

Inside Track



MICHAEL BUCK

Jennifer Maxson, center, relies on her team to deliver Varnum's leadership message to client companies. Working on a project with her are Pat Seguin, left, and Kris Ridings.

Crafting next tier of influential people is a development process

Tim Gortsema

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When it came time for Jennifer Maxson to step up and be a leader, she was ready.

But what else would you expect from Varnum Consulting's practice group leader?

"When I first joined (in 1996), I kind of asked myself, 'What is this leadership development?'" said Maxson, fresh off a two-year stint with the Downtown Management Board and, at the time, the new marketing and communications manager for Nancy Skinner & Associates.

She would soon find out and learn at the knee of one of the area's preeminent leadership and management consultants. When Nancy Skinner sold her business to Varnum eight years ago, Maxson made the transition, as well, now firmly entrenched in the ways of management consulting, executive coaching and customized leadership programs.

"The beauty of this, for me, was that I had a chance to have every role in the organization — and, of course, I had Nancy as a great mentor," Maxson said. "Then five years ago, through our own succession plan, Nancy gave me the reins of the organization. It was exciting, rewarding and a natural fit."

Today, Maxson wears three hats within the organization: She's the practice group leader, a consultant who builds partnerships with clients in Michigan and beyond, and a coach in Varnum's programs and services.

Varnum consults on strategy, coaching for building leaders faster and developing skills for strategic face-to-face communications, including externally in sales, marketing, public relations and investor relations, and



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Jennifer Maxson heads up Varnum Consulting, where she and her team offer consulting and coaching services to executives, external sales leaders, senior leaders and high-potential future leaders.

internally with alignment behind corporate change and employee relations.

Although headquartered in West Michigan, the firm works with clients around the country.

Actually, Maxson would be the perfect client for Varnum Consulting. Her career track and leadership training came from a natural progression of jobs with ever-increasing areas of responsibility.

In the real world, however, that type of transition isn't always the norm, which is why Varnum does what it does, she said.

"In an ideal world, we would work with a client (planning for) three to five years out to see who is in the pipeline, and develop bench strength in the organization. Sometimes we are able to do that, but sometimes we're not. It depends on the situation at the company.

"With the recession, people weren't leaving jobs. Now that the economy is turning, some companies are surprised to see key individuals leave, and they may not be prepared for that."

Maxson and the other five members of her team work with a variety of industries, including health care, higher education and manufacturing.

The specific industry isn't as important as the people within the client company, she said.

"We are trying to develop the next tier of leadership," she said. "There are a lot of common threads within each of the industries we're working with, but it can't be one-size-fits-all. What we are trying to do is show them the differences between leaders and managers."

Maxson said companies often miss the distinction between the two. Leaders don't necessarily have to be managers, she said. They can be key people within an organization's culture who take pride in their work, help others do their best, and do so in an unobtrusive, nonjudgmental way that inspires others.

"Leaders, no matter what industry they are in, can really rally the troops to an overall purpose. They take pride in what they are doing. These are the leaders we all want to work for. We want to know that what we're doing is having an impact, that it's important. And that doesn't change, whether it's health care or higher education or whatever."

Or shoveling snow for that matter. Maxson laughs when relating her first job experience, which was cleaning the office of her father, a Bay City podiatrist, as well as mowing the grass, shoveling the walkways and salting the parking lot in the winter.

"I just had to get up early and get it done before school. That's where you learn responsibility. If something has to get done, you do it. Of course, I was happy to pass that job along to my (younger) siblings."

That sense of family is important to Maxson. With three small children age 8 and younger, she and her husband, Gene, have plenty of juggling to do between home and work, which sometimes requires that she goes away on business for a couple of days or even a week at a time.

"I hear people talk about work-life balance, but you are never going to get a true 50-50 balance. Maybe it's 60-40 or 70-30.

"That's why I strive for harmony. This is very much a partnership with my family. (Gene) is there. The grandparents can help if needed. I want us all to be in harmony, so that work doesn't overshadow family."

Maxson said working with Nancy Skinner and Varnum Consulting has in many ways been like a family, too.

"People ask me why I would stay at one place for 15 years, because that's unheard of today, but I know it's right for me. When Nancy and I met, there was this sort of chemistry. I was just doing marketing and my degree was in PR, but it felt like so much more, like I was really contributing. And the people I work with today, I feel the same way about them. We are the 'Super 6.'"

Maxson said her career path has in many ways mirrored what she tries to teach her clients and the individuals with whom she works at those companies.

Jennifer Maxson

COMPANY: Varnum Consulting

TITLE: Practice Group Leader

AGE: 38

BIRTHPLACE: LaGrange, Ill.

RESIDENCE: Belmont

FAMILY: Husband, Gene; children Madison, 8, Gage, 4, and Kendall, 3.

BUSINESS/COMMUNITY

ORGANIZATIONS: Cook Leadership Academy Mentor, Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies, GVSU; Leadership West Michigan recruitment chair; Wolverine World Wide Family YMCA Board; Van Andel Institute J-Board.

BIGGEST CAREER BREAK:

Joining Nancy Skinner & Associates in 1996.

"The mission of our organization continues to be enhancing the credibility of leaders. Right now, we need leadership at all levels — public and private — regardless of industry."

Maxson is doing her part within the community. She was recently selected as one of 10 Young Professional Athena Award nominees for 2010 and 2011, is a member of the Business Journal's Forty Under 40 class of 2010, and was in the first class of Rising Women Leaders sponsored by Huntington Bank's Women's Advisory Board. She's also the recruitment chair for Leadership West Michigan.

Skinner quietly retired at the end of May, and Varnum Consulting hasn't missed a beat with Maxson fully at the controls.

"I kind of feel like I'm in that dream job," she said. "I'm having so much fun. I'm glad I got a chance to see how everything works here. Each culture is different, but if someone is going to open the door for you, you have to walk through it."

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