



Authority Magazine
Top Lessons. Top Authorities

Lizz Welch of iDE: Why We Need More Women Founders & Here Is What We Are Doing To Make That Happen

July 16, 2023



Written by Yitzi Weiner

7.9K Followers · Editor for Authority Magazine

A "Positive" Influencer, Founder & Editor of Authority Magazine, CEO of Thought Leader Incubator



Invest in authentic relationships with others — Careers and businesses twist and turn throughout the years. By consistently investing in relationships and maintaining loose ties with several people, you'll have a network of support for your own twists and turns in your career.

As a part of our series about "[Why We Need More Women Founders](#)", I had the pleasure of interviewing Lizz (Ellis) Welch.

Lizz (Ellis) Welch became CEO of iDE Global in January 2019, after spending five years as COO, when she led the organization through a period of growth, deploying her skills in management, business development, and a commitment to financial integrity. iDE brings the best in development, combining impact and value for money with an entrepreneurial approach that empowers the rural poor. A seasoned expert in gender, monitoring and evaluation, finance, and economic growth, Lizz has more than 20 years of experience with designing solutions for challenging markets in Asia, Africa, Central America, and the Middle East. She holds a master's degree in public administration/public policy with a specialization in international nonprofit management from Rutgers University and a BA in history and global development studies from Grinnell College. She also served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco. Lizz is a certified high-performance coach and has been consistently recognized for her passionate commitment to developing those with whom she works.

Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we dig in, our readers would like to get to know you a bit more. Can you tell us a bit about your “backstory”? What led you to this particular career path?

When I was in high school, the AIDS crisis was a common topic of discussion as my mom worked as a medical technologist and we had a close family member who was gay. At the same time, I got involved with letter-writing campaigns for Amnesty International, advocating for improved human rights. When I left for college, I knew I wanted to get involved in stopping the spread of AIDS and that I was interested in international work. As a result, in college I decided to focus on sub-Saharan history and global development studies. I studied abroad in Namibia where the AIDS infection rate was one in four. While there, I volunteered for the Namibia Women’s Center, the country’s first women’s nonprofit. I worked on grant-writing to help the center set up a laundry business to provide steady revenue for the center and income for the women working there. It was at that moment that I recognized the importance of economic empowerment — helping grow household incomes so that women can choose how to invest their income, by starting a business or sending their children to school, for example. From that point forward I have focused my career on supporting women artisans to supporting smallholder women farmers in Nigeria and helping them double and triple their income.



Elizabeth Welch in Bangladesh making her first field visit after becoming iDE’s CEO in 2019.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began your career?

When I worked in Morocco in the agriculture sector, we were trying to figure out how to replace the country's long-held practice of growing and exporting strawberries in the north of the country. Morocco could no longer compete with Chinese strawberry exports due to higher labor costs. We partnered with UC Davis to import tissue cuttings for blueberries, blackberries, and raspberries and then worked with a lab to multiply the tissue cuttings to test the suitability of these crops to the Northern Moroccan landscape. Within a year of introduction, Morocco became the highest exporter of blueberries to the UK in a single growing season. I learned how quickly market dynamics can shift, creating new opportunities and new challenges at an unprecedented pace.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

On one of my early trips to Vietnam, I made the mistake of expressing my appreciation for the fruit that was served during the meeting. Throughout the rest of my stay in Vietnam, every new meeting ended with someone gifting me a bag of fruit. Yet while the gifts of fruit were incredibly thoughtful — and heavy — they were impractical due to the fact I would be boarding an airplane in a few short days. I learned that it is important to know the gift-giving protocols when traveling to avoid inadvertently triggering gifts that I can't reciprocate.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

Shortly after the birth of my second child, my family was struggling to cover daycare costs for two kids and my company at the time was going through layoffs. I decided to volunteer to be laid off because the cost of daycare for two kids exceeded my salary. The vice president for my division convinced me to wait a week while he looked into some options. He came back with an offer I couldn't refuse — the ability to work remotely at three-quarters time. This was back in 2007, way before Covid and the recognition that remote work is feasible. That offer allowed me to stay in my career while also caring for my kids. Without that opportunity, my career would likely have ground to a halt. Instead, about nine months later I had the opportunity to move my family to Morocco and take on a senior management position in our office there.

Is there a particular book that made a significant impact on you? Can you share a story or explain why it resonated with you so much?

The Obstacle Is the Way: The Timeless Art of Turning Trials into Triumph by Ryan Holiday. I am a big fan of the stoics. The basic premise of the book is that what is holding you back becomes the very thing that helps to make you stronger and break through challenges. My favorite quote in the book is this: "What blocked the path now is a path. What once impeded action advances action. The Obstacle Is the Way."

Do you have a favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Do you have a story about how that was relevant in your life or your work?

I am a big fan of the serenity prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." My mom was an alcoholic when I was a young kid and went into treatment when I was in third grade. From that point on, the whole family was enrolled in the AA programs — and the serenity prayer was a constant at those meetings and within my family. As I have gotten older and faced difficulties, I have relied upon the serenity prayer to discern whether the situation is something I cannot change or whether I need to summon the courage for change. It's a very comfortable mantra for me that reminds me to pause and reflect when I feel overwhelmed or challenged, and it's very much in line with ancient stoic wisdom to evaluate "what is up to us, what is not up to us."

How have you used your success to make the world a better place?

Throughout my career in international development, I have used my influence to improve the ratio of women benefiting from training and investment. When I worked in Nigeria with smallholder farmers on our data team, I noticed that only five percent of the farmers we were investing in were women. After asking some questions, it became clear that not a lot of effort was put into enrolling women in our training programs. My first year I set a quota of enrolling at least 30 percent women. In a single year we made that happen, and the women outperformed the men in terms of yield. As CEO at iDE, I have placed a strong organizational focus on deepening gender equity and social inclusion. As we look to the future, we are centering our focus on empowering women entrepreneurs as agents of change in their families and in their communities.



Elizabeth Welch in Zambia in 2023 with Alice Zulu and Panima Gwilizani from Mwachisompola camp in Chibombo District. Photo by Pezo Siabasimbi.

Ok, thank you for that. Let's now jump to the primary focus of our interview. According to this FY report, only about 20 percent of funded companies have women founders. This reflects great historical progress, but it also shows that more work still has to be done to empower women to create companies. In your opinion and experience what is currently holding back women from founding companies?

I believe it is a combination of factors. First, imposter syndrome can be a huge detractor from taking the risk of founding a company; would-be women founders need access to incubators and accelerators as well as seasoned mentors. Second, women often face barriers in accessing capital and investment funds. And third, given the lower prevalence of women founders, would-be women founders have less exposure to successful women founders. Networking and mentorship programs go a long way toward inspiring women and giving them confidence to launch their companies.

Can you share with our readers what you are doing to help empower women to become founders?

As CEO of iDE, we are focusing our next strategy on supporting women entrepreneurs across Africa, Asia, and Central America. We work with women to start micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises in the agriculture, water, and sanitation sectors that deliver social impact for their families and their communities. We provide knowledge and skills transfer and help to create an ecosystem for these businesses to thrive. For example, we help to link these businesses with access to capital and access to improved technology to scale their businesses. We help to prototype business plans and new lines of business, and we support market-testing of the products and services to ensure market demand prior to scaling.

This might be intuitive to you but I think it will be helpful to spell this out. Can you share a few reasons why more women should become founders?

Women leaders, on average, create stronger company cultures and more profitable businesses. They hire more women and focus on creating solutions that serve women. For the social impact sector where I work, this translates into greater social impact. Women-led businesses tend to be more environmentally conscious and provide better benefits that lead to greater wellness for employees. Finally reaching gender parity in entrepreneurship could add \$5–6 trillion in net value creation.

Here is the main question of our interview. Can you please share 5 things that can be done or should be done to help empower more women to become founders?

1. Mentoring — Get a mentor early in your career. Seek out someone who challenges you to be a better version of yourself and who can support you as you grow and learn in your career.
2. Hire a high-performance coach — Coaches help people discover the answers inside themselves and commit to making choices that serve their future selves and bring balance between personal and professional goals, enabling them to sustain high performance without sacrificing health and happiness.
3. Surround yourself with people who inspire you to be a stronger leader and who challenge you to grow continuously.
4. Have fun — Life is too short not to pursue work that is meaningful and fun.
5. Invest in authentic relationships with others — Careers and businesses twist and turn throughout the years. By consistently investing in relationships and maintaining loose ties with several people, you'll have a network of support for your own twists and turns in your career.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good for the greatest number of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.

Investing in others — I would want to see broad buy-in to the importance of each person investing their time, talent, and resources in other people to help them grow and develop for the communal good. If we can inspire a culture where neighbors, co-workers, family, and friends actively seek out opportunities to help others, we would help to strengthen the social fabric that ties us together as humans.

We are very blessed that some very prominent names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them.

Jamie Kern Lima — She is the quintessential entrepreneur. She had an idea that she deeply believed in that would bring benefit for millions of women around the world. She wasn't willing to conform to old beauty standards that required models with perfect skin. She wanted to celebrate the beauty within every woman and believed in the ability of her products (It Cosmetics) to transform the confidence of women worldwide. Furthermore, she never let rejection hold her back from pursuing her dreams. I'd love to meet with Jamie because she is such an inspirational leader. I believe she could help champion the stories of women entrepreneurs that we work with globally: small-scale entrepreneurs who are moving their families and their communities out of generational poverty.

How can our readers further follow your work online?

You can follow me on LinkedIn [here](#) or at ideglobal.org.

Thank you for these fantastic insights. We greatly appreciate the time you spent on this.



Written by Yitzi Weiner

7.9K Followers · Editor for Authority Magazine

A "Positive" Influencer, Founder & Editor of Authority Magazine, CEO of Thought Leader Incubator