

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

Lynn Thoman

(<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

Ep 43: Hard Won Wisdom From An Entrepreneur: Ellen Marie Bennett

INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers, and now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi everyone, it's Lynn Thoman, and welcome to another episode. Today, I'm excited to be talking to Ellen Marie Bennett, author of *Dream First* and founder of Hedley & Bennett, a multi-million dollar company. Ellen came from a single parent Latina family in LA, and she didn't have any experience in either design or manufacturing. Yet, she built Hedley & Bennett into the success it is today. I'm excited to learn about her hard-won wisdom from her years of dreaming first and jumping in and making things happen. Welcome, Ellen, and thanks so much for our conversation today.

Ellen Marie Bennett: Thank you, Lynn, I'm so excited to be here.

LT: My pleasure and thank you. In an earlier episode, I talked with Harvard Business School entrepreneurship professor Bill Sahlman, about what he learned from reading 10,000 business plans and investing in hundreds of startups. He said that execution trumps idea every time. And you personify that. I'm excited to get your perspective as someone who's successfully started and built a business by jumping in and executing with zero planning upfront. Can you tell us about how you started your apron-making business?

EB: Absolutely. So Hedley & Bennett began as an essentially custom business, making aprons for chefs in the restaurant world, I used to be a cook myself at a two-Michelin star restaurant, I hated our uniforms, and I decided that I wanted to do something about it to make them look and feel as good as they should, and because every night in a restaurant, it was like going into battle, you didn't know how the night was going to go, you didn't know what was going to happen in that kitchen, but you knew you needed to keep running until you got to the other end, which was get through every single seat, every single person that came to the restaurant and do it flawlessly because two Michelin stars is not just your average meal. And it was in this process of me working here that I looked around at our team and I was like, "Wow, we all look and feel like crap in here, and our uniforms really suck, they don't fit right, they are made out of paper thin materials, there's nothing sustainable about it, it's just not good."

EB: And I decided to make the perfect apron. It was a very dream first details later moment because I made that decision, and a couple of weeks later, one of my chefs said to me, "Hey, there's a girl, she's going to make us some aprons for the restaurant. Do you want to buy one?" And I had already had this idea and I thought, "Wow, what are the chances that somebody would be asking me this, I need to take this moment and I need to do those aprons, I don't know who's making these aprons, but it needs to be me." And so I blurted out like, "Chef I have an apron company, I'll make you those aprons." And that's how Hedley & Bennett began. So as you said earlier, no plan, a lot of

action, a lot of failure along the way, but I'm really grateful for having just leaped into that moment versus having over-thought it too much, because sometimes that stops the big dreams.

LT: So when you said, "Chef, I have an apron company," Did you actually have a company? Was it just an idea? Or had you actually started making aprons or sourcing materials or doing anything else?

EB: I had gotten my doing business as in California, and that was pretty much it. And so in the eyes of California, I was official. And that was enough for me. It was like, "Great, that'll work. Nobody else needs to know all the other details." And I literally clocked out of the restaurant and started calling people that I knew and saying, "I have this order, I'm doing this thing." I'm half Mexican, half English, so I was just in Spanish, in English, in anything I could get across to the person in front of me and just saying like, "Who do you know? Who makes a pattern? Where can I get fabric? Where can I find this?" And I really believe there's nothing like a deadline to get you going, it was like there was an outside force that was holding me responsible for committing and getting to something versus it just being like, "Oh, Ellen's going to work on aprons this week," and I loved that. It was like going into service a little bit, it was like being in a restaurant and I needed to get to the finish line, and that resonated with me, so I just had to ask a million questions.

EB: And the irony of it is that when you decide you're going to do something and then you just start going down the path, you learn so much on the actual path versus the analysis part, where now I have a whole village of amazing team members who help me do the details later, towards the beginning versus the end, as I clearly like to do, but for the longest time, it was just like me against the world, and it didn't always land perfectly, but the one thing I can say is there was always progress, there was always movement forward, no matter what.

LT: Most people spend so much time planning. Do you think it hurt you that you did not plan...? That you just jumped in?

EB: I think that there are certain things that happened along the journey that I probably wouldn't have had to go through, but if I look back, you know, I was 24 or 25 years old when I did this, I had just finished going to culinary school in Mexico City, I was young and honestly, really resilient, and I had been raised by a mom who was incredibly resourceful and who spent a lot of time making something out of nothing, and I got to watch that. And it's a beautiful gift. I don't care how much resources you have, to be able to be thoughtful and creative with the resources you have and really make a lot out of not a lot, is a gift. I just appreciated the journey that I took, and I don't know that I would have had it any other way, I also feel like I got five MBAs over the last nine years of having bootstrapped a business, scaled a manufacturing company, learned how B2B and D2C businesses work, and what is wholesale and how that world works, and how to hire people and how to change out people if something isn't working, it's just... The list goes on and on and on, and...

LT: And was that first batch of aprons critical?

EB: It was critical. And also, by the way, Lynn, they were terrible. When I turned them in, I thought they were the greatest things since sliced bread, and 24 hours later, the chef pulled me into his office and he's like, "These aprons suck." And I was like, "What?" And I almost died because here I was thinking, I had just landed on the moon, and he's like, "The straps aren't working, I don't like the way this is laying." And visually, they looked great, but in function there were details about

it that didn't quite land because we hadn't thought through everything, you know, we were learning. And I said, "Chef, keep half of them. I'll take the other half and let me fix the straps for you, don't worry, I've got this, I will take care of it. You're my chef. You're my first client, like, this is really important to me, I will make it work." I wasn't hiding behind my computer or the error, I was simply looking at it and recognizing there was a failure and what could we do to fix it, and then march forward. Don't sit there and overthink it, just do something to make it better and then keep going.

EB: So there was this always sort of energy thrust of forward progress, and every failure was just an indication to go left or right instead of straight, but it would never stop. "There's a detour. Okay, cool. We're going off-roading for a little bit. Great, and I've got a machete and I've got a little Mini Cooper, let's go." That's what it has felt like for a long time.

LT: Your aprons are more than a uniform, they're really an attitude. You changed the way kitchen staff look and feel. How did you achieve that?

EB: In the beginning, it was street by street, chef by chef, it was very grassroots. I would go to food events and attend big festivals and get in front of every chef I could talk to and introduce myself, and they didn't know who I was, nor did they really care, but I would come at them with a very humble enthusiasm, and so it's this combination of excited to share and willing to listen. Excited to share, excited to learn together is kind of a perfect combo because you're really enthusiastic about something, and then at the same time, you're really excited to hear what the other person has to say about the said thing you're so excited about. And what that does is it causes a sense of collaboration and it creates buy-in from the person in front of you. It also perks their interest because you're genuinely excited about it, but not in a way that's braggy, instead you're like, "Oh, my gosh, I'm working on this thing. It's so cool. I've been doing it for a few months. I've been talking to a bunch of chefs and I'd love to know what your thoughts are, do you mind if I come by restaurant or show you what I'm up to?"

EB: That's very different than, for example, "I have an apron company now. It's very successful. I love what I'm doing. And everybody loves it too" And you're just like, "Oh my God, get out of my face. I don't want to talk to you." Right? So it's the same kind of idea, but a very different approach.

LT: Very different approach, so interesting, because most people go in selling and it's a hard sell.

EB: Yeah. Do not make people feel like a transaction, or guess what, you're not going to get buy-in from them. So always start from a place of humble enthusiasm, and then you become friends with them, you get to know them and you're actually interested in the person in front of you and treating them like a friend, not like the fancy person that they are, and ironically, that really served me well because my emails are packed with exclamation marks and a lot of emojis, and we have outfitted everyone from SpaceX, Google, Yahoo, every major restaurant you can think of. Half the Michelin star restaurants in the United States, we're in over 6000 restaurants, and that's just on our corporate side of the business, so the people we've been working with are everyone from the head of the four seasons, to you name it.

EB: But I never treated anyone like it was some very serious, aggressive business deal. If anything, we treated them like they were a friend and we were somebody that was going to be their ally in getting this thing that they needed to get, and they happened to be working with somebody that they

really liked, so it became a long-term relationship. So I always thought long game, old school, keep your promises, your word is gold, and because we did that, we've created these really long-lasting relationships with people like Martha Stewart and David Chang, and so many prolific incredible chefs now are die-hard Hedley & Bennett fans for life because they've just been in the journey with us, not like transactions, but like actual allies and co-pilots.

LT: And they are, more than Hedley & Bennett fans, they are Ellen fans as well. They all adore you.

EB: It's very special to have all of those wonderful people in my life, but a lot of those people became part of my life because of Hedley & Bennett and because I met them through there, so there's no reason that just because you have a business, you need to treat people in a way that is different. I think people really like feeling like human by another person, and because I didn't get an MBA and didn't go to business school, I just kind of decided to do things that worked because I was watching people and I was using my own observation skills, my own emotional intelligence to navigate the world. And that's what I saw people responded to, so I just kept doing more of that, and that's the key. It's like, people at the end of the day are human. So watch and learn and see what resonates with them. It's like, "Okay, they want to be treated like humans. That makes sense. I'm going to do more of that." They want to be friends first, and then if they need something from you, they will eventually come back. It's a great thing.

LT: Yeah, your genuine interest in them, and enthusiasm for them really comes through and is wonderful. The other thing that you did, which I thought was so interesting, was that rather than ever sell, which you never seem to do, you ask people for advice and you're genuinely interested in their advice, and you follow their advice and you come back to them with changes made because of what they've said to you.

EB: That's right, and I think that people really value that because a lot of people can give a lot of people advice, but if they actually put it into application and then it works for you. The least you can do is go back to that person and say, "Hey, remember that thing you told me to do, it actually really worked. And look what I got, and this is what happened." And there's that humble enthusiasm coming out, and guess what, it probably will strike up another conversation where they're like, "Oh well, if you need anything else, let me know," because now they're doubly bought into you, and they're excited because you're succeeding and you're sharing with them, so they feel their own little commitment to the journey. It was simply people contributing to my journey and me being responsible to come back to them and say, "Hey, this worked, this didn't... What do you think about this? Look at that." And keeping the ball rolling forward with them, and eventually they're very good friends of mine and just mentors for life, but I started the seed and just kept moving it forward, so I talk a lot about that too. Back to the idea of, not everything has to be absolutely perfect in some elegant mentorship where it's on paper that just doesn't actually really exist. You need to find the people that are going to help you, but just be friends first, and the rest comes after.

LT: And no doesn't actually mean no to you, Ellen. Can you tell us a little bit about that? What does no mean to you?

EB: Absolutely, the idea of no is essentially very similar to one of my favorite phrases, which is, if the front door isn't open, you climb in through the window, and the concept behind that is, okay, life is long journey, business is an even longer journey, and you're going to hit a lot of roadblocks and

stops and accidents on the freeway, and when I have that, it's an opportunity really to go left or to go right and to pivot, but not necessarily to stop. It's not a no right now, it's maybe a yes later is kind of my approach to it. It's taken many years to just not ever take it personally, but I've recognized that for every no I get, some other really fantastic opportunity or learning experience happens pretty subsequently. And it's great if you just keep going because imagine if every single time you got no, you had stopped there, think about all the experiences after that point that you wouldn't have gotten... And that list is long. So I really rarely take a no as a no, and I just take it as a detour.

LT: What is the single most important thing that you attribute your success to?

EB: Showing up and showing up and continuing to show up no matter how hard things get, no matter how difficult, the journey is. One of my favorite things is they're not bumps in road, they are the road, and when you know that as a person, as a human, as an entrepreneur, it really does help because it takes a little bit of the sting away every time you fail, which inevitably is part of the journey. When you and I were talking about Danny Meyer earlier, who's an incredible restaurateur, and Danny founded Shake Shack, which is a unicorn of a company, in the grand scheme of things, the IPO, they started as a literal shack selling burgers. But guess what, Danny has also had many, many businesses that did not succeed, and he has risen and he has had his failures and he's closed restaurants, and that's the thing. He's resilient. He marches on anyway, and the more you are willing to just keep showing up and trying, the more chances you actually have to find a unicorn to kill it in some special way, and so that is a big belief of mine is I just keep marching forward. No matter what.

LT: That's what I admire so much about you, Ellen, is that you are always marching forward, you're always taking action, you never stop, you try something, and if it doesn't quite work the way you want, you pivot, but you keep going. And that's wonderful.

EB: Thank you. It's been a hard-earned skill, but I'm incredibly grateful to have it, and I would say that my team is very much the same way, and when we are hiring new team members, we look for those values. Are you a problem-solver? Do you have no ego? Are you willing to learn? Because if you're willing to learn, you're willing to grow, and if you don't have an ego about it, you don't have something stopping you from saying, "I don't actually know how to do that." And it's so crucial to always think of yourself as a student of life, like you're just... Every day, you are learning something new from your team members, from the world, from your mistakes, from all of it, so... Don't stop learning people.

LT: Ellen, what were your biggest mistakes? And how did you recover? What did you learn from them?

EB: One of my biggest mistakes that actually took a very long time to course correct was this idea of I could do it all, and that I was a one-man band, and that I could will it all into existence if I just showed up and I realized at one point of the journey that you have a great idea and you need to just push yourself out into the universe to get the idea started. But then at some point in the journey, you got to get the details into when the processes and the rail road tracks down on the ground, so that you can achieve velocity. And for a long, long time, I was just running so hard on my own that I wasn't really putting in the time or the correct resources to ensure that my team was able to keep up with all of the Ellen ideas, and because I had been so independent and I had been raised by a single

mom. I just had this as my ball back, that was just how I got things done, and it took many, many mistakes just in the land of people, until I got to a place where I recognized that team is everything, and you actually have to work at it.

EB: It is not just something that happens by default. And when you have a team that feels taken care of and supported and you have processes and they have direction and clarity and priorities set in a certain way, everyone is more successful. And even if you have to slow down a little bit to speed up, it's worth it, but that took many, many, many, many failures and many failed attempts. And I hate to say it even relationships that were broken because when I first started Hedley & Bennett, I hired friends of friends and anybody that I knew that could help me. And then we got to a place in the business where we really had to get even more team members that had even more experience and that transition from scrappy to Pro is a tough one to take when you're building something out of nothing. And I think that not enough people talk about it, but I know that every entrepreneur goes through it. So people shouldn't feel bad if they are going through it, they just need to recognize that it is a very important pillar of your organization, are the people.

LT: Before I ask for your three key insights or takeaways, Ellen, is there anything else you'd like to talk about that you haven't already mentioned?

EB: I would say that right now is one of the wildest times in our lives, we just came out of COVID, we have never had the world be in such a reset moment, and it's an opportunity because we all just earned these crazy resilience stripes, if you will, and we all just whether we wanted it or not, earned a lot of grit and really took that on. And so it's a moment in time to look at your life and reassess, "What am I going to do?" And if you've had dreams or ideas that you've wanted to go after for a long time, there's not a better time than now to actually go after them. And a lot of things that existed for a long time have gone away, and a lot of old ideas and old beliefs have been shaken and play books have been lit on fire and thrown out the window. So take that leap and yes, you will work on the details later, but you don't need to work on all the details first, just begin and start showing up, and I hope that this is the kick in the pants that you need to just take that big first step.

LT: Ellen, what are the three key takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today.

EB: I would say start before you stop, meaning, show up, do it, learn from the journey, don't learn from the theory of what you think will be on the journey. I would say use humble enthusiasm with everything you do and always treat people like people, not like transactions. And remember that they're not bumps in the road, they are the road, and that for every success you see out there, there's 20 failures behind it. And it is part of the journey, so don't ever take it personally, but simply learn from it. They are like steps on a staircase versus rocks on your shoulders, don't take it like a rock, take it like a staircase. That was a mistake that's going to get you to another place, and you just learned something, so good job for surviving it. And of course, last but not least, dream first details later. That is what it's about, and you are the driver of your own life car, so start driving that car where you want to go.

LT: Ellen, this has been terrific, and I also really enjoyed your book. It's well written, your stories are great. Thank you so much.

EB: Thank you Lynn.

OUTRO male voice: If you enjoyed today's episode, you can listen or subscribe for free on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. If you would like to receive information on upcoming episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at 3takeaways.com or follow us on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Note that 3takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. For all social media and podcast links go to 3takeaways.com.