

Nuts—Changing careers

By Graham Prosser

Who'd want to be a CEO? I thought I would. After twenty years shinning up the slippery pole, I was the Chief Operating Officer of a bank with more customer assets than Citigroup, so it seemed like the next logical step. But the grime beneath the gloss of the celebrity CEOs was starting to grin through. I'm no Marxist, but with a take home forty times that of my average colleague, I felt like an overfed rat.

So my wife and I decided to get out. In our mid-forties we would retire. Colleagues' reactions varied from envy to pity. Many thought I was nuts.

We moved to Toronto to be closer to our extended family and busied ourselves with a house renovation. For a while, my son basked in the new-found and lavish attention of his loving father. We bonded warmly over my enthusiasm for technology and e-bay; indulging our shared interest in fast computers and drop-dead gorgeous electric guitars. But too much of anything can be unattractive after a while. It was time for me to figure out what I was meant to do now that I had grown up.

I'd imagined a portfolio of volunteer work and one or two non-executive board positions. But I found that many volunteer organizations reserve their interesting roles for the representatives of their major donors. And I should have known that CEOs rarely want unfamiliar non-execs making Board meetings unpredictable. Known quantities make audit and compensation committees work smoother. Ask Messrs. Lay, Ebbers and Kozslowski.

I was mired in notions of what was "appropriate" given my past career. Early retirement is cool, but second career choices can be very tricky. I remembered how an ex-colleague at a Wall Street firm was ridiculed when she opted out to run a Subway sandwich franchise. Having invested into a tony Toronto enclave, I wondered if our stockbroker neighbours could serve me with a writ if a Subway van was permanently parked on our driveway.

Eventually I kissed the board room goodbye and reconciled myself to some bottom-rung roles in the volunteer sector. I began working as a helper in a homeless shelter and as a mentor to young entrepreneurs. I was familiar with the adage that you often get more out of volunteer work than you put in. But I wasn't ready for the dividend I was about to receive.

One mentoring session was really rewarding. I had spent fifteen minutes illustrating, to my mind irrefutably, why my listener's business case was doomed to miserable failure. At the end of my deflating spiel the lad made eye contact, mine cold, his blessed with a haunting brightness, and said "Yes I know all that but, what you can't see on this spreadsheet is how much I want this business to work." We never looked back.

The lesson for me was plain. My way forward lay in not giving a fig for the opinion of others and shaking off the blinkers grafted on by years of competing in the corporate rat race.

I went back to the whiteboard to figure out some new directions. You soon realize that a life in banking equips you for very little else. You need to go back to school and learn some new skills. I love to write, have some sense for a good picture and don't enjoy heavy lifting. So I decided to have a crack at freelance photo-journalism. I'm now enrolled in a certificate program at Ryerson University and, in the fast food parlance of the day, "I'm loving it."

I recently enjoyed a concert by John McLaughlin, a guitarist who ranks up there with Beck and Clapton but who has never conformed to the standard rock star razzmatazz. Something McLaughlin said that night struck a chord. "I hope I never stop wanting to experiment and learn." I hope I never do either. Just as I hope that, despite all the scandalous trials, enough bright, aspiring COOs and CFOs retain an ambition for the top spot together with a good sense of proportion.

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