

It's not easy being a woman in business – the glass ceiling, the juggle of family life, the omnipresent feeling you're not doing everything justice... NEXT spoke to five successful career women who now give back through business mentoring. Here they share their stories and their secrets of success

BY DEBBIE HARRISON

## Finding your creativity again



*Maree (Ree) Smith, 53, spent 20 years in corporate HR and 15 years in property investment. Now she owns and designs her own clothing label, Minnie + Ree, as well as doing change management and organisational development on contract. She's been mentoring small New Zealand and Fijian businesses for 14 years.*

### On changing her life

About 10 years ago I was in the wrong job, wrong business and wrong relationship, so I stopped the world and got off for a while. I used up most of my savings but it was worth it. I had been very creative in my teens and 20s but had lost that through working in the corporate world. Eventually I moved into coaching part-time and found my creativity coming back, which started me on my path to Minnie + Ree.

For my mentoring, I did some training in the areas of neuro-linguistic programming and Myers Briggs personality testing, which met my fascination with how and why people act and feel the way they do. I love that stuff.

### On running her own business

I started in the clothing business with no industry experience at the start of the global financial crisis, so it was an interesting time – and a good thing I had a second income. I did get the balance wrong a few times and money was pretty tight, but it was all good training.

I still do a market stall at Underground Market on Wellington's waterfront and it's important that I do – the customer contact and feedback is excellent for developing my clothing range and philosophy, plus it's good to spend time in a tough retail environment. I do enjoy the challenge of working online, though. It's very hard work and intellectually challenging – you need to be constantly putting your brand out there.

### On challenges she's faced

My ongoing challenge has always been getting the balance right. I often take on too much work, but when you love what you do it's sometimes hard to tell the difference between work and play! I don't like the phrase 'work/life balance' because, to me, my work is a huge part of my life and most of my ideas come when I'm not consciously working.

### On business mentoring

As a former HR manager, I often work with clients on the people issues associated with

their business. I am also part of a team that goes up to Fiji every six months to provide mentoring to their businesses.

### On the issues she sees women in business struggling with

Being too busy being busy, and losing sight of the big picture as a result. When you are rushing around, being all things to all people, you get overwhelmed by the never-ending To Do list. I am a huge fan of mind mapping – a one-page mind map which gives you a clear view of where you are going and stops you getting overwhelmed by all the things you have to do. I have some lovely messy ones drawn on paper bags and other scraps of paper, done when I've grabbed a spare moment to brain dump and get clarity. The mind map gives you your overall direction or goal, it chunks up the endless list items and lets you prioritise what's important. I can't function well without them. To teach clients how to use them, I use a children's mind-mapping book – it's much quicker to comprehend and has no business jargon! >>

## On what advice she offers to women in business

**1** Know yourself. Use every opportunity that comes your way to understand yourself, your strengths, weaknesses and what you love doing. Use the same tools to understand others – and respect their strengths and weaknesses.

**2** Play to your strengths and try to get others to cover your weaknesses, but remember that you are still responsible for them.

**3** Be authentic. It's just too tiring pretending to be someone else!