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CHAMPION OF INNOVATION: Consultant helps companies see green in ‘green’

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Keramida (Photo courtesy of Keramida Inc.)

Vasiliki ‘Vicki’ Keramida isn’t big on multitasking. A nationally recognized environmental engineering expert, she believes the only way to find innovative solutions to a Big Problem is to give it your undivided attention.

“Multitasking can and should be done; it has its place,” says Keramida, founder and CEO of Keramida Inc., a roughly 60-employee firm that (to put it very, very simply) helps corporate and municipal clients worldwide develop sustainable “green” strategies for everything from transportation systems to factories. “I should be able to talk on the phone and see who passes in front of my office. I should be able to talk on the phone and read a document at the same time. However, if we are to do our best thinking, we need to focus.”

Keramida said she did some of her best, most innovative thinking about 15 years ago, when she helped redefine the environmental engineering business.

Back when she founded her company in 1988, corporations were less than thrilled about dealing with her. Indeed, they sometimes did so only when forced to by environmental legislation. Keramida’s epiphany was in helping those recalcitrant corporate clients see there was green in green.

“The whole thing starts from a desire to have a livable planet,” she said. “If you look at it that way,

you start finding ways to innovate. You see that you can allow people to make money in manufacturing and in other areas, and not necessarily to perceive environmental protection as a drain. We can do things in ways that allow them to make what we need, yet allow us to live in this world for generations to come. That's the big idea."

It came to her while she was far from the madding crowd. She said the first step in the innovation process is seeing the big picture—something that rarely snaps into focus during the day-to-day grind. Sometimes she attends conferences just to get away from the office and ruminate. Her daily commute likewise offers an opportunity for mental "me time."

"I live on a farm and I drive about 45 minutes each day and night, and that's my thinking time," Keramida said. "You cannot be an innovator if you spend your whole time trying to put out fires."

One of her more recent innovations is her company's six-person executive committee. Its membership is voted on by the entire staff and includes two positions occupied by young people. Young people with full voting rights and full participation in the proceedings.

"It's a delightful experience," Keramida said. "It's also one of the best ways I can think of to have a training ground for future leaders."•

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