



The Best Advice I Ever Got

By Dirk Hoffius

In 1990, I was Chair of the Board of Kendall College of Art and Design with the pleasant task of passing out diplomas to the graduating seniors. It included the opportunity to see the slides of each student's best works during their four years of college as well as to hear a commencement speech. As you can imagine, I thought the commencement speech would be the low point: nothing but boring platitudes. It was not. It's been almost 20 years since I first heard it, and I've gone over that speech almost every year since then. There were lessons there not just for college graduates, but for all of us.

The speech was by Theodore A. Bell, President of Leo Burnett USA, one of the biggest advertising agencies in the world, and it was entitled *Learning the Ropes*. After the speech, I asked Ted Bell for a copy and permission to edit it substantially for lawyers instead of art college graduates so that I could pass it on to our first-year associates. I have since edited it several times for clients and friends, so that I no longer know where Ted Bell began and where I took over. He was the starting point with my parents, teachers, my partners, friends, and clients having all contributed to what I will say. I have found *Learning the Ropes* is applicable at any age and this message continues to resonate in my life. What follows is the essence of Ted Bell's message, both embellished and simplified, for how to take control of your career or your life.

1. Do things.

In other words, act, make, and do. You have three choices in life: you can make things happen; you can watch things happen; or you can wonder, "Hey, what in the world happened?" Do it. Get it done. Turn your energy into plans, actions, and deeds. People will be impressed, and so will you. Don't limit your actions to your career. Apply these principles to your family life and your free time. It's important to have high expectations for others, but it's also important not to wait for someone else, and you can be part of the action. I carry this over into all of the small things, from learning to use your computer (I am doing better), making and serving coffee, and cleaning up behind yourself. You set the example.

Several friends have related seeing my father walk down the street and see him pick up someone else's trash and put it in a receptacle. They say they now do the same, and so do I. If Judge Hoffius could do it, why not the rest of us?

In fact, it's just as your parents told you or showed you, and for those of you who are parents, you told your children: if you always

do the best you can, good things will happen. Each responsibility, each job, prepares you for the next responsibility or job, even if you don't know what that is. Soon enough, you'll find out what your next step is, your next challenge, and then you will marvel at how you can be so good at something you never thought you could do.

That's essentially the story of a young man named Colin in the 1950s. He showed up every morning at the Teamster's Hall to volunteer for day jobs. One day a job cleaning up sticky soda syrup opened up at a Pepsi plant. None of the other kids volunteered, but Colin did. He did such a good job, he was invited back the next summer to operate a bottling machine instead of a mop. By the end of the summer, he was deputy shift leader.

In his memoir, he said it taught him an important lesson, "All work is honorable. Always do your best, because someone is watching." In fact, the whole world watched as Colin Powell served as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of State, a job no military leader would be expected to achieve. I wonder what became of those kids who wouldn't clean up sticky syrup?

Of course, some times things go wrong. If that happens, take responsibility, apologize, and remember the parable of the cow in the ditch. Ann Mulcahy, CEO of Xerox, said she learned it from another CEO. He said:

When something goes wrong and you are not sure what to do, you've got to do three things:

- First, get the cow out of the ditch.
- Second, find out how the cow got into the ditch.
- Third, make sure you do whatever it takes so the cow doesn't go into the ditch again.

2. Find a mentor.

Do this as early and as often in your life as possible. You will know your mentor when you meet him or her. He or she will be smarter than you are, more talented than you are, more sophisticated than you are, and wiser than you are. Yet, somehow, for all that, he or she will believe in you. He or she will be both your teacher and your sponsor.

The better your mentor, the faster you grow. You may have more than one mentor over the course of your life. In fact, you should have more than one mentor because that reflects your growth and the changes to your life. You'll need different directions at age 60 or age 40 than you did at 18. Or, I hope you do.

3. Be nice to everyone.

Assume that the kid in the mailroom is your future boss or client, because he or she may well be. You can't be too nice, but that doesn't mean you should be a pushover. Nice people don't finish last; they just don't talk about winning on the way to the finish line. The more important you get, the nicer you've got to be.

My father claimed that the best advice he ever got, advice that changed his life, was to "be nice to everyone." In 1931, he went to Colgate University in Hamilton, New York, a great distance from Grand Rapids, but he benefited from a few boys ahead of him who had gone to Central High School with him. One of those was eventually to be his brother-in-law, Gee Chamberlain. Uncle Gee gave my father the advice to "be nice to everyone." The reason for the advice was simple: Colgate was a small school and sooner or later, you'll run into everyone several times. You might as well make them your allies. How many times have you heard people refer to Grand Rapids in that same way?

My brother, Steve, and I always marveled that no matter where we walked with our father, he seemed to know everyone, and everyone seemed to know him. Often he couldn't remember a name, but he remembered something about the person passing by and could inquire about his cottage at Big Star Lake, or her brother-in-law's business. For over 35 years, he was either Prosecuting Attorney or Circuit Judge for Kent County, neither position really requiring that he be nice to everyone. But, it sure made his life, and our lives, more enjoyable. More importantly, good things just seemed to happen to him. It was natural; why would good things happen to someone who isn't nice to others?

Which reminds me of a corollary to hard work. One of our great pro golfers commented that he was amazed that the harder he worked, the luckier he got. It wasn't Tiger Woods, but after watching some of his shots at any of the major tournaments he has won, you know what I mean.

4. Be on time.

I'd like to change this to "*be reliable*," because as most of my friends know, being on time is perhaps the most difficult thing for me to do. Ninety percent of life, according to Woody Allen, is showing up. People who show up on time get a 95, and what they do after they show up is the rest of the grade. My excuse for being time-challenged is that once I show up, I never walk out of a meeting early. But that's still just an excuse, and I need to work on timeliness every day of the week. Be committed to the task at hand because everybody's time is as important as yours. Agreeing to a meeting is making a promise. Keep it. I was here well before this presentation, in case you are wondering.

5. The magic words.

Growing up, your parents made you learn the magic words, "Please," "Thank you," and "I'm sorry." If you want someone to do something for you, say "Please." If they do it, say "Thank you." If you do something and it's wrong, don't sit around waiting for everyone to forget about it. They won't. Say you're sorry and

remember the parable of the cow in the ditch. Think about it, the magic words turn an order into a request, an accomplishment into appreciation, and a mistake into an opportunity to learn. That's why they are magic words.

6. Never point your finger unless you're giving directions.

In the law, things go wrong all the time. It's a given. It's why there are so many lawyers. I am not a litigator, I am a planner, so I am not in a career that forces me to lay blame, either on others, or events, or the weather, or whatever. There is no time for it and the press of events is far more important than who or what is to blame. Be part of the solution, not the problem. But, never be afraid to 'fess up to your own mistakes. Strive for fairness in all things. Even more important is to give others the credit they deserve. You will need them for the rest of your life.

7. Stay curious.

Ask questions. Whenever anything is unclear to you, never ever worry about appearing dumb. The dumbest question you'll ever ask is the one you never ask. It was your missed opportunity to learn. People love somebody who's not afraid to ask a dumb question. They were waiting with the answer anyway. It demonstrates amazing self confidence. Don't be intimidated by expertise, and don't be afraid to challenge jargon. Jargon is the mask of the insecure, the fortress of the overeducated. The first meeting where you say, "Excuse me, Bob, but just what the heck is RIPZ anyway?" You'll not only earn respect of your peers, you will understand the rest of the conversation. As we age, asking questions is even more important as our hearing or our random access memories fail us.

8. Keep it simple.

Strive for simplicity in everything. Think about it. Have you ever heard anyone say, "I love the guy, he makes everything sound so complicated?" In my profession, it means using plain English, and always thinking about how my clients will best understand what I write and say to them.

I know it's difficult for my secretary when I revise something one more time, but I still have the fear of meeting with a client and finding the awkward language in a meeting, let alone receiving a phone call inquiring about what I was trying to say.

9. Love what you do. Do what you love.

This is absolutely critical. If you don't love what you're doing, you probably won't perform as well as you could. And, even if you are successful, you'll be miserable, so what's the point? I started out in litigation, perhaps because both my grandfather and my father were litigators, prosecutors, and circuit judges. I wasn't a litigator long enough to know whether I was any good. But success, if it came, would have been hollow at best because I didn't enjoy the job. I do love what I'm doing now, and I have found that most truly successful people love what they do. Period.

What if you don't love what you are doing? Maybe you aren't doing your best because if you do your best, one of two things can

happen: you may have a new opportunity or you may find you like the job. That's the story of Fred the mailman told by Mark Sanborn in his book *The Fred Factor*. Fred always did more than Mark expected, so that he made his position delivering the mail into a special job. Essentially, by always doing his best, anticipating the needs of others, and having a positive attitude, he made a mundane job fun for both him and his customers. You can do the same with whatever task you dislike. Do your best, anticipate the needs of others, and have a positive attitude. Try it, it works!

10. Learning is forever.

No matter what we do in life, we are always learning and that's a good thing because the more we learn, the better we do, and the more we enjoy what we do. More importantly, our careers and our lives do not become boring if we continue to learn, to explore new things, and to grow. Learn technical skills, like a job, the computer, or even a new cell phone. Find an expert; hand your cell phone to a teenager and he'll teach you things it can do in less than a minute. Learn practical skills like cooking, gardening, and better ways of exercising. Learn personal skills like telling a story or, more importantly, learn to listen.

I have written a cookbook, "Just Good Food for Good Friends" and a photo album of Vickie's garden from Spring to Fall, so I became a regular at the Apple store for one-on-one training. While I was writing the cookbook, I handed out drafts of the cookbook to get input. Input, criticism, and comments I really wanted to make the cookbook the best it could be.

The result of always learning from classes, mentors, competitors, and anyone with whom you come in contact, is that someday you can be the best in your field. When it happens, you may feel a real disappointment. As you are starting out, you look at those above you and say, "Wow, those guys are really smart!" But when you're near the top looking down, it's not unusual to think, "Boy, if nobody is any smarter than I am, this place is really hurting." Whether you recognized the moment or not, you became the mentor. What you needed when you started is still what you need, humility, and the belief that you can learn from anyone, throughout your entire life.

Abraham Lincoln was never really recognized while he was alive for what he accomplished, and he was assassinated within days of the South's surrender at Appomattox. But, after his death, even a critic, Horace Greeley, saw what Lincoln had done. Greeley wrote:

He was not a born king of men . . . but a child of the common people, who made himself a great persuader, therefore, a leader, by dint of firm resolve, patient effort, and dogged perseverance. He slowly won his way to eminence and fame by doing the work that lay next to him – doing it with all his growing might – doing it as well as he could, and learning by his failure, when failure was encountered, how to do it better . . . He was open to all impressions and influences, and gladly profited by the teachings of events and circumstances, no matter how adverse or unwelcome. There was probably no year of his life when he was not a wiser, cooler, and better man than he had been the year preceding.

May we each in our own small way emulate the life of perhaps our most humble and our greatest President who clearly Learned the Ropes.

Americans love lists and, apparently, I am no exception. Let's see:

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2. Find a mentor.
3. Be nice to everyone.
4. Be on time. Be on time. Be on time.
5. Remember the magic words.
6. Don't point your finger unless you are giving directions.
7. Stay curious.
8. Keep it simple.
9. Love what you do and do what you love.
10. Learning is forever.



Things to do:

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These 10 things are important if we are to be the best we can be. And, of course, I haven't just been talking about work. These are lessons for life. You can't be a jerk at work and not be a jerk with your family and friends. You can't turn your personality on and off. I know plenty of people who tried to do that and failed, and so do you.

When sailors learn the ropes, it's a finite practice. These ropes are different. They take us a lifetime to learn and each time we think we've made it, we find we can do better. We can and we will.



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Dirk Hoffius has been providing Michigan residents with legal expertise and counseling on estate planning for more than 40 years. His knowledge and experience enables him to assist families as their needs change, from the most extensive and layered estate plans to basic plans. Dirk is an active member of the West Michigan community and has served and chaired numerous non-profit organizations over the years. Dirk's most recent undertaking was the creation of *Just Good Food For Good Friends*, a cookbook filled with nearly 160 of his favorite recipes that are simple enough for any cook to master. Dirk's cooking philosophy is that every recipe must be prepared well and with enthusiasm; not unlike his philosophy towards estate plans.

