The Master Plan
Anita Thompkins M.B.A. ’11

Changing direction can be challenging even when it’s part of a master plan. That’s what Anita Thompkins M.B.A. ’11 discovered when she switched careers not once, but twice. Both times she disciplined U.S. Air Force Academy graduate planned for it. But, as her story shows, she still needed focus and determination to get where she wanted to go.

Excelling at her Washington, D.C.-area high school and on the SATs, Ms. Thompkins had chosen to attend the competitive Air Force Academy mostly because it was free, with students committing five years to military service after they graduated. At the time, the U.S. military was shrinking, and there were more jobs available for engineers than in other areas she was interested in, so she majored in civil engineering and joined the Air Force’s bioenvironmental engineering division, which manages public health and environmental issues on Air Force bases. After two years as an environmental engineering consultant at Brooks Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, the military sent her to Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany to run the bioenvironmental engineering office. She managed a team of 25 that made sure the drinking water and waste treatment plants at the base—which included housing, a medical clinic, a childcare facility, and industrial shops for aircraft maintenance—were functioning properly in addition to monitoring air, noise, and occupational safety. “It was exciting because there was a lot of responsibility and there was always something going on,” Ms. Thompkins recalls. She also made time for her other passion, fitness training, teaching group classes before work at 6:00 a.m. and training clients after work and on the weekend.

In 1996, after seven years in the military, Ms. Thompkins decided to leave the Air Force and pursue a long-held dream of opening up her own fitness center. She knew she needed to learn more about running a business first, so she answered an ad from a fitness center in Bermuda that was looking for a director who could turn around a struggling club. She got the job, and spent the next year and a half solving problems like members not paying their dues (she introduced automatic checking account deductions) and revitalizing classes (she brought in a trainer from California for three months to launch a spin program, the first in Bermuda). Knowing that she needed a hook to convince people to train with her when she eventually opened up her own business, she also competed in body-building competitions while living on the island, so future clients “could see photos of what this girl could do,” she says. Her marketing research suggested New York City would be the best location for her business, and in 1999, she returned to the U.S. and opened a personal training studio in Chelsea.

The business took off, and over the next eight years, Ms. Thompkins grew it into a complete wellness center that offered cardio and weight training, yoga, Pilates, and nutritional counseling. When she turned 40, however, she decided that the long hours and constant hustling for new business would burn her out eventually, and it was time for another switch—a return to environmental work. There was one catch: she couldn’t get the kind of job she wanted.

A headhunter told her that she’d been out of the industry for too long and that she needed to upgrade her professional certifications. So Ms. Thompkins took a job as a fire protection specialist at a construction company to get back in the game. “It was a hard pill to swallow,” she recalls. Shes been the director of an important bioenvironmental office before, “and now I was working for a construction company wearing a hard hat and steel-toed boots. But I gave it my all.” She also enrolled in Adelphi’s weekend M.B.A. program to sharpen her management skills.

Her biggest challenge was “being open to how change happens,” she says. “It often comes in a different way than you pictured. You’re looking at the final goal and sometimes you have to do some steps in between.” But she kept her eye on the prize and, when faced with decisions, would ask herself, “Will this step help me get there?” She turned down a job in Seattle that was in her field but would not move her forward and, instead, took a position at an industrial acoustics manufacturer in the Bronx that would help her acquire LEED certification, for example.

Halfway through her M.B.A. program, her resolve paid off: the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency hired her to be chief of its drinking water and municipal branch for New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands in 2010. Ms. Thompkins now manages a staff of 26 that gives out $6.8 billion in loans and grants a year to agencies to build and repair water infrastructure and makes sure that drinking water plants, including the New York City water supply, comply with environmental laws.

The fact that she couldn’t reinvent her life instantly turned out to be a plus, she says. “All the jobs I had along the way have made me a better manager. And the M.B.A. program taught me how to figure out the strengths of people on a team and use them.” Ms. Thompkins’s main takeaway from her career evolution: “You’re always going to have fear,” she says. “I don’t let the fear win. I want to live a great life, a life that I create for myself, and I know if I don’t go after it, I won’t have it.”

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