

Coastal Connecticut – Autumn 2015 - George Bodenheimer, ESPN ex-president

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His rise on the corporate ladder personifies the American Dream; working class gopher to the chairman's suites of giants ESPN and Disney. He led the transformation of sports from the back pages to front and center as a domineering force in our economy and culture. Pivoting the spotlight from himself, he credits his team for his company's successes. George Bodenheimer achieved it all by sticking to tried and true values instilled by his parents. Now he focuses on a new passion; philanthropy. Through his seat on the board of the V Foundation, he fights to solve the scourge of cancer and honor the legacy of Jim Valvano, the college basketball coach who cancer claimed in the prime of his life. He recently shared some of his experiences and thoughts with Coastal.

How did you begin at ESPN?

After graduating from college in 1980 with a degree in economics, I wrote letters to every major league baseball team. I got back 26 'I don't think so' replies. Then a friend of my father mentioned this young company in Bristol, ESPN, being focused only on sports. I wrote a letter and got an interview. When I got back home in Greenwich, I told my dad I had sort of been offered a job as a mailroom driver for \$8,000 a year. He told me not to focus on the money, to think about the potential of sports TV and make a decision based on what you want to do for a career.

What were those early days like?

I was driving around delivering mail, driving Dick Vitale back and forth to the airport, and shoveling snow.

What attribute or experience was most helpful to your progression?

Good mentors. I had several good business mentors along the way. They encouraged me to always be a student of the business, never stop learning. And ESPN had a

culture of encouraging promotion from within. But the most influential and important mentors were my mom and dad. They taught me most everything I needed to know. Respect for other people. Work hard. Humility. Humility is important.

What is your proudest accomplishment?

Professionally, it's the growth of the company at ESPN. We did that every year by sticking to our mission to service sports fans, empowering our employees and having a culture of innovation. The people there work hard and supported me.

(Bodenheimer's humility wouldn't mention the skyrocket growth under his leadership. During his presidency from 1998 thru 2011, ESPN grew from less than 2,000 employees to more than 7,000. It established four new domestic networks, 28 new international networks, 18 web sites, and numerous multi-year contracts to televise, among others, Monday Night Football, Wimbledon, World Cup Soccer, and several college football conferences.)

What advice do you have for new college graduates?

Be willing to learn, follow your passion, and be optimistic.

Do you think sports gets too much attention compared to its value to society?

I disagree. Every town is a sports town. When life brings us down, sports can pick us up. Sports plays a powerful unifying role for the country. *(Note: Every Town is a Sports Town is the title of Bodenheimer's book, which is a memoir of his career at ESPN. He is donating all his proceeds to the V Foundation, formed in 1993 by ESPN and college basketball coach Jim Valvano. Its endowment covers admin costs so 100% of donations go to cancer research. A board of doctors decide where the money goes.)*

What is your function at the V Foundation and why is it so important to you?

I've seen the power of it and the benefits it can produce to help people fight cancer. I'm chairing a new initiative called, 'Not a Moment to Lose.' Its goal is to raise 200 million dollars in seven years. It raises the bar at what we do. There's been so much

research advancement by doctors. One promising treatment is immunotherapy – using the body's immune system to fight the cancer cells.

What lessons from your experience at ESPN are you applying to your work at the V Foundation?

Number one is build relationships. If you want to be a successful executive, a successful salesperson, a successful anything, it's about building relationships with people. I tried hard to do that at ESPN and I certainly am doing that now in a fundraising capacity. When you ask people to donate money to a charity, they have a right to feel good about where the money is going and how it's going to be spent. Number two is be optimistic. You've got to knock on a lot of doors to get a yes, so to speak.

In your book, you emphasize the importance of culture in a company, about empowering people and building the right environment. How do you do that? What's the key?

It starts at the top and you gotta walk the walk. You and your senior people must embody the culture that you want to be prevalent in the company. We used a term called 'culture carriers'. We would promote people who embodied the ESPN culture. You can send out all the memos or make all the speeches you want but nothing speaks louder to your employees than the people who you promote.

You also mention in your book placing a major emphasis on compassion and caring. Can you explain that?

When I used to tell people that at ESPN we're a family, they'd ask what does that mean. I'd say it means what it means in a family. We take care of each other, we have each other's back. When people had difficulties like health issues or other problems, everyone comes out and helps each other. We allowed time for people to go to their kids' baseball game or a PTA meeting. I wanted family to be your number one priority. It's okay for ESPN to be a close second, but don't ever confuse that order.

Is there a recent book that's made an impression on you and why?

'Playing Against the House' by James Walsh. It's about a journalist who gets a job at a casino and works undercover to unionize the workers. It reinforced my appreciation for the plight of employees and the hard work that they put into their jobs every day. This book is inspiring in terms of showcasing hard working Americans.

What is a guilty pleasure of George Bodenheimer?

I like to go fishing and play golf and be with my family and friends. That's really it. I spend time with my three kids and my wife, Ann. Looking forward to reeling in a few stripers on Long Island Sound this spring. It's a great body of water and it's really a great asset for Connecticut.