

Lessons in

LEADERSHIP

The 2014 Top 50 CEOs share the wisdom of their experience, in their own words

During the selection process for the Top 50 CEO awards, each nominee is required to answer a series of questions about their personal leadership style and actions. These questions are designed to reveal key motivators, seminal moments and management philosophies. The responses are raw, revealing and an invaluable education in what makes exceptional leaders tick. Here, we share their award-winning (sometimes painfully earned) lessons in leadership.

Who or what has had the most significant impact on your growth as a business leader?

Doug Doucet

rca Construction Inc.

Pete Luckett (of Pete's Frootique) is one of my best mentors. His Sunnyside store was our first project as a contractor and what I learned from working with him during that period was priceless. Pete claimed that it didn't matter if you sell fruit or construction services, that it's all the same thing. He always preached that if you make a positive experience every time, clients will always come back for more. We have since completed numerous projects for him over the past 17 years, so I guess the philosophy works.



David Grebenc

Innovatia Inc.

Aside from my parents (who instilled in me the importance of a sense of humour, integrity and hard work), my experience and mentorship while working for NBTel/Aliant has had the strongest influence on my career. Leaders like Jack Travis and Gerry Pond put me in jobs that, to be honest, I'm not sure if I thought I was ready for. They took chances with me, but they were always there to help me learn from mistakes, not penalize me for them. Don't get me wrong - they were always firm with their feedback, but I guess that toughened me up too!

Suzanne Larochelle-Bachur

Premiere Executive Suites/Atlantic Ltd.

In 2012 I was introduced to The Women President's Organization and very quickly became a member. With no disrespect intended, or regrets, without prejudice, I will share that while having been primarily influenced by men during my career development, I find this group of extremely astute business women very refreshing and more in tune to my perspective as a woman in a leadership role.



Mike Hachey

Egg Studios

My father, who was also an entrepreneur, overcame much adversity in his life and taught me the valuable lesson of perseverance. After a car accident left one of his arms paralyzed, and him hospitalized for months, he pushed through it all and never let his disability affect him. As a contractor and sole-provider, he worked through every business challenge to find new opportunities. Always innovative and creative, he pushed his kids to think big and never let anything stand in our way - and showed us how by example.



Troy Northrup

**East Point Inc./
Shred Guard Inc.**

My father taught me to recognize the hidden value in what others often saw as only an undervalued asset. He started our family business with very few resources and a belief that if you looked for opportunities and worked hard and long enough, then success would follow. He was, and still is, the classic entrepreneur, taking manageable risks, investing in what he believes in and continuing to reinvest for the long term. He has taught me many very valuable business and life lessons over the years, lessons that I will hold forever.



Jon Stanfield

Stanfield's Ltd.

My father's work ethic, fairness, commitment, loyalty to people and place and his integrity continue to influence me every day. I also have my YPO forum whose members have vast experience and knowledge. I don't have an immediate listening or discussion outlet in Truro so my forum-mates help ground me and force me into different types of decision-making processes.

Describe the most difficult professional challenge you've faced in the past year, the possible ramifications and your response.



Greg Hemmings

Hemmings House Pictures Ltd.

It has always been hard to develop creative original content at the same time as running the day to day of my client-based work. I have now created a team to support the commercial work and I am now almost fully able to focus on creative development of our own projects.



Jack Kelly Bulk Carriers (P.E.I.) Ltd.

Succession planning is a constant challenge of mine. The company has been built on my values and sometimes the difficult part of letting go is wondering whether the foundation is solid for the family preparing to take over this business. We have engaged a consultant to complete an operational review and evaluate all aspects of our business. The challenge for my management team is to continue to hold each other accountable for the execution of our business plan and for me to be there to support the team and provide feedback when necessary. Starting a business is hard, but finding the best way to transition and move the business on to others is equally as difficult.



Scott MacEachern

STARK International Inc.

I owned a company with my brother; he and I are different in our way of thinking. Not that one is right and the other wrong, just different visions. I made him an offer and he took it personally, feeling that I was trying to get away from him. Long story short, lawyers made everything worse, to the point we were not talking, business was suffering making things very difficult for family and employees. Eventually my uncle got involved and got us communicating; we hired two business valuers and made a fair agreement. I'm amazed at how things got out of hand and how the legal system can cost vast amounts of time and money. In the end, fair communication is the best solution.



Sean FitzGerald Vocational Rehabilitation Assessments Inc.

I had to learn the ins and outs of South Africa's personal injury and legal process so I could determine a client's future loss of earnings as a result of injuries sustained from a motor vehicle accident while there on vacation. Disappointing the lawyers and doctors in Ontario who had recommended me could have negatively impacted our future as a firm of leading experts. I became a student again and learned what I needed, even hiring an expert in South Africa to be my advisor. The court awarded the second-highest personal injury pay out in South African history.



Barry Kyle

Industrial Rubber Company Ltd.

Establishing a 50/50 partnership with a German company here in Canada. In doing so, one does not know how the business with two different cultures, styles/personalities will evolve. Good to say it has been rewarding and eye-opening both for myself and the employees.



Dr. Travis McDonough
Kinduct Technologies

Our most difficult decision/challenge this year has been to decide whether or not to take in some outside funding and subsequently dilute shareholding or to continue to grow organically and hold on to all the company's equity. We decided to raise 10 shares and take in a multi-million-dollar financial infusion from one of Canada's wealthiest billionaires. For us this has been the best of both worlds. We have only had to have minimal dilution and we now have the financial runway to accelerate our growth. And we have a business mentor who can help us with major and fundamental business decisions.

John Rowe
Island Abbey
Food Science

Managing rapid growth across multiple businesses – I am partnered in several businesses and lead these teams as CEO.

The only way I have been able to successfully manage this hockey stick has been by surrounding myself with talented people who: a) have the same drive and enthusiasm as I do, and b) have the necessary experience. The results: double head count and revenue in 2013 over 2012.



Ian Smith
Clearwater
Seafoods
Limited
Partnership

The most difficult challenge has been to inspire, lead and align our company to achieve the

fourth consecutive year of growth and profitability. Key results were: we met or exceeded all of our key business/financial objectives; we were recognized as a top employer in Atlantic Canada; we were named International Business of the Year by the Halifax Chamber of Commerce; and we were recognized as one of the top 10 companies in all of Canada for "Passion Capital".



John Atkins

JAC
Dealing with HR issues. With any business you tend to

spend just as much time working with your colleagues as you do with your family. As a result, you form relationships with people. Having to address issues like job performance or a request for a raise that may not be warranted, can be stressful. You need to find the right balance of engagement or it could result in poor communication and/or misinterpretation.



Roxanne Fairweather
Innovatia

Focus and prioritization. There are thousands of good things that can drive the energy of an organization, but it's finding the few truly great things that lead you to the top. For me, this is the quintessential business problem that I struggle with, because of the many good opportunities that we are fortunate enough to be presented with.



Sean O'Regan
O'Regan Automotive Group

Keeping up with communication can be quite difficult with the number of brands we represent and each manufacturer is quite different (e.g. Toyota is very different from Mercedes-Benz; Nissan is very different from Kia, etc...). The volume of communication is quite heavy and ensuring that each of our manufacturer's objectives and priorities are addressed takes a lot of juggling.

What's the most difficult part of your job and how do you deal with it?

Damian Byrne
Landmark Hospitality
Group

When I first entered this business as an owner, I was 28 and responsible for everything – from bottle washing to accounting. It was a fairly steep learning curve, but one that you become dedicated to perfecting when your own money is on the line. I'm not ashamed to say that I became very good at it, so when I see someone who does something differently, or that isn't up to scratch, there is the natural desire to step in. Consequently, I have to continuously resist the urge to become too involved in the day-to-day operations and stay focused on the bigger picture. I have dealt with that by building an excellent team around me who I trust, and by holding them accountable for their roles and responsibilities.



Dan Merzetti
DSM Telecom

Financing a start-up is not like the days where you could go to the bank with a business plan, have a conversation about the viability of the venture and both parties assume some risk for a chance at the reward. Today it is all about finding alternative funding which can be anything from loans from business development banks and lending bodies to private equity. But the whole process of finding the right financing formula that works for you and for the lender and then navigating through all of that is challenging. Fortunately, I was able to secure a number of private lenders and investors who believed in my vision and continue to support DSM Tel as the business grows.

Joe Randell
Chorus Aviation Inc.

Communication and trying to nurture a strong commitment to the organization are a challenge with so many employees spread across Canada, especially our front line employees whose 'workplace' is onboard an aircraft. We continually evaluate our communications tools and technology to enhance this aspect of our business. Another challenge is to provide recognition when and where it's due to motivate employees in a timely manner. We have a number of programs and tools available to our management team to recognize and reward employee accomplishments.



What are your personal rules of leadership?

Al MacPhee

MacPhee Ford

To succeed and excel in business at the same time as contributing to my community. My wife Mary and I are co-chairs of the Capital Campaign for the Bridge Centre for



Arts and Technologies. Located in downtown Dartmouth, it is a soon-to-be-created learning environment for youth who do not respond well to conventional forms of education. The environment will encourage hope and innovation, creativity and excellence and provide a path for young people to re-engage in their education. Creative arts programming supplemented by technical training have proven to be exceptionally powerful methods for realizing wonderful outcomes among youth who might otherwise be on a destructive path.



Cory Bell Lindsay Construction

To become successful within your organization, you must first possess the technical and operational skills, but more importantly, to be an effective leader you must also have the ability to help people understand your vision and embrace it. Take the time to show people how they fit into the overall plan, explain how their role is paramount to the success of the plan and then show them what success will look like when everyone fulfills their role.



Brendan Paddick

Columbus International Inc.

We have a golden rule at Columbus: "Permission to fail is part of our corporate DNA." You have to foster a culture that embraces playing to win, as opposed to playing not to lose. Also, at Columbus, you don't work for people, you work with people. As such, you will never see capital letters in any of our titles; not on our website, not on our business cards, not anywhere. So whether you are a csr or a ceo, we all have a job to do... together.

Next, I have always tried to recruit and hire professionals who are smarter than me and more talented at their area of expertise. Entrepreneurs should never be intimidated to seek out such individuals, because in the end they broaden your perspective, help you grow as a leader, and inevitably make you look good.

Thirdly, as Craig Dobbin once said to me, "don't be afraid of the zeros." Every financing, acquisition, capital investment, big or small, should be based on a detailed set of facts and a good dose of intuition. So whether you are talking about \$10,000 or \$100,000,000 don't let the zeros blur your focus and discipline.

And finally, I would share with aspiring leaders the pledge that Renee, Cayla, Gary, Ian and I (my family) have made to keeping it real and always remembering where we came from. Success is a privilege, not a right.

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Ian Cavanagh
Ambir

I believe that there is nothing more complex in business than the human being and if you can understand “who” a person is versus just “what” they do, then you can appreciate their motivation and behavior. Once you are able to do this you are best positioned to help them be successful and the corollary is so too the business shall be. People need to be supported and to know that you care. At the same time, people also need to know that there is a business to run and to make successful and that this is an imperative as well if we are to continue to be a thriving enterprise.



Tim Moore
Moore Executive Suites

Treat everyone at all times with dignity and respect. Motivate people. Do what you say you are going to do (be honorable). Have a strong work ethic and lead through example. Develop a sense of spirituality in your organization. Provide opportunities to those who want to grow, and create excitement in your organization.



Bert Hickman
Hickman Automotive Group

To continue to grow our business and take advantage of the great economic boom we are seeing here in Newfoundland and Labrador. We have recently hired a COO to help build a second-to-none customer experience at all of our nine automotive dealerships. As well, to build an employee working environment that breeds pride and customer enthusiasm thus resulting in revenue growth. We are also building strength in our existing people by implementing training paths to ensure we are ready to take advantage of any merger/acquisitions that may arise.



Carolyn Booth
BMO Bank of Montreal

With a significant number of employees in the retirement corridor, and many of our youth leaving Atlantic Canada, I spend a substantial amount of time on talent management and succession planning. My team and I work with many of the universities and community colleges across the region to source new hires. This past year we reinstated an intern program that allows us to begin training future employees and introducing them to the BMO culture while they are still in school. Monthly, I spend time one on one with many of our staff, discussing their career moves and building relationships with them. I am a firm believer that people don't leave a company, they leave a leader and I am pleased to say we lost very few people over the course of 2013.

Paul Farrah
Partner Seafood Inc.

Controlling our growth – saying ‘no thanks’ to some attractive opportunities is never easy. On the other hand, we cannot take on new opportunities if we are short staffed or don't have the proper financing lined up. These things are my main focus and help me make educated decisions.



Gordon Laing
Southwest Properties

Managing the many opportunities we have in front of us – planning the staff required, finding the right people who can integrate into our organization and who meet both performance and value standards – are challenges.

In addition to the large Motherhouse development we're working on, we have an apartment nearing completion and a hotel about to start construction. In the planning stages we have two large apartment developments, a hotel acquisition and renovation, along with our annual repair and maintenance program on the existing portfolio. Premiere Executive Suites and Bishop's Cellar continue with double digit annual growth. We are constantly on the lookout for new talent – every networking meeting becomes a potential recruitment opportunity. We also have a close relationship with a firm that is regularly looking for talent to strengthen our company. These are great challenges to have, and we are thankful that our challenges are related to growth.

Gregory Roberts
Mary Browns Inc./
P.I. Enterprises

The biggest challenge and opportunity facing me is leading one of the world's largest chicken quick service brands and making sure international expansion is successful. This means that we never take our eye off the ball in Canada, and carefully evaluate each and every potential territory or region diligently in order to make sure we are successful. While my drive and passion would like to see me open in multiple countries simultaneously, I have to be careful with the allocation of key resources (financial, local talent to assist with international training) to ensure success. It will be slow and steady versus overly ambitious, rushed and a failure. That word is not in my vocabulary.



What's the biggest challenge facing your organization and what are you doing about it?

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What's the worst thing that's ever happened to you? What did you learn from that?

Shelley Fleckenstein

Kings
Physiotherapy
Clinic/
CBI Health
Group

A trusted employee appropriated funds from the organization. I learned the dangers of not having sufficient checks and balances in place to ensure integrity and validity within the system. I have also learned the importance of managing the accounts receivable so as to ensure that both top and bottom goals are met. I have learned to work hard over the years to refine and adapt my management style to address the mercurial nature of small business ownership and the many challenges that come with it.



Ron Lovett Source Security

In 2007, four of our security guards were injured on the job. This was the worst thing to happen to me personally, but possibly gave me the best lessons I could learn as a business owner. I really feel as though this was a "make it or break it" moment in my career. Handling the substantial media interest, and leading the team through this challenging time made me a stronger leader and a more mature entrepreneur. There was a personal takeaway as well. This is when I determined that I needed to do more from a community standpoint, and made an effort to give more of my time to various community organizations. This also led to my decision to become a foster parent.



John Griffin *W.P. Griffin Inc.*

During a major expansion in 2004 our bank told us that due to potato market conditions, they didn't want us to complete our expansion. We countered by putting some of our own money on the table and completed the project. We learned that it is crucial to have financial partners that are closer to our industry and truly understand our business. We moved banks the following year.



Guido Kerpel

New Castle Hotels and Resorts

For our team in Halifax, 9/11 was a surreal experience. We immediately had flight crews arrive at our hotel from the Halifax airport, many of whom had just heard that their colleagues were lost. We had customers rerouted back to our property, again many of whom had relatives or friends affected by this tragedy. We also had colleagues with New Castle Hotels in the Tower that day; thankfully they were able to escape. Throughout this awful day, I also saw the best in people, specifically our front-line staff who went over and above their designated roles to comfort those who were in need.

The long-term ramifications for our industry were very tough. We saw the tightening of borders and increased travel restrictions, which of course resulted in far fewer travelers from the United States in the years following 9/11. The focus on security, while absolutely understandable, has made us less hospitable in many ways. We've become a "vanilla-type" destination and we've moved out of the Top 10 desirable locations to visit (as promoted by the United Nations World Tourism Organization and TIAC). In terms of what I've learned from this experience, I've learned that sometimes the worst moments bring out our strongest traits. I learned that nothing feels as good as the power of teamwork and collaboration.

Feedback: dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com; @AtlanticBus; @ABM_Editor; #ABMTop50

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