



Karen Vernal and Laura Piotrowski hold the 1996 Atlanta Olympics torch.

Karen Vernal passes the torch to former client

By Brandon Anderegg, staff writer

LAURA PIOTROWSKI attributes the leadership training of Milwaukee-based Vernal Management Consultants with helping her rise to an executive position within Robert W. Baird early on in her career.

Now, Piotrowski owns the firm that helped shape her own leadership.

After 20 years as president and chief executive officer of Vernal Management Consultants, its founder Karen Vernal recently passed the torch to Piotrowski, selling her the business in October. The firm, which specializes in leadership development and executive coaching

for businesses and organizations, has changed its name to Vernal LLC with Vernal remaining involved as a consultant and close advisor.

Since 1999, Vernal and her team have trained thousands of leaders across several industries, working with all-sized companies, mostly local, including Northwestern Mutual, Baird, Rockwell Automation and Harley-Davidson.

Piotrowski, founder and president of Cavendish Consulting, LLC, was previously the chief financial officer and vice president of human resources at Stein's Garden & Home. However,

Piotrowski spent the majority of her career at Baird, where she was managing director of finance.

When she received training through VCM, Piotrowski said it allowed her to track her functional competency and reflect on insightful questions posed by her coach.

"What it did for me and what I see it doing for other leaders is that accountability," she said. "It holds you accountable for moving that needle yourself."

Throughout Vernal's career, she's discovered that most executives become leaders because of their

functional competency, meaning they are good at their particular job. However, just because someone is a great engineer, doctor or accountant, it doesn't always equate to expert leadership skills, she said.

"People have some intuitive ability, but it's a different tool box," Vernal said. "Organizations, I think, have the responsibility to really provide the tools for their leaders to be successful."

It's not uncommon for executives to have never experienced a confidential relationship where they can raise concerns over competency in a safe space, Vernal said. Even if a leader can ask those questions, he or she is often too busy working in the business, leaving little time to work on the business or on themselves, Piotrowski added.

"To have a moment or an hour to reflect with someone that is providing the time and energy around focusing internally, your behaviors and thoughts,

it's a huge leadership advantage," Piotrowski said.

Emotional intelligence is at the core of Vernal LLC's model, with self-awareness and bridge building as major components of the company. Vernal LLC is one of two firms in the country certified in emotional intelligence by the Institute for Health and Human Potential.

With Piotrowski now at the helm of Vernal LLC, the company continues its legacy of having a team with a variety of backgrounds.

In 1999, Vernal, who previously served as director for behavioral health agency Hawkins Donovan and Associates' corporate division, purchased the division from Jo Hawkins Donovan, who laid the foundation for what Vernal LLC is today. Vernal is a BizTimes Milwaukee strategies columnist, and Hawkins Donovan is formerly a BizTimes Milwaukee strategies columnist.

When Hawkins Donovan signed

over the business to Vernal, the deal was sealed over a lit candle and a bit of poetry – the beginning of what Vernal considers a successful career guided by an "uncommon" approach to leadership training, she said.

"I think it's a reflection of the way we have humanized our work and how we help leaders humanize their work as leaders," Vernal said.

Fast forward to 2020, Vernal and her team's style of leadership is still heavily influenced by Hawkins Donovan's background in mental health and counseling but has evolved to include Vernal's background in social work, and Piotrowski's wealth of corporate experience.

"It's not about me or us," Vernal said. "It's about the engagement of the clients. They have to do the work. We can help to guide, but leaders that really want to learn and grow, the opportunities for them are endless." ■