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Salesman puts skills to use building aspiration

By Ian Wylie



Lesson plan: 'The great teachers and lecturers are the great salesmen,' says Humphrey Walters

In a cove on his farm in Devon, Humphrey Walters has just planted tree 37. Each serves as a reminder of someone who has helped him on his unlikely path from selling cars and helicopters to sailing yachts round the world, winning rugby world cups with England, coaching coaches at Chelsea and now giving direction to chief executives and headteachers.

"I look at these trees and think I wouldn't have this lovely farm if it hadn't been for these people," says the 72-year old marathon runner, who mercifully does not dress up in cod psychology what he does in teamwork, motivation and leadership.

Mr Walters is best known for being Sir Clive Woodward's motivation expert when England won the Rugby World Cup in 2003, then mentor to Sam Allardyce when he managed Bolton Wanderers and young coaches at Chelsea, including Brendan Rodgers (now manager of Liverpool) and Paul Clement, now assistant coach at Real Madrid. But Mr Walters concedes he is still in the business of sales.

"The great teachers and lecturers are the great salesmen," he says. "They are good at persuasion. The skills of selling that I'd learned in the car game help me sell knowledge, self-belief and aspiration – whether it's a chief executive or kids of 15 who don't think they can do an A-level."

That skill first became apparent in 1968 in West Germany, when Mr Walters teamed up with a car dealer to trade American cars with US troops, then export the trade-ins to the UK to sell to pop stars of the day, including Cilla Black and Marty Wilde.

"They couldn't afford Rolls-Royces and Bentleys, but they wanted something ostentatious and these were cheaper options," he explains.

The venture was assisted by exchange controls that prevented anyone in the UK from buying cars in Germany, but when those controls were ended, Mr Walters returned to the UK and with an Australian friend began selling a speed-reading course developed at Harvard University to schools and companies.

"I needed another vehicle to make money and this was an easy sell," he recalls. "The two priorities for me have always been being able to pay the heating bill and being my own boss."

He traces this pragmatic approach back to a largely self-sufficient childhood. Born in India to doctors who moved to Gambia to run a medical research desk, Mr Walters was shipped off to boarding school in England when he was 11, and did not see his parents again until he was 20.

"There was no airport near where my parents lived and the ship took three and a half weeks, so there was no point in trying to visit them during school holidays. I had to look after myself," he says.

"Early in life, I developed independence and entrepreneurial skills. I received very limited pocket money, so I had to earn money washing cars or digging gardens. And I had to learn the skill of getting on with people at school *and* their parents, so that I had someone to stay with in the holidays."

With some guidance from Marks and Spencer's then chairman, Marcus Sieff, Mr Walters developed the speed-reading business into a fully-fledged management training company with offices in the US, France, Botswana, Australia and New Zealand and enlisted the help of sportsmen Mike Brearley, Duncan Goodhew and Bill Beaumont as well as Major General Sir Jeremy Moore, the commander of the land forces in the Falkland's conflict.

But that was not enough for Mr Walters, who saw in Chay Blyth's round-the-world yacht race an opportunity to try walking the talk after more than two decades of dispensing management advice.

"I didn't want to be fake. I wanted to have my own case study that was tough and dependent on teamwork," he says. "I knew exactly what I was doing; it was a personal branding exercise, and Global Challenge was my way of saying: look, I've done it."

His experiences on board Ocean Rover over 11 months in 1996 and 1997 formed the basis for a book that sold more than 25,000 copies

and led to a meeting that changed his life. His weekly radio broadcast from the yacht had been heard by newly appointed England rugby coach Clive Woodward.

“Within a month of returning, Clive had called me, saying he needed someone to bring business principles into the sporting environment, someone who would have credibility with the players, and that I fitted the criteria,” Mr Walters recalls. “England were 10th and they wanted to win the world cup in 2003. Clive was a great winner and he gave me a chance that I’ve never forgotten.”

He was tasked with helping Woodward turn a group of rugby players into world-class athletes. “I explained to the players that when you go on holiday, it’s a series of incidents. And if you lose your luggage, the whole holiday is clouded,” he says.

“If you want to be world class, you can’t afford one part of that journey to be low level – every element has to be world class, and that’s true whether you are a supermarket or a rugby team.”

Mr Walters examined every element of the rugby team set-up, from diet and hotels to practice routines and changing rooms. He also visited other world-class organisations to discover their secrets, including the Israeli defence academy and the London Symphony Orchestra.

“I wanted to see how they handled their prima donnas, because we had prima donnas, too.”

His success in helping England achieve their goal in 2003 has brought further work in sport, with Bolton, Swansea and Chelsea football clubs, as well as the Olympic judo squad. But Mr Walters admits to getting as big a kick from his work with chief executives and headteachers.

“The job I do with LDC, Lloyds private equity arm, really excites me, helping the CEOs of businesses they invest in to be world class,” he says.

“And I love working with headteachers, because while a CEO touches customers’ wallets, a headteacher touches souls.”

Secret CV

Have you had any mentors?

Marcus Sieff, who showed me how to build a business, Sir Chay Blyth who gave me the chance to sail round the world, Clive Woodward who gave me a huge break with the England rugby team, and my wife who has stood by me and supported me from rags to riches.

Biggest disappointment?

When I got back from sailing around the world, I joined three business people who wanted to build a management training business on the back of me, but I found them to lack emotional skills. I stuck it for 18 months, became ill and moved on.

Career advice

People work far too hard by being not smart enough. Many CEOs are so busy trying to make an impact and seeking success that they are frightened to let go. They don’t remember that someone once trusted them. In Formula One, there is a culture of “just tell me once”. CEOs need to learn that too.

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