

Deans' column: Patrick Harker of Wharton on Jon Huntsman

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I have a confession to make: I really don't like management "gurus". Whenever I hear someone spouting off some solipsistic new theory of management based on a limited set of empirical experiences, I cringe. I have the same reaction when media pundits and other so-called "experts" expound on the latest happenings of the day from the comfortable armchair of hindsight.

Instead, I am drawn to seek wisdom from two types of people. The first are true scholars who have devoted their careers to the development of deep, time-tested knowledge concerning economics, human behaviour and the nature of our world. I have been honoured throughout my academic career to know and be inspired by many such individuals.

The second group consists of those who have been in the trenches – in the "real world" – and have emerged from their trials as not just successful, but as people I admire and aspire to be like.

As Teddy Roosevelt said: "In the battle of life, it is not the critic who counts; nor the one who points out how the strong person stumbled, or where the doer of a deed could have done better. ... Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though chequered by failure, than to rank with those timid spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat."

One person stands out for me in the latter group of individuals: Jon Huntsman. A true self-made man, Mr Huntsman graduated from the Wharton School in 1959 and after a career at Dow Chemical, he and his brother started Huntsman Corporation in 1970. From its humble beginnings, Huntsman grew to be the world's largest privately held chemical company, with more than \$12bn in annual revenues.

In 2005, Mr Huntsman took the firm public. Along the way, like in all business, the growth path for the firm was not completely smooth, with the business facing its ups and downs. Mr Huntsman clearly does not live in Roosevelt's twilight! Despite these series of successes and setbacks, he never wavered in his commitment to the firm or his faith in his employees. Today, Huntsman Corp. is quickly becoming one of the world's largest speciality chemical manufacturers.

But it is not what he has accomplished that sets Mr Huntsman apart. It's the way that he achieved this success. As one of the world's leading philanthropists, he is committed to making sure that business and business success serve society.

This is not a "win at all cost" philosophy. Rather, Mr Huntsman's business philosophy focuses on doing the right things and in the right way. Basically, it boils down to being able to sleep at night, knowing that you have done your best for your customer, your employees and the community.

In his book *"Winners Never Cheat"* (Wharton School Publishing, 2005), Mr Huntsman lays out his approach to business and to life. I have been fortunate not only to have read the book, but to have developed a wonderful friendship with Mr Huntsman, who is one of the warmest and most genuine people I've ever known. Here are the five most important lessons that I have learned from him:

Listen. The key to being a successful entrepreneur and to having a successful life is to listen to people, to really understand them. Mr Huntsman has this remarkable ability to listen and to glean insights from people because of the second lesson, namely

Put people first. Listening is easy if you care about people. Mr Huntsman greets everyone, from the highest ranking person in the room to the housekeeping staff, with the same enthusiasm. As a

result, people know that he really cares.

On this point, François Michelin, in *And Why Not?*, gave the best advice I know when he passed along this piece of wisdom to his son: "Be loving. To love someone is to accept that person as he or she is, it is to go in search of the plain, unvarnished truth about that person and to acknowledge this truth, whatever it may be, even if it is unexplainable. ... What it amounts to is this, simply, a respect for the freedom of the person. It is a respect for the mystery of the person."

Keep your word. A career is a marathon, not a sprint. Lie and cheat and it will eventually come back to haunt you. This is tough, but I've seen Mr Huntsman go through some hard times in his business career and life, yet he never reneged on a commitment. As a result, people respect him and will give him the benefit of the doubt because they know he's a person of integrity.

Be resilient. Not everything in life is going to go smoothly. By building your life, both professionally and personally, with relationships at the centre and showing that you care about people, they will respond in the bad times with an outpouring of assistance and support. In both his business setbacks and in his personal life, I've seen this play out in Mr Huntsman's life, and I admire his calmness and his resilience.

Don't seek success, seek meaning. John Gardner, a great academic and civic leader, said this about meaning: "Meaning is not something you stumble across, like the answer to a riddle or the prize in a treasure hunt. Meaning is something you build into your life. You build it out of your own past, out of your affections and loyalties, out of the experience of humankind as it is passed on to you, out of your own talent and understanding, out of the things you believe in, out of the things and people you love, out of the values for which you are willing to sacrifice something.

"The ingredients are there. You are the only one who can put them together into that unique pattern that will be your life. Let it be a life that has dignity and meaning for you. If it does, then the particular balance of success or failure – as the world measures success or failure – is of less account."

Business and business success are not an end in themselves. They are means to an even higher and more noble end: a life well lived in service to mankind through one's business and civic affairs – a life exemplified by Jon Huntsman.

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