

My parents also served as excellent examples. My father, James A. Saunders, was the first black graduate of the University of Missouri's School of Journalism. There is a building named after him at Eastern Illinois University. He was likeable, affable and humble. My mother was the most brilliant, extraordinary woman who sometimes assumed that others knew as much about a subject as she did. When I didn't know, she would insist that I look it up rather than give me the answer. I didn't like that at the time, but it was a good lesson for me. She was a leader, but she didn't realize her power. This was probably due to the time in which she lived.

## What would you say are the main reasons for your success?

I don't believe that you can be an entrepreneur and not pray sometimes. Also, I'm always talking to others, reading and observing to learn what works. And, lastly, I help people get to where they want to go. I serve to remove their impediments so that they can soar. If you first seek to serve, then your business will grow.

Also, I am surrounded by extraordinary people including Jami Henry and Judy Teeters at Bellewether. They are lovely to be around and are great at what they do.



## How do you manage the rough patches that we all sometimes experience?

I study harder and go deeper. I examine myself for lessons and I try to find others who have experienced something similar. I like to go to the history books for this information and study what women like Elizabeth I and Mother Teresa did to cope with and improve as a result of their challenges. I research the work of other entrepreneurs. Usually the issue is in the planting, not the harvest. I've learned that one shouldn't focus on the crop. Rather, focus on the planting and the crop will take care of itself.

## What do you do to bring balance to your life?

I like quiet time for contemplation, spending time with friends and family, reading, listening to music and watching movies. I live.

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