

COVER STORY

Laying Down the Lore

Learnings & legacies from Kevin Roberts, Roderick Deane, Ralph Norris, Jo Brosnahan, Gil Simpson, Joan Withers & others

By Ruth Le Pla

It's hard to imagine some of today's business leaders as callow youths. Did they lie awake at night worrying if they could do their jobs? Did they tiptoe tentatively through the mass of daily decisions before learning to trust their instincts? We asked this pack of proven performers to share some of the advice they were given on the way up. Not the technical stuff but the soul-nurturing, character-forming nuggets of insight that guide them to this day. instincts? We asked this pack of proven performers to share some of the advice they were given on the way up. Not the technical stuff but the soul-nurturing, character-forming nuggets of insight that guide them to this day. Their insights are as varied as their successes. Sometimes funny, poignant and at times surprisingly frank, this is what they were told. Here are their words from the wise.

Graeme Avery

Owner/CEO Sileni Estates

A couple of stimuli made me determined to prove myself in different ways. When I was at school I was told I should choose a university course career – which I didn't. I chose pharmacy instead because I wanted to blend a mixture of science and commerce. Because of that I was very determined to succeed in doing what my teachers and classmates from Hutt Valley High School said I shouldn't do. If I remember rightly, I was the only one from my class who didn't go to university per se.

Also, just prior to being told to go to university, I'd done one of those ridiculous IQ tests in career guidance at school. The test said I was not suited to an academic-based career, but I went on to finish as the top pharmacy student. That's probably because I could see through the nonsense behind the IQ test. These two events happened within a couple of months of each other and, looking back, I think they made me determined to succeed. In my case, negative comments tapped into determination, stubbornness and a desire to succeed through creative thinking about the future.

Jo Brosnahan

Chairman of Leadership New Zealand and a consultant in leadership and strategy

I could think of those who told me to follow my heart (usually works), those who said to stay away from local government (ignored) and those who said to look after the people and the organisation would look after itself (followed).

However, I have no doubt that the best advice I ever received was to study leadership on my Harkness Fellowship in the United States from 1995 to 1996. I had been advised that I had been made a Harkness Fellow but my carefully prepared topic had been rejected – I needed

to find another. I went to a restaurant one night with John Vandersyp – a friend and mentor over the years – and put my challenge to him. He asked what I would like to do – and I said that I would like to travel the United States, talking with the variety of great people whom I had read about. What did they have in common? They were all leaders in various ways. And so he advised me to study leadership.

Thus began a journey into the study and practice of leadership, culminating most recently in my involvement in the establishment of Leadership New Zealand and the recent involvement in a global leadership forum in Istanbul. I have no doubt that it will be a lifelong passion and commitment.

It has focused my career to the extent that my objective became to create organisations in which there is leadership throughout, as was the focus at the ARC in my time there. I am concerned now to spend more time in leadership research, writing and teaching and in assisting New Zealand to develop a whole network of future leaders.

On reflection, that advice was life changing!

Liz Coutts

Professional director

The best advice I ever got is something I've been told often and by many people throughout my career. It was to make the hard calls early. When you have losses, address them quickly. If there are going to be redundancies, announce them as soon as you can. If there's bad news, get it out the door.

It was first given to me by Rob Allen, when I was financial controller of Caxton Group and before I became CEO. Selwyn Cushing said the same thing to me when I was on the board of Air New Zealand. And many others have done so in between. It's advice I now regularly pass on. If people see me as tough, it's because I believe in this principle and act on it. Being in business is not a popularity contest. It's not about being liked. It's about being trusted. And taking the hard decisions early builds credibility.

Evan Davies

Managing director, SkyCity Entertainment Group

When I first left university I worked for my father – Rodney Davies, architect and town planner. He taught me to be fair and open-minded about new ideas and different approaches to an issue or opportunity, and to be flexible as to method or route employed. At the same time, he taught me to be completely informed and absolutely implacable in dogged pursuit of a clearly defined objective.

That approach has stayed with me and I think is the foundation of my role at SkyCity.

Roderick Deane

Chairman, Telecom New Zealand, Te Papa & ANZ National Bank & director ANZ Banking Group Melbourne

I have been the fortunate recipient of much advice over the years. From my father, Reg Deane: "Win or lose, be calm and not ungracious" and "never write to a minister or a government agency without first knowing what their reply will be". From Philip R Coney, one of New Zealand's most outstanding economists and my mentor at the Reserve Bank: "There are only a few truly outstanding leaders in any arena ... pursue the opportunity to work closely with them to really develop your own talents and those of the teams around you" and "always look for better intellects than your own to work with". From Ray White, former governor of the Reserve Bank, when I was young: "Listen" and "be less impetuous and impatient of others". From my wife Gillian: "Edit button, Roderick, edit button" ...

particularly when dealing with politicians and the media.

Corallie Eagle

Chairman, Eagle Technology

My parents told me to always be prepared for a rainy day. In my life that advice has seen me through many hard times, but also through many good times. Always be prepared for change, because nothing ever stays the same.

Tony Falkenstein

Owner, Red Eagle Group

When I was 29 I accepted the position of general manager of Polaroid in New Zealand. I was very shy and had a few nerves about whether I could really do the job. Norman Godden, who was a principal of Sheffield Associates and had placed me in another role five years earlier, suggested I join Toastmasters and learn public speaking. This was one of the best things I ever did. It didn't turn me into a spectacular speaker but it gave me the confidence to handle a CEO role... and I found my wife there as an added bonus.

I also learnt a lot from Peter Masfen, who was the chairman of Corporate Investments, which owned Montana Wines and had a large share in publicly listed Optical Holdings. I was appointed CEO of Optical Holdings, which we restructured and put on a success track. The market didn't believe it, so Peter continued to purchase shares and told me I should be doing the same.

It was only when he dragged me kicking into Westpac that I recognised the leverage of using someone else's money – I had never been a borrower. The lesson? When the return you can get from your business is higher than what you pay your funder, then use that leverage.

George Hickton

Chief executive, Tourism New Zealand

I was given a bit of advice very early in my career that has stuck with me since. When I worked at the Ford Motor Company factory in Lower Hutt I was given a rare chance to move from the factory floor to the office. One of the older guys took me to one side and said:

“Never give them your soul. Always remember who you are and maintain your own sense of self. It's the only way to remain sane. Ultimately businesses change but people don't.”

I've always had that at the back of my mind. At the end of the day it's important to be happy with who you are and not what you do.

I was also once told to watch who you step on on the way up because they'll kick you on the way down.

In business, you need to be quite comfortable in yourself. Don't be confined by the role.

Fiona Luhrs

Chief executive, Tourism Industry Association New Zealand (TIANZ)

Tom Jaap, managing director of the centre for enabling leadership, Centell, made me aware of my communication style as it wasn't one that other people automatically warmed to. I learnt that everyone communicates differently – some are more analytical, some are left or right brain thinkers, some are more visual, others are big picture thinkers.

His advice was to modify my style according to the person I was dealing with at the time. It improved my relationships with others – with teams and customers, for example – and I have much more positive and rewarding relationships with colleagues. Each of us is made differently so the more you get to know yourself the more you are aware of your impact on other people. You learn to take conscious control of your own life.

Also, as a leader of people in business situations I realised that most people don't stand in

the shower in the morning and decide to be obnoxious at work that day. That usually happens because managers don't put in place ways for them to get satisfaction at work.

Ralph Norris

CEO and managing director, Air New Zealand

(Next month will take up new role as CEO and managing director, Commonwealth Bank of Australia.)

The best piece of enduring advice given to me was by my first manager, Dennis Maloney at Mobil Oil (NZ). I was an 18-year-old at the time and he said to me, "Son, when you shave in the morning, look at yourself in the mirror and ask, are you doing your best and is that the face of someone who can be trusted."

Those words have resonated with me every day for nearly 40 years, and I think my success to some degree was forged by those two simple questions.

Denis Orme

Chief executive, Insurance Brokers Association of New Zealand (IBANZ)

The best advice I was ever given was:

a "Never get involved in a business where you do not have a 12 to 18 month, month-by-month, cash-flow projection;

b understand the gross profit margin trends of all products or services both for the products/services and by customer; and

c understand whether you have, or are working towards, differentiated products or services."

That advice was given to me by Don Grose a regional director of the United States government's Small Business Administration (SBA) service at the time I was granted a loan to start a consulting practice in Texas. To that point it had been unheard of to fund a business largely without assets, and one which did not have a product.

I have been president of the Turnaround Management Association and have been a change leader in many situations internationally where I have assumed the senior management role in order to implement change or turn around an under-performing or distressed company.

I cannot tell you how many times this advice has enabled me to develop and implement urgent action plans which people helped develop, believed in and subscribed to and then worked hard to reposition the business successfully.

Without knowing the cash-flow forecast and profit trends you have no idea whether or not you have the time needed to implement change. And without differentiated products or services you are a "me-too" company and all the cash flow in the world will not save the situation. Additionally, without sharing the information with your team you will not capture their hearts and minds... and without that you have nothing.

Kevin Roberts

CEO worldwide, Saatchi & Saatchi

I don't draw a clear line between business and life, so have been fortunate to have some great mentors for both along the way. The two most influential? At school in Lancaster there was my English teacher Peter Sampson, a dramatist and a rebel – for me, a beacon of light. He taught me that being different was okay. I just think differently to other people about emotion, I dance to a different beat, and I have a different set of standards. Peter told me that that was okay, and the fact that I was out of sync with 85 percent of the class and the entire school authority system didn't matter either.

Fast-forward to 1997 when I became CEO at Saatchi & Saatchi, and met Bob Seelert, the chairman and a fantastic guy. Bob told me that luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity. His big advice came on the preparation side of that equation. He said I would

now be in the public eye (aka the firing squad). I'd be fodder for the media because of the Saatchi & Saatchi profile and history, and because of our belief in transformational ideas – which always draw criticism from any constituencies.

Said Bob as I raised an eyebrow: “Every morning, Kevin, strap on your bulletproof vest and your waterproof back.” Helpful stuff, because whenever the flak flies, it bounces off my front or runs off my back – so I maintain momentum, optimism and conviction, and can focus on being an inspirational player. (I guess Tana got the same advice somewhere along the line.)

Gil Simpson

Founder and president, Jade Software Corporation

Good advice comes in many forms. Throughout my life I've received advice from numerous and varied sources. Some examples of words and people that have borne an influence on my decisions, and remain prominent in my mind today are:

“Don't worry about the future because it will all be different when it actually arrives.” – Bill Mace (deceased), founder of Mace Engineering. (Advice at age 15.)

“When selling an idea to someone else always include a mechanism that will allow them to be successful as a result.” – Jim Merrit, CEO, Bluff Smelter. (Advice received in my first career job in 1972.)

Philip Fowler was a Southland farmer who showed me at the age of 23 that it is better to fail with integrity than to succeed with no integrity.

“If you want to go tiger shooting make sure you take more than one bullet.” – Hugo Simpson (Advice at age 34.)

“Accepting people as honest in the first instance saves a lot of time.” – Gilbert Simpson (father).

Ian Taylor

Partner, Sheffield

Like it or not, parents pre-empt and have an indelible influence on the 'advice' agenda. As mine said: “You can only do your best but make sure it is your best.” Such comments are fundamental to the high levels of anxiety and fear of failure that promote both stress and success.

When “best” doesn't appear to be good enough, advice from Bancorp Treasury and SPARC chairman John Wells has been helpful. “Your best has to be good enough until the cycle turns... and it will... and new circumstances will bear out your best.”

Mervyn King, author of South Africa's King Report, was wise in his advice not to allow ego and sentiment to interfere with doing what is best for the company and its longevity. “Make the tough calls early and stay close to your bankers.”

John Graham, president of the New Zealand Rugby Union, chancellor of Auckland University and former headmaster of Auckland Grammar, taught me the importance of building strong, individual, personalised relationships to move initiatives forward.

And, finally, some advice from my wife: “Always buy good shoes.”

Joan Withers

NZ CEO, Fairfax

In my experience some of the best advice is not explicitly given but comes in the form of observed behaviours and practices that translate into success, whether in life or in business. Being given the example from an early age of a father who had a very strong work ethic was one demonstration of how hard work, diligence and integrity can provide sustainable happiness and peace of mind.

I was also fortunate to attend an all-girl convent high school where the head nun especially

was ahead of her time in terms of the limitless horizon she portrayed for us if we were prepared to apply ourselves.

Some more specific jewels of wisdom I have gleaned over the years include:

“Don’t compromise yourself, you’re all you’ve got” which is a quote from Janis Joplin via a little book called Great Quotes from Great Women which was given to me by David Appleby, who as chair of Ceramco gave me my first board appointment.

In the early days of my career I attended a number of courses run by David Forman, the well-known sales and marketing trainer. His advice was that retaining information is assisted significantly by going back and revisiting material 24 hours after you initially read it. He used the analogy of tracing your finger through sand; the first indentation is not very deep, the second tracing makes much more of an impression.

As a very plain pre-teenager, the wife of our family doctor, Zena Shine suggested that I should remember as I grew up that I should rely on my brains rather than my looks.

Fortunately I have always felt better equipped in the former department, so there has been no dilemma for me in that area! Seriously though, women today are far more independent than they were 30 years ago and the ability to rely on sexual appeal in the corporate environment has in my view, vaporised.

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