



*Great Leaders
Great Organizations
Lasting Results*

***I have no special talent, I am only
passionately curious. – Albert Einstein***

The above quotation applies especially well to Master Leader Robbie Shaw. Robbie has changed jobs every five years. In fact there was a standing joke, that you could set your watch by it.

In 2011, Robbie became Executive Advisor to the Dean of the Faculty of Management at Dalhousie University's School of Business Administration. Before that he was:

The President and CEO of the IWK Health Centre Foundation
Vice President, Partnerships & Innovation responsible for NSCC's \$123 million expansion project
Vice President, Customer Service, Marketing & Sales, Nova Scotia Power Inc.
Managing Partner for Atlantic Canada, KPMG
Executive Vice President and Senior Vice President, National Sea Products
Vice President, Finance & Administration, Dalhousie University
Government of Canada – Ottawa, Senior Vice President, Government & Public Relations
Principal Assistant to the Premier of Nova Scotia
President and General Manager, Clayton Developments and the creation of Colby Village

My interview with Robbie Shaw follows:

B.M. Why did you change jobs every five years?

R.S. I like to make a difference in what I am doing and after five years I felt that I made as much of a difference as I could make. My wife would say that I get bored easily and really need to be stimulated. However, there were a couple of exceptions; such as six years as President of Clayton Development Ltd., which is part of The Shaw Group and was very innovative. We built the first three condominiums in Nova Scotia as well as developments in Clayton Park.

I'm sure that after five years, some organizations realized that I wasn't as good as they thought I was.

B.M. What were the benefits of changing jobs every five years?

R.S. There were always new things to learn because each place I worked did things differently, which gave me a “close up” view of what worked and what didn’t work. I should also say that my learning was cumulative over the years and I never could have learned that much had I stayed at one company or organization for my entire career. I was also quite active in the Liberal Party provincially and that added a great deal in helping me learn about leadership.

B.M. What was one of the most important things that you learned?

R.S. I learned that you usually can’t change a culture in four or five years but you can certainly change the direction. When I came into the IWK Foundation, it had three CEOs in five years and a 100 percent turn over in staff. There was no optimism, no plan of action, and we had a terrible relationship with the IWK Health Centre. We achieved a significant culture change in two years and a complete culture change in five.

We turned the culture into one that was collaborative, cooperative, hard work and yet a fun environment with an understanding that we can have an intimate and friendly relationship with the IWK Health Centre, which was fundamental. I was also heavily involved in the IWK itself as part of senior management.

B.M. Succession planning is one of the most important jobs of a leader, how did you deal with it?

R.S. Succession planning was always a priority. I always tried to develop succession planning to a highly sophisticated degree. It also has to be a formal process that everyone understands. I also believe in promoting from within whenever possible.

For example, Allen Shaw is my first cousin, and at the Shaw Group, we were both seen as having potential. My father, Lloyd Shaw, brought in a mentor for both of us. However, in the end, Allen got the job as President and CEO because he was twice as bright as I was. He earned a Harvard MBA and came in first in five of his subjects. Allen was the right person for the job and I have never regretted it.

B.M. What were the costs to you and/or the organizations you worked for when you left?

R.S. Very minimal. For example, Clayton Developments became the foremost residential development company in Atlantic Canada. At National Sea my successor was probably as good or even better than I was, He carried out the same aggressiveness in terms of marketing and sales, and is still in a senior management position with National Sea.

B.M. As a leader, how important was continuing education for you and your career?

- R.S.** Continuing education was and is critically important if it is the right kind of education, for the right person and at the right time. For example, I was very fortunate in being able to take the American Management Association course for Presidents. We had four weekly sessions and we learned as much if not more from the other participants, one of which was the President of Exxon for South America. The programs greatly enhanced my sense of confidence in finance and human resource management.
- B.M.** Research on Leadership suggests that Master Leaders have developed four or five areas of strength. Which are yours?
- R.S.** I would say that Teambuilding and People Management is #1, High Energy is #2, Strategic Thinking and Planning is #3, and to a lesser degree Marketing and Sales.
- B.M.** From your long and distinguished career, what is the best advice that you have for emerging and established learners?
- R.S.** Develop emotional intelligence. I know it is something that can be developed because I have mentored people who developed it. You also have to be prepared to always get your hands dirty. You need to lead the way by working hard, doing what you love to do and getting everybody as a team to pull hard.
- B.M.** Lastly, your sister is Alexa McDonough, who was the leader of the NDP both provincially in Nova Scotia and federally. When the two of you get into an argument, who wins?
- R.S.** She does — all the time.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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