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When Running the Meeting, Speak Last

Lindsey Ueberroth

Chief executive of the Preferred Hotel Group

Q. Were you in leadership roles when you were younger?

A. Most people don't believe me, but when I was a child, I was a painfully shy person. But my family moved from Los Angeles to Minneapolis when I was in fifth grade and that was a big turning point, because all of a sudden I was in a new environment. And it was really cool to be from California, so I had that going for me.

We ended up moving a lot, and I became very good at being the new kid and learned very quickly that you have to get involved in things. I ended up in a lot of leadership positions.

Tell me about college.

I studied organizational communications. I was always interested in what motivates people, and how to affect people's behavior. I interviewed for everything when I graduated, but I ended up working for Accenture. That was an interesting interview process, because it was a highly coveted company and everybody had said: "You've got to have this G.P.A. You have to have scored this on your SAT."

I didn't, but I figured that there's always an exception to the rule. I made it through the first interviews, and then 10 of us went to the Charlotte office for the final interview, and everyone was expecting to get an offer.

I found out that there was a division called "change management consulting," and I kept asking people about it. They'd all say, "We don't hire college graduates for that." They let me meet the partner who ran change management, and I asked him a lot of questions. I ended up leaving without an offer. I was devastated.

But two weeks later, I got a phone call from the partner, who said, "You were gutsy enough to keep pushing for this, and so we'd like to make you an offer."

He gave me some good advice, too. I remember asking, "What's the one thing I should know as I start my professional life?" He said, "It's always better to be tired than bored."

Any lessons from working in change management?

I learned that a lot of the work was about listening. I was like a therapist most of the time, because people just wanted to get things off their chest. The more people tell you what the problems are, the faster you



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can figure out how to solve them.

Ultimately you switched to the family business, in the travel industry.

I had never once contemplated working with my family, but it was just a natural fit. At first, I was consulting, helping my father integrate the businesses he was buying. My dad never once said, "Will you come work with me?" It was always, "Will you go spend some time there and let me know what you think?"

But family businesses are hard because you have to work three times as hard to prove yourself, because everybody thinks that you're overpaid and that everything is handed to you. People always have a lot of preconceived notions about you, and it just takes a lot more time and a lot more work to prove yourself.

How has your leadership style evolved?

I'm a lot calmer than I used to be. That just

comes with experience and time. I've also learned when I'm running meetings that I need to be the last one to speak about a topic, because otherwise that sways people. I've learned to throw a topic out, ask a lot of questions and get a lot of engagement before I speak my mind.

I've also asked my team to really challenge me when they think we may be going down the wrong path. Sometimes when you're the new leader, you're trying hard to prove that you're capable. Now I definitely rely on my executive team to give me advice and counsel.

How do you hire?

I really don't care very much about where they went to school. I'm a pretty good judge of character, and it's just about how I'm going to interact with this person. What experience do they have? Do they seem motivated and passionate? I want somebody who's a real go-getter, who's self-motivated. I want people who have an entrepreneurial spirit.

I also like to see if they've got a sense of humor. You've got to be pretty intelligent to have a sharp wit, because you have to be on your toes.

So the three questions I generally ask are behavioral, the kind that Accenture taught me to ask. "Tell me about a time in your professional life when you failed or something went wrong. Walk me through what happened and then tell me what you did to either resolve it or what you wish you had done differently."

Then I'll usually say, "If your spouse or best friend were sitting here at the table with us, what would they say is your best trait, and what would they say is the one thing you could improve on?"

Then I really just want to know what they're passionate about.

What career and life advice do you give college students?

The first thing I say is to make sure you don't overspend your new paycheck from the get-go, like having your monthly car payment be more than your rent. I made that mistake.

Then I'll say that your first job is just about getting experience and working hard. I find that a lot of kids right out of college want to be a vice president and make six figures within the first two years. They should worry less about the title. Worry about getting the right experience.

I think there's a fear that you're going to be doing whatever your first job is for the rest of your life, and so it has to be the perfect job. That adds a lot of pressure, and it's not realistic. You're not always going to hit it out of the park on your first job.