



out of Africa

Not one to rest on her laurels, Mandy Holloway CA is on a mission to change those who are reluctant to do so.

Story Peter Switzer **Photographer** Anthony Geernaert

Mandy Holloway CA was born with a yearning for the wild. So, it might not come as a surprise that she had to learn to deal with the wilderness of being a woman in a man's accounting world some two decades ago. Of course that was then and the here and now is far more sensitive and new age. In fact, it has changed so much that Holloway has created a business that cashes in on the far-sighted accountants and other visionaries in business of the 21st century.

For those needing well-worn tags, she is an organisational change expert and describes the main task of Holloway Consulting as a business that "nurtures human capital".

Still uncertain about organisational change? Don't be alarmed, academics love to debate exactly what it is, but in simple terms we know organisations are continuously undergoing change that has to be managed. US expert on the subject, Richard Seel identifies four key areas where change happens in an organisation: processes, systems, structures and the organisation itself. Triggers such as mergers, a takeover or a simple sale of a business have big organisational change implications, and the law recognises that employees have rights and these have to be managed when times change.

It is a big and often ignored issue, but not by Holloway. "I work with my clients to develop their ability to manage teams of people and their tasks, help them commit to change which is imposed on them and to initiate change," she explains. "I also help with leadership, to unleash someone's potential and to assist their journey."

And when it comes to Holloway, her life and career has been a journey out of and into something that was implanted from her early childhood – Africa. Born in London, Holloway's South African father whisked her family off to Zambia when she was a toddler.

She emigrated to Australia as a teenager in the '70s and was schooled in the inner west of Sydney, before studying to be an accountant at the University of New South Wales and working as a cadet at Coopers & Lybrand between

1978 and 1982. Powering into the Chartered Accountants program in 1983, Holloway had a mission and was focused on one thing. "I wanted to be a partner," she recalls with great fervour.

CALL OF THE WILD

Typically, Holloway trekked overseas and met her eventual husband on a Contiki Tour and having no great interest in the UK or the US, she found herself working for Coopers & Lybrand in South Africa.

"It was an amazing experience and while I chose to go there, others did ask what I did wrong to wind up there," she laughs. "I loved the bush and the lifestyle. My father said to me when you've lived there, 'Africa is in your blood'."

Though her progress to manager status in South Africa was a feather in her cap, she ultimately headed back home where her old firm didn't significantly acknowledge her African experience and she admits she was not impressed.

"I spent nine months with a small firm and eventually PKF created a job which was half in auditing and half in setting up an internal learning department," she explains. "My goal was to create a profitable learning and development division to create learning solutions for clients."

Holloway had found that unlike many of her colleagues, she was actually good with handling people and that there was a need for accountants to understand their clients' business issues to provide effective solutions and manage their people. This change of focus coincided with her hitting her mid-30s and the arrival of her first child.

"Like many female accountants, I found it was a big struggle after having a baby because it was either come back as a full-timer or nothing," she recalls. "I still wanted to be a partner and PKF finally agreed by making me their first female partner." Her PKF stint was followed by five years as a partner at KPMG.

Despite her success in taming the accounting fraternity, the 'call of the wild'



Shot on location at Taronga Zoo, Sydney

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persisted and she eventually went out on her own and established her consulting business. The outcome was her response to two competing goals: to create a business career and have a significant family role.

“I was the first partner to take maternity leave at KPMG,” she says. And it is an irony that a woman who in her younger years had asked the profession to accept change is now in the business of helping them deal with the significant changes it is confronting. By the way, she points out, change is not just a threat to the profession as a whole but also to individual accountants.

“I worked with a female Chartered Accountant who wanted to be a partner and had received feedback that she had to develop in some areas,” she says. “The 360 degrees feedback can be quite confronting. The firm asked me to coach this woman and happily within six months she was a partner.”

Holloway adheres to the view that organisational change, which is her beat, is huge. “It can be a restructure of an entire business to simply a small system change to accepting a new culture in a business.” She believes that most organisational change is imposed and that’s why it creates issues for those who have to deal with it.

TAMING THE BEAST

On her professional colleagues, she has some confronting views herself. “Accountants are not good at accepting change,” she says. “It’s often nothing more than reluctant acceptance.”

One of their greatest challenges, she argues, is when they are promoted to manager status. “The bulk of an accountant’s education is on task-orientated activities,” she observes. “However, when they are made a manager they are turned on their head – suddenly they need to be good with people and build relationships.”

The problem is that change asks accountants to go where many have feared to tread. “You have to have the courage to go out there, make yourself vulnerable and embrace the change,” she advises. “If you don’t do this you lose much-needed positivity.”

Holloway thinks accountants, by their nature and education, are ignoring a threat to their business base: business coaches.

“Business coaches are a threat to our industry,” she suggests. “As accountants, we are not engaging with our clients on an emotional level; we stay in the safe zone. We have not been trained for it and fear taking it on.”

Similarly, she thinks her colleagues are losing the talent war. “We need to embrace generation Y to attract them to the profession,” she insists. “Once, a Chartered Accountant had to go into public practice to qualify, but we’re now competing with the likes of Macquarie Bank. I don’t think we have been ready for that.”

Generally, she believes the model that accountants have worked off for hundreds of years needs to change. And Holloway, given her background and training, is qualified to make this observation.

“My role in my business is to facilitate the thinking of my clients so they can reflect on their personal purpose and passion to commit to change,” she says.

These are words that many accountants might scratch their head and say: “What?” And others might even think the request for such a personal investment into change seems unnecessary and unreasonable. However, as George Bernard Shaw once concluded: “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.” Imagine what an unreasonable woman from Africa might be able to change? ●