**A brown building with many windows

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**Building Success: Calisse’s Journey from Engineer to Entrepreneur**

Entrepreneurship often starts with an unexpected opportunity, a leap of faith, and a drive to create something meaningful. For Calisse, the path from industrial science to civil engineering, and eventually business ownership, was filled with challenges, adaptability, and a passion for problem-solving. Her story is one of resilience, strategic thinking, and the importance of relationships in building a successful business.

**A Shift in Career Plans**

Calisse grew up in Palmyra, Missouri, and initially planned to study architecture at Kansas State. However, at the last minute, she decided to stay closer to home and attended Truman State University, where she earned a degree in industrial science. While the early 1980s job market proved difficult, she adapted by obtaining her education degree and briefly teaching before pivoting once more into the engineering field.

Her entry into civil engineering was almost accidental. A connection at the city of Kirksville led to a job opportunity with the city engineer’s office. What started as "grunt work" quickly became a passion, and she discovered that civil engineering was far more engaging than what she had studied in college. This hands-on experience laid the foundation for a career that would span multiple companies and, eventually, her own business.

**Taking the Leap into Business Ownership**

After working for various engineering firms, including a 15-year tenure at Missman, Calisse faced a turning point. With limited opportunities for career advancement, she and a colleague decided to start their own company—J&M. As a Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE), their firm aimed to secure government contracts designated for women- and minority-owned businesses.

Starting J&M was both exciting and daunting. The first few months were spent working from their kitchens, later upgrading to a small office with rented space. Funding was tight, requiring personal investments in computers, software, and certifications. It took an entire year to obtain DBE certification, which involved rigorous documentation and verification. Despite the challenges, Calisse and her business partner pressed forward, securing small jobs through networking and former clients.

**Overcoming Business Challenges**

One of the biggest surprises in starting J&M was the reality of wearing multiple hats. As a business owner, Calisse wasn’t just responsible for engineering work—she also had to manage accounting, marketing, and administration. While she had expected contracts to roll in quickly, securing DBE work was a slow process that required persistence and relationship-building.

An eye-opening moment came when a mentor from the DBE office reviewed their financials and told her bluntly: “Don’t be nice in business. Ask for what you deserve.” This lesson in valuing their work and ensuring fair compensation became a guiding principle for the company’s success.

J&M slowly grew, hiring employees and expanding its reputation. However, by the time COVID-19 hit, both founders were feeling the strain of running the business. While they had survived the pandemic and secured contracts, the increasing administrative workload took them away from their core passion—engineering.

**The Decision to Merge**

After seven years of business ownership, Calisse and her partner began considering the next step. They were approached by multiple firms interested in acquiring J&M, but many saw them simply as employees rather than business leaders. Eventually, through a trusted connection, they were introduced to RTM, a firm looking to expand its civil engineering division.

RTM provided the perfect balance—allowing J&M’s team to continue its work while benefiting from the support of a larger organization. The merger took place on February 1, 2021, exactly seven years after J&M was founded. Transitioning into a larger company came with a learning curve, but over time, it became clear that the move was the right decision.

**Lessons in Entrepreneurship**

Calisse’s journey offers several key takeaways for those considering business ownership:

1. **Adaptability is Key** – Be willing to pivot and seize opportunities, even if they weren’t part of the original plan.
2. **Value Your Work** – Never undersell yourself. Ask for what you’re worth and stand by it.
3. **Build Strong Relationships** – Networking and personal connections are crucial in securing business opportunities and long-term success.
4. **Be Prepared for the Business Side** – Running a company isn’t just about doing what you love; it’s also about managing finances, marketing, and operations.
5. **Know When to Evolve** – Whether it’s expanding, merging, or shifting focus, being open to change ensures sustained success.

**Looking Ahead**

Now part of RTM, Calisse continues to bring her expertise to civil engineering projects while benefiting from the resources of a national firm. Her journey—from an uncertain college student to a thriving entrepreneur—proves that success is built on resilience, relationships, and the willingness to take bold steps forward.

For aspiring entrepreneurs, her story serves as both inspiration and practical insight: Dream big, work hard, and never underestimate the power of the people around you.