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Sage Advice for Leaders: Work Hard and Share Your Wealth

By Christine W. Zust, M.A.

Add this note to your expanding To Do list: Talk to a sage. You will learn more about leadership in a one- or two-hour conversation with an elder statesperson than from any business management book. If you often wonder where you will find the energy to get through another day, think of those who have come before us, who have paved the way for our success as leaders, and learn from their wisdom.

I had the privilege recently of spending several hours with 93-year-old Midwestern business leader and philanthropist Ralph Cobey. Cobey, who still comes into the office every work day, has founded and managed more than a dozen companies throughout his career. Today, he remains president of two companies and chairman of a third. Throughout his active entrepreneurial life, Cobey has started successful enterprises ranging from asphalt and iron works to steel and rock crushing. I asked him about success, what words of wisdom he might pass on to emerging leaders, and what encouragement he could offer to leaders who strive for simplicity in an age of techno turbulence. His advice might surprise you.

Work Hard. Pick up any best-selling autobiography by any high-ranking business leader, and most likely the author will claim that it was hard work that paved the way to a successful career. It was no different for Ralph Cobey. Cobey vowed at the age of 10 that he would never be poor. He had worked since he was 4-1/2 years old, earning a nickel per row to weed celery rows at a local farm. It was hard, dirty work for a young boy, but he was determined to save his money for a better life. From that early age, there was no task too difficult for Cobey. He simply set his mind to it, learned what he had to, and mastered the task, whatever it was. While he was educated as a mechanical engineer, he credits his development as a generalist in giving him the tenacity to meet any challenge willingly. Cobey says general problem solving is difficult today because so many people are trained as specialists. They can only do one thing well, and if their life changes, especially during tough economic times, they have no other skills to support them. He advises broadening your horizons.

Be an Innovative Thinker. Looking over Cobey's five-page biography, complete with dozens of honors and awards, it's clear that he is a man who loves a challenge. While others may merely think of creating businesses, and never acting upon those thoughts, Cobey turned every thought into a reality. He doesn't consider himself to be a role model (but he is). "I am just a man," he replies. When Cobey started his first business venture in 1946, a farm machinery company, he noticed that most accidents on the job occurred on Mondays, perhaps because workers were not as focused on work, having just enjoyed the weekend. Cobey began offering a chaplain service, for just 20-25 minutes a day, that allowed workers to spend time in reflective thought and prayer. It wasn't long before he noticed the accident rate dropping. Wherever there was a need, Cobey had a solution. U.S. presidents and Ohio governors have put Cobey's creative mind to work in matters of the environment, economics, foreign affairs, labor relations, industrial development and industrial safety for nearly seven decades.

Have a Good Support System. "No one man can do it alone. It takes others to help him," Cobey says. He learned through his vast business experience that you can't just hire good people. You have to be with the people. You do this, he says, by keeping everything exciting and interesting. "Human beings need attention." Coach people when they need coaching. Treat everyone as equals, from the janitor to top management. Push your ego aside. Cobey and his lovely wife of 59 years, Hortense, made the choice long ago that they would support each other's efforts. Cobey never brought work home with him. Hortense knew that Ralph was committed to building his business, and Ralph knew that the time he spent at home with his family in the evening and on weekends was his personal time. He used his normal workdays to get his tasks done efficiently and surrounded himself with talented managers and workers who shared the responsibility. He trusted them to get the job done, and he kept the channels of communication open.

Share Your Wealth. Helping others to achieve success and giving to others who are less fortunate has brought Ralph Cobey immense personal satisfaction. “When you give to others unconditionally, with no expected return of favor, then you have succeeded in life.” In order to be profitable, you must also be charitable. When your company does well, that wealth must be shared with the people who got you there – your employees. He admits that Andrew Carnegie taught him many important lessons in life, as much of Cobey’s life is patterned after the 20th Century industrial mogul and philanthropist. From the time he was a young man, Cobey has supported the Boy Scouts of America, and donated countless hours of his time and energy to the organization. He joined the group in 1920 and became an Eagle Scout. As he continued his successful business career, he never forgot the positive impact that scouting had on his development as a budding entrepreneur and leader. In fact, his stone crushing company, Eagle Crusher Company, Inc., proudly reflects his pride in scouting. Through his quiet efforts, Cobey has shared his wealth with dozens of non-profit and community-based organizations. He cautions: give, not because you want the attention, but because you genuinely care.

It is often said that hard work develops character in a person. In Ralph Cobey’s case, he has given of his time, talent, energy and heart to help make the world a better place. And isn’t that what we all want to accomplish as leaders and human beings?

Christine W. Zust, M.A., is a communication expert and speaker who helps executive leaders and management teams develop credibility and clout with customers and key clients. She is president of Zust & Company, a Cleveland-based training, coaching and consulting firm, and can be reached at (440) 777-8373, or visit www.zustco.com.

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