



Debbie Tennick, left, co-owner of Tanner's Pub, and Lori Waters, owner of Built by Waters, were among those who shared insight into their decisions Tuesday at a Business of Polk's Business Women session in Winter Haven.

# Lessons Learned

## Successful Women Recall Their Worst Business Decisions

By MARY TOOTHMAN

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WINTER HAVEN  
It wasn't easy for five successful women to talk about their worst business decisions, but they shared them anyway Tuesday in a lively panel discussion.

Top on the list? Making decisions with the heart only and not the mind. It was just one of the topics that cropped up during the second annual Business of

Polk's Business Women, presented by the Winter Haven Area Chamber of Commerce.

The women talked about what they have done right and where they have gone wrong, and shared insight with more than 50 people at the Lake Region Yacht and Country Club.

Loretta Mervis, Wachovia's East Polk County Community Bank president, said poor decision-making in her career history has a pattern. "Every time I made a decision just with my heart, or

just with my head, it was always a bad decision," she said. Using both is what has worked, she said. "To engage my heart and my head together, that's when I make the best decisions."

For Mary Ellen Poe, executive director of the Good Shepherd Hospice, a rash decision was the wrong one. She said she once awarded a large contract to someone who was well-spoken and charming — without shopping

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around first. "Later, I began to realize what I did," she said. "I just reacted too quickly, and didn't use good common sense."

Later, she realized others offered a much lower cost for the same service.

"I didn't really think through that whole process. I learned a big lesson from that," she said.

It's also important, Poe said, to have the ability to admit a mistake and fix it. "If something keeps bothering you after you made a decision, it probably needs to be looked at again. Rethink it," she said.

Debbie Tennick of Tanner's Pub also cited emotional decision-making as a problem area. "Some decisions are just made for the betterment of the business," she said. "It's great if you're having fun and

you love what you do. But really, at the end of the day, it's the success of your business that matters."

Lori Waters of Built by Waters talked about a bad decision she once made because of ego — and the inability to say no. She got involved in a project that was doomed and couldn't get out of it, she said. "There were some signs along the way, some problems," she said. "I ignored them. There were just lots of red flags that kept going up."

Follow your instincts, she said. "You don't have to take on a project if you don't feel right about it," she said.

For author Sharon Schuller Kiser, risk-taking was beneficial. She said it wasn't easy for her to leave other work to write a novel, but she was glad when she did.

Tennick also cited risk-taking as

an important factor in successful decision-making. It took nerve, she said, to leave an earlier career to join her husband in the restaurant business.

"That was the scariest and hardest decision I ever made," she said. "I was very afraid because I was very much out of my comfort level."

In the end, she said, it turned out to be a great choice.

She added that when all is said and done, even a so-called "bad decision" really might not be a mistake. "When you look back at those, at the time, based on what we knew then, it was not the wrong decision at all," she said. "Sometimes it was really best, taking that leap of faith."

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