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Susan Ford Collins

Interviewed by Ron Hubsher

Getting the opportunity to chat with someone as influential as Susan Ford Collins should not be taken lightly. What she has studied throughout her career has been a breakthrough. Her expertise, wisdom, and unique insights into leading a successful life are powerful. I knew I needed to get all I could out of this interview.

Susan Ford Collins is fondly called “The Founding Mother” of The South Florida Strategic Forum. She considers the Forum and its student group “family.” Susan understands the power of community and leadership and what it takes to create a successful, well-balanced life.

Susan was born in New York City where her father attended law school at NYU. After graduating he and his young family returned to their roots in Richmond where he became a prominent lawyer and accountant. Today we’d call him a business turn-around expert. Susan spent her childhood in the now historic, early co-op called The English Village. Her grandmother lived next door. Two aunts and uncles lived in houses in the Village as well. Susan loved spending her days bouncing from family member to family member. She is especially grateful to her “grandmother the gourmet” who cooked in pinches and handfuls and encouraged Susan to understand the “hows and whys” of cooking and create recipes of her own. This early coaching would have a profound impact later in her life. Susan’s father bought Bodeker Drug Company, made it profitable, and sold it to Owens & Minor, a global healthcare-solutions-provider. It was a major career accomplishment for him, but sadly the move away from The English Village and his long hours away from home overwhelmed Susan’s mom and she became an alcoholic.

Susan attended Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts until the morning she received a phone call from her dad saying that she needed to come home to care for her younger sisters. Her mom had just been hospitalized. So Susan continued her education at The University of Richmond and graduated Phi Beta Kappa. She married and they had two daughters, but their marriage would end in divorce. Susan’s family experiences, positive and negative, made her want to study highly successful people to discover what skills they were using. Having been raised by a workaholic and an alcoholic, she knew she wasn’t ready to parent a successful family or team, So after graduation, she took a position at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) as a Research Psychologist.

A pivotal point in Susan’s life came after a year at NIH. A compelling idea started waking her up at night.

A month later, Susan raised her hand in one of their prestigious weekly conferences. Cheeks flushed, heart pounding and the youngest researcher in the room, she asked, “What more could we learn if we started studying highly successful, healthy people not just ill and dysfunctional ones? Are they using skills we could teach people who are missing or misusing them? She sketched out her proposal, but instead of being excited, the whole room laughed.

Red-faced, Susan had to make a life-changing decision on the spot. “Are all these people right that my idea is laughable and I should give it up? Or am I onto something Big they just don’t understand yet?” Later she realized that this is the challenge all innovators face.

Maybe NIH wasn’t ready for such bold innovation or they couldn’t grasp the breakthrough Susan was onto, but she didn’t let their laughter stop her. She spent the next 20 years as a single mom, raising her two daughters, teaching the gifted program in their school so they’d have the same schedule, and shadowing some of the most successful people in the world. Since 1985 Susan has taught The Technology of Success in over 4,000 corporate training sessions and she has written The Technology of Success Book Series: The Joy of Success, Success Has Gears, Our Children Are Watching, and Blur: Clear the Way Ahead. Her newest book is Becoming One Again ... Divorce, New Love and Life.

Now I would be remiss not to share a few of Susan’s Technology of Success skills. The first and most important skill is “Success Filing.” Susan says it’s crucial to spend time each day acknowledging yourself for the tiny steps you’ve taken in the directions you want to go. Don’t wait for other people to acknowledge you! They won’t. You are responsible for building and rebuilding your self-confidence, and the self-confidence of your family and team. Susan’s bestselling book The Joy of Success teaches the 10 success and leadership skills and has been translated into 15 languages. Susan is currently creating online programs for high school and college students and beginning to certify Technology of Success Schools.

Here’s another one of Susan’s valuable discoveries ... success and leadership have gears. Three gear-like phases, that each have their own needs, requirements and timings. To succeed with others we must be able to recognize which gear the person or team we’re working with is in and to shift into the corresponding leadership gear. To road to success requires us to shift up and down as circumstances require.

The third Success Skill is “The Science of Dreaming.” According to Dr. Karl Pribram, a Nobel-nominated neurosurgeon from Stanford University, our thoughts actually generate an electromagnetic forcefield that he was able to measure! Which thoughts are more powerful than others, you ask. The ones that are more detailed and multisensory, the ones we can see, hear, taste, feel and smell. To bring projects into reality, we need to create extremely detailed, multi-sensory outcomes and find others who can Co-Dream them with us. Committing to outcomes helps carry a team through the rough patches, the setbacks and failures.

Yes, creating our dreams requires hard work, but just as important is maintaining your balance throughout the journey. One morning at 4:30 am, (everyone knows Susan’s up that early) a director at American Express called. He said that one of his managers had just dropped dead in the parking lot. They wanted Susan to work with his team to figure out what went wrong and how to correct it. Ending up dead or in the ICU isn’t success, Susan reminds us. Your health and relationships shouldn’t be abandoned in the name of success. Maintaining your health and balance is the 10th Success Skill, one we all need to use. Early on when Susan was shadowing HSPs, she would take someone off her list if they weren’t using this skill!

The first HSP Susan shadowed was one she was most eager to interview. And they connected by chance. The principal of the school where Susan was teaching The Gifted Program asked her to attend the World Game conference at the University of Massachusetts. It was sponsored by Buckminster Fuller, the world-renowned architect at the top of Susan’s HSP list! When Susan arrived at the conference, she literally ran into Bucky in the hall! Even though Susan was stunned she seized the moment and told Bucky about her research and that she wanted to shadow him. Chuckling he responded, “ I like you young woman. You’ve got spunk! We can make this work” and they did. Bucky allowed Susan to spend three months shadowing him. At the end when she revealed the 10 skills she had seen him using, he responded, “Yes, Susan you’re right. I do all of those things. But doesn’t everyone?” And she quickly replied, “No, Bucky everyone doesn’t. That’s the point!” Then Bucky referred Susan to other successful leaders who who referred her to others. And so it went.

Flash forward to today, Susan has given over 4,000 training programs in corporations around the world, written six books, and been called “America’s premiere success and leadership coach” by CNN. Twenty years after being laughed at, Susan gave the keynote at the National Grant Management Association Conference. Afterward, twelve people came back to get their copy of The Joy of Success signed. They eagerly told her that they were the team currently in charge of grants at NIH. They only wished they’d been there the day she was laughed at you all those years ago. They would have given her a grant to do the research she’d had to fund on her own. Oh well! Timing is everything.

Susan’s book, Blur, talks about how grief can stop us from dreaming and looking ahead to the future. It’s a book she didn’t want to write because a tornado and a hurricane had struck her home. A month later her husband Albert was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer. And a month after that her sister Fran was told she had two advanced cancers. But ready or not, the book poured out, demanding a voice. Blur is a roadmap for navigating our way out of grief and loss. And helping others out too. Interestingly, if Susan could have dinner with any celebrity in the world (a question she was asked in a recent interview) it would be Anderson Cooper so they could talk about the work he’s done with grief and loss since his mother’s death.

In her spare time, Susan can be found tending her garden, her koi pond, or raising African and Australian finches. She’s also an accomplished photographer. Susan takes pictures for Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden which they use in ads and promotions. Susan also enjoys coaching her grandchildren as they navigate their careers. And she takes great pleasure in spending time with her unique and different daughters, Cathy the yoga teacher, and Margaret the neuroradiologist.

Susan Ford Collins offered up a giant wellspring of knowledge in the short time I got to speak with her, and I barely even scratched the surface. We should all do ourselves a favor and dive into her books to discover all the secrets to a successful and well-lived life. In parting, I will leave you with one of her most profound pieces of advice: “When everybody laughs at your idea it probably means you’re onto something they just don’t understand yet. And it could be something Big!”

We are so fortunate to have Susan as the founding Mother of the Strategic Forum. She nurtures and nourishes us with her wisdom, expertise and kindness!

Thank you, Susan.

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