

BELOW THE LINE

USC UPSTATE CHANCELLOR **BENNIE L. HARRIS** SPEAKS WITH
TRACI NEWKIRK, PRESIDENT OF INTELLECTUAL CAPITAL



Traci Newkirk, president of Intellectual Capital, with Chancellor Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D. Photo by Terry E. Manning, USC Upstate

Welcome to Below the Line, a monthly question-and-answer column in which Chancellor Bennie L. Harris, Ph.D., of the University of South Carolina Upstate interviews a leader about change, technology, education, and leadership. This month, Dr. Harris spoke with Traci Newkirk, President of Intellectual Capital, a staffing, recruiting, and talent strategy firm. Traci also serves on the Greenville Chamber Board. (This interview has been edited for content, clarity, and length.)

Harris: Let's start with your background. Tell us a little about yourself.

Newkirk: Well, my husband Barry and I have been married for 35 years, and during that time we've started five different businesses. I've always loved starting and building things, but more than building businesses, I really love building people.

Harris: Did you grow up here in the Upstate?

Newkirk: Yes, I did. I went to Riverside High School and then on to Winthrop.

Harris: Did you always know you'd end up being a leader?

Newkirk: I think so. My mom used to call it being "bossy." I might have preferred a different word, but yes, I think leadership has always been part of me, especially as the oldest daughter.

Harris: You and Barry launched Intellectual Capital in 2003 out of your basement with grit, determination, and complementary strengths. How did those beginnings shape your leadership and the way your company grew?

Newkirk: That was actually our fourth business. We'd already made plenty of mistakes and learned from them through the school of hard knocks. We had some angel investors who supported us for about 18 months, and we were able to pay them off, which was a good experience. At first, Barry and I sometimes stepped on each other's toes, trying to do things outside of our own strengths. But once we figured out our lanes and trusted each other, that's when the business really began to thrive.

Harris: You have a B.A. in communication, a master's in organizational leadership, and a number of certifications. At USC Upstate, we value credentials and certificates, especially stackable ones. How have your studies and certifications influenced your approach to building culture and leading your company?

Newkirk: Certificates are a great way to gain knowledge quickly when you don't have time for a full degree. You can invest a few weeks or months and walk away with real expertise in a particular subject. My very first certificate actually launched our fifth business, and since then I've earned nine more. They've been game-changers for me.

Harris: I know you admire Maya Angelou's quote: "People will forget what you said, but they'll never forget how you made them feel." How do you weave that philosophy into your company culture?

Newkirk: For me, it comes down to dignity. People deserve it and desire it. I don't have to be the smartest person in the room, but I do need to treat people with dignity, whether they're employees, vendors, customers, or the wait staff when I'm out with colleagues. During Covid-19, Barry and I decided that no matter what, we would not lay off employees. It was a scary time, but we cut expenses and made changes elsewhere. That choice created deep loyalty. People remembered that we stood by them when it mattered most.



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Harris: When challenges come, what leadership principle do you lean on?

Newkirk: Know your values and stick to them. But first, you have to do the hard work of naming your values. Once you know them, living them out becomes your guide in tough times.

Harris: You've emphasized hiring for diversity of thought. Can you share an example of how that's helped your business?

Newkirk: Yes. In 2023 we intentionally hired someone who was from a different generation, outside of staffing, and brought a fresh perspective. She's helped us build systems and prepare for the future. It reinforced for me how important diversity — whether of thought, generation, background, or race — really is.

Harris: You've lived through crises like the 2008 recession and Covid. How did those experiences shape your mindset as a leader?

Newkirk: Honestly, 2008 to 2010 was harder than Covid for us. We lost 75 percent of our business and had to start over. That experience forced us to build strategies that later helped us weather Covid. I tell leaders: Remember what you've already overcome. Past challenges are roadmaps for future ones.

Harris: You've helped guide younger professionals into certifications and new opportunities. Can you share a success story?

Newkirk: One comes to mind. I had an intern with an HR degree from Clemson.

I encouraged her to pursue an additional certification. Later, she was hired away by another company because of that credential. At first it was hard to let talent go, but I've learned to "train people like they'll stay, and bless and release when they go." And sometimes they even come back, which is the ultimate compliment.

Harris: You also launched Human Potential Advisors to focus on culture. How did that evolve from Intellectual Capital?

Newkirk: With ICAP, we'd place candidates in organizations — especially in IT — and if the culture wasn't healthy, those candidates wouldn't stay. About eight years ago, we started offering culture consulting as a value-add. Over time, that grew into its own business. Now we test, assess, and build programs to help companies align their culture with their values.

Harris: In 2025, you were recognized globally as an Enterprising Woman of the Year. How did that feel, and what do you hope it says to others?

Newkirk: I was 57 when I won that award. My hope is that it shows women it's never too late to start, to restart, to succeed. Success doesn't always come early. Sometimes it comes after clunky seasons of learning and growth.

Harris: Looking to the future, how do you see AI impacting your industry?

Newkirk: I believe AI will create jobs, not just eliminate them. We're already hiring

developers who understand AI. It reduces redundancy and frees us up to think more strategically. Companies that adopt it will outpace those that don't.

Harris: If you weren't leading businesses, what career would you pursue?

Newkirk: Probably a college professor or career counselor. My husband jokes that I already do both, in some ways. I just love developing people.

Harris: I'd next like to talk about Leading Below the Line. What I mean by that is that oftentimes we don't know what's going on beneath the surface — for leaders and for their teams — and we have to dive in and find out exactly what's at play in order to make a project or a plan successful.

Newkirk: Only 43 percent of Americans are truly self-aware. Too often leaders show up with judgment instead of curiosity. I coach leaders to replace judgment with curiosity, to really listen, and to ask great questions. That's how you understand people's stories and truly lead them.

Harris: One last question — do you have a hero?

Newkirk: Yes, my grandmother Edna. She was consistent, dependable, and present. Every day after school she had sugar biscuits waiting for me. She made me feel important. I want to emulate that in my own leadership — being dependable, consistent, and fully present with my employees, my family, and my community.