

Views from the TOP

Their businesses range from fashion and finance to real estate and software development. Their employees number from the dozens to the thousands. Some are entrepreneurs, while others work for established corporations. Herschel Supply founders Jamie and Lyndon Cormack, Troika Developments CEO Renee Wasylyk, BCLC head Jim Lightbody, Copperleaf Technologies chief executive Judi Hess and BMO VP Mike Bonner tell us what it takes to be a leader

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IT'S ALL RELATIVE
Jamie (left) and Lyndon Cormack, in the lounge at Herschel's Vancouver HQ, think of their employees as family



Shoulder to Shoulder

At global phenomenon Herschel Supply, brothers Jamie and Lyndon Cormack guide the business together while giving their team freedom to excel

So, this is where my kids' backpacks got their start. At Herschel Supply Co. headquarters in East Vancouver's rough-hewn Railtown neighbourhood, the atmosphere on a sunny August morning is brisk. About 130 of the company's 170 employees work here, alongside founders Lyndon and Jamie Cormack, who are chatting with staff. The ground floor of the 28,500-square-foot digs is

open space, natural light and dark wood, offset by a many-headed chandelier whose tendrils could represent Herschel's rapid worldwide expansion. The company the Cormacks established in 2009, named after the Saskatchewan town that is their ancestral family home, now sells its retro-inspired, fashion-forward bags, apparel and accessories in 72 countries.

In a few days, Lyndon is heading to Shanghai, where Herschel has one of its four

satellite offices. For the business, which manufactures in China, being a hit with style- and budget-conscious young consumers from Tokyo to Paris to New York also means battling a rising tide of Asian-made knockoffs. "We spend out of our ears to protect our brand not only here at home but globally, and the tap's never going to get turned off," Lyndon, who would win most staring contests, says from the edge of his seat in the staff lounge. "It's a constant fight, but we

take it extremely seriously." He shares that intensity with Jamie, the senior Herschel co-founder by two years, whom I meet in his sparsely decorated office. The Cormack brothers are friendly people who show a genuine interest in others, but they didn't get where they are by being timid. If Lyndon comes off as a firebrand who can rally the troops, Jamie is a smouldering presence with an edge of his own. On the windowsill behind his desk sits a

sculpture of a hand with its middle finger raised. Right now, Jamie is most excited about Herschel's new travel and rainwear jacket lines. "It's good and bad," he says of leading a business with his brother. "It's good that I know we're both fighting for the same goal, and that's for this brand."

Before Calgary-raised Lyndon and Jamie launched Herschel, they were sales reps for U.S. apparel icon Vans and Seattle-based sporting goods retailer K2 Corp., respectively. Lyndon admits that early on, their parents worried that the siblings

would have a falling-out. But they've made it work, he says, pointing out that their older brother, Jason, is also involved in the company. "I run the benefit of Jamie being my best friend well before we started the business together, and we're equal partners, so there's no hierarchy," Lyndon notes. "We make decisions together. We're each other's best sounding boards. We have disagreements, but they're short-lived. There's the beauty that there's no candy-coating in our conversations, so things can move really quickly."

Jamie recalls how thrilled

JAMIE CORMACK



How do you spot and encourage talent?

I stopped hiring, other than major hires, I would say three years ago. I let my managers and leaders hire their own teams; I think that's important. I help, and I will obviously give my opinion, but I want them to hire their own team so that team can feel right to them and it's going to be their style.

What was your biggest leadership mistake?

In the beginning, it's hard to let go. I probably didn't let go early enough. I probably stayed in the trenches a little bit too long, probably became a little bit of a workaholic because of leadership. I think it took me a little while to realize that, "Hey, this is a really talented team that we have out here, and I can let go, and I know they're going to get the job done."



they were to start the company. "We saw that there was a hole in the bag market and the accessory market," he remembers. "But globally, I don't think we had a clue how big that open market share was." Back then they were probably closer colleagues, Jamie observes; today, with the business growing so quickly, they try not to step on each other's toes. He handles design and production, while Lyndon takes care of sales, marketing and other tasks. "Although we talk a lot about it and really get aligned on it, we work less closely," Jamie says.

JAMIE: What three things would you tell a young person who aspires to become a CEO?

1 Show up properly on the front end of your business and the back end. The front end [is what] people can see; the back end is just as important—the financial side, the operations side, your systems, your policies. If the back end of the business is there, it's going to help you show up properly on the front end.

2 Be easy to do business with. If you're easy to do business with, people want to come back. It seems so simple, but it's one of the hardest things to do.

3 Continue to push yourself. I think I learn something new every day I'm here, from everybody, too. If you're constantly pushing yourself, it keeps that passion going. I think that's everything, because I love to fight for the brand.

LYNDON: What three things would you tell a young person who aspires to become a CEO?

1 Get that title out of your head. Don't be a title chaser. Earned authority is the most important thing, not title authority or a nameplate.

2 Be inclusive and collaborative, and know that the team is going to help elevate you more than they're going to help suffocate you. The team's going to lift you up, not put you down.

3 Make sure you matter. Make sure people care that you're there.

Lyndon, who reckons the Herschel crew would be friends even if they didn't work together, regards his employees as family, too. With that in mind, the company gathers its local and international staff, along with its distributors, in Vancouver a couple of times a year for product launches. "We're very transparent, especially within these walls, about how business is going and how we can get better," he says.

As a leader, Jamie adapts to the situation. For example, he says, he talks differently to a designer than to a product manager. His overall style? "I'm hands-on. I spend probably 10 per cent of my day in my office in front of my computer, and 90 per cent is walking from section to section." But having made his expectations clear, he lets people own their roles: "I think they have more ownership of the brand because they have that freedom to run their section."

To that end, Herschel began hiring department leads early on, Lyndon explains. "Rather than allowing people to graduate into a position, we went to the top first and also allowed those people to hire their own teams." Herschel is a brand that listens—and keeps an open mind about how it can improve, he adds. "We've had ridiculous success," Lyndon says. "And it certainly has not been from a couple guys'

idea. It's been from a whole bunch of people buying into that we can do this differently and better and smarter." Lyndon calls his leadership style inclusive. "We surround ourselves with people who are exceptionally good at their jobs," he says. "I would describe myself as a proud generalist, somebody who likes to have a light touch on everything but allows the people around me to get the job done and celebrate their own wins."

He also strives to matter as a leader. His test: if you put the team behind a one-way glass and asked them, would they care if he showed up at work tomorrow? "My goal personally is to make sure I matter to the business," Lyndon says. "Because if I don't, then I think should probably just go."

Jamie, who says his parents gave him a lot of confidence, always knew what his goals were when he launched his first business—a sales agency in 2003—and worked in previous roles. At Herschel, he aims to steer managers in the same direction: "You want to lead with confidence, but more than anything, you want to know what you're trying to achieve before you get into anything."

Although Lyndon says he always had a knack for clearly defining that outcome, he used to be more stubborn about how to get there. He now knows there can be

many paths to the same result. Something Lyndon isn't very good at: being comfortable in the face of success. "I find comfort is, as a brand, a sign of weakness, and potentially an opportunity for people to come and smash you over," he explains. "I like getting on my toes a lot more than I like digging in my heels, and so I think that attitude is probably a little contagious."

How do you lead a company in an industry where tastes can change overnight? For Jamie, it means striking a balance between the commercial—products that customers keep coming back to—and the progressive. "We're big on core items here, but [we] also have

enough where we're pushing the market in an exciting way." To make that happen, Jamie pushes his designers and creatives. "I'm going to call a spade a spade," he warns. "I'm going to tell you if I think something is terrible, and I'm also going to tell you if something is great."

If there's one thing that gets Lyndon excited about the future, it's Herschel's continued growth. That expansion doesn't just equal more revenue to invest in new systems; it also lets him and Jamie hire more collaborators so they can strengthen the brand. "It's an overused quote around here," Lyndon says, "but the windshield for us is a hell of a lot bigger than the rear-view mirror." —N.R.

LYNDON CORMACK



Are you a born leader, or did you learn to lead?

If there's a whiteboard in front of me, I like to have the pen in my hand, and if there's a microphone around, I don't mind it near me. Throughout my life I've had a natural gift of the gab, [and] I don't have a lot of nerves when speaking to people. Whether it's an individual or a large group, those nerves got shot long ago. And so I think maybe there's a bit of a natural ability to crowd people together and speak and articulate in a way that others can't.

What's a common myth or misconception about leadership?

There's things about culture and creating culture. I think culture creates itself. If you allow people to be themselves, they're going to naturally perform better.



LEADERSHIP

Home Truths

Renee Wasylyk forged her own path in the real estate development business by seeking advice from others and choosing collaboration over confrontation

There is no perfect leadership style—no prescription that will work for every CEO, or every wannabe, in every enterprise. Check the back issues of the *Harvard Business Review*, and you'll find a long history

of leadership fads, many of which still have merit. But for Renee Wasylyk, founder and CEO of large-footprint property development and construction firm Troika Developments, the time of the overbearing, my-way-or-the-highway boss is long gone.

There are two reasons for the change. First, every new hire from the past 10 years has a box in their closet overflowing with participation medals and trophies; millennials have been told their whole lives that their contributions would always be valued. As a result, "Millennials are more demanding," Wasylyk says. "They want a transactional boss."

Second, those new hires have entered the workforce at a time when the influence of women has softened the edges of traditional leadership practice. That's both noticeable and surprising in the development industry, which is well known for its toughness and is still heavily male-dominated. But it's the

world that Wasylyk chose, and although she says, "I don't think about being a girl," she also knows that she is, by nature, "more relational, more collaborative."

All this came into clearer relief recently when Wasylyk was having lunch with a newcomer to the 70-person team at Kelowna-based Troika, which specializes in residential and commercial projects. "I asked him how it was going, and he said that he'd been watching me. He said, 'I think I could do what you do. But I'd be a lot more savage.'" Wasylyk's response reveals her self-image and her own toughness. She told him, "Then you couldn't do what I do."

Troika's developments, in

Kelowna, Edmonton, Regina and Winnipeg, and its more than \$60 million in annual revenue, suggest that Wasylyk's mentee—and everyone else—needs to keep watching.

Renee Wasylyk was born in Drumheller, Alberta, in 1976, but moved almost immediately to southern

California, where she grew up in Orange County. After high school, she was drawn, mysteriously if irresistibly, back to Alberta—to Edmonton, where she did a BA in religious studies and a master's in theology at Taylor University College and Seminary (then affiliated with the University of Alberta). She met and married another Albertan, and when she got pregnant with the first of their three children, they moved to Kelowna—"for a year." That was in 1998.

There being no jobs to her liking, Wasylyk created one. She'd been fascinated by real estate development since high school, when she job-shadowed a project manager at Irvine Co., which, dating from 1864, is one of the oldest and most successful development firms in western North America. Yet when she bit off her first venture, a small mixed-use building, Wasylyk says, "I knew enough to know what I didn't know."

So she went looking for advice from some of B.C.'s best developers: Joe Segal, David Podmore (Concert Properties Ltd.) and Peeter Wesik (Wesgroup Properties and ParkLane Ventures). She asked each of them three questions: What would you do all over? What would you never do? What would you tell your younger self?

"These guys were so

How would you describe your leadership style?
Relational and transformational. Organizationally, we don't have a hierarchy; we have a matrix. It's not an org chart; it's a circle. You'll never hear anyone call me cutthroat or shrewd. I'm always looking to find the greatest win-win.

What's a common myth or misconception about leadership?

That leadership is glamorous or easy. It's lonely and isolating. And you never really know what people think. You really have to have intrinsic motivation—to do more, get better, listen more.

kind in giving me time," Wasylyk recalls. "It was like I was young and female and didn't pose a threat."

The most memorable counsel came from Podmore, who told her that if she wanted to succeed in development, she should also start a construction company. Otherwise, when the market is hot, it's a constant—and incredibly expensive—hassle trying to get your projects done.

Wasylyk took the advice and built an empire, an integrated development and construction firm with a full complement of tradespeople: framers, electricians, plumbers, drywallers, cabinet-makers—the works. By the mid-2000s, when one of her children asked her what she did for a living, she said, "I feed 180 families."

When the economy tanked in 2008, that turned

out to be about 100 too many. Troika was sitting on quality projects, but it couldn't get past the cash crunch. "In the 1980s, money cost 18 per cent, but people would still lend it to you," Wasylyk explains. "In 2008, no one would lend you money at any rate. It was catastrophic." She says she could have declared bankruptcy or just cut loose all the tradespeople and suppliers. "Or I could sell my assets at pennies on the dollar and make sure everybody got paid."

That's what she did. Wasylyk thinned out the organization, ultimately dropping from 180 to 70 full-time employees, but she did it slowly enough that everyone had a soft landing. "I didn't want to be a developer who chased the market," she says. "I wanted to be a community leader and builder who was here for the long term."

Wasylyk's leadership advice now? Go ask someone in your business her three questions. The answers may be complicated, but there is wisdom in listening.

And does she recommend her own industry? "Absolutely. If you like roller coasters, you'll like development. Just close your eyes, put your arms in the air, and enjoy the ride." —R.L.

What three things would you tell a young person who aspires to become a CEO?

- 1 Don't worry about becoming a CEO; worry about becoming a better person.
- 2 Leadership isn't about position; position will never make you a leader. People make you their leader.
- 3 Be careful what you wish for!

On His Game

To get results at the Crown corporation, BCLC boss Jim Lightbody puts others first and gives everyone a shared goal

At age nine, Jim Lightbody found himself thrust into a leadership role. In his native Victoria, Lightbody belonged to a talented soccer team, some of whose members went on to play in the National Hockey League (ex-Vancouver Canuck Geoff Courtnall) and represent Canada in soccer and rugby. The squad had no permanent captain, and they never lost a game—until one day they did. “It was like the world had ended,” says the president

and CEO of British Columbia Lottery Corp. (BCLC).

What happened next changed Lightbody’s life. “After that game, our coach said, ‘Jimmy Lightbody is going to be your captain from now on,’ because he saw something in me on the field that he knew his team needed,” he recalls in his gravelly baritone. “He gave me an opportunity, and what it gave me was the insight that I really enjoyed being a leader. I get a lot of energy from inspiring others and aligning people together

toward a common goal.”

The two-time Senior A box lacrosse national champion—he won the Mann Cup with the Victoria Shamrocks in 1983 and the New Westminster Salmonbellies in 1986—flashes a broad smile that telegraphs grit and compassion. Asked to describe his management style, he says he’s a servant leader who cares about how he shows up in front of his colleagues. “I place myself at the bottom of the pyramid instead of the top,” explains Lightbody, who rode the elevator down to greet me in the lobby of BCLC’s Vancouver offices. “I look at how do I serve people’s needs, and how do I make sure that I’m leading them in a way that is going to inspire and get them to be engaged in what they’re doing for our organization.”

To that end, Lightbody is big on communication. Since he took his current post in 2014 after serving as vice-president in charge of casino and community gaming, he’s emailed a weekly letter to employees, outlining what’s happening in his own life and at BCLC, and recognizing people’s achievements. Besides regular town-hall meetings, he holds annual staff gatherings in Vancouver and Kamloops, home of the company’s head office.

At BCLC, Lightbody oversees some 900 staff and three business lines: lotteries, casinos and e-gaming. Before he arrived at the Crown corporation in 2001, he spent more than 25 years in the consumer goods industry in B.C., Alberta and Toronto, working in sales and marketing for companies such as Procter & Gamble Co. and

Nabob Foods Ltd. In those organizations, he noticed that some people thought a leader should have all the answers and tell others what to do. But one boss at Nabob was open to feedback and input, Lightbody remembers. He “would listen to everybody’s perspectives and then say, ‘OK, here’s where we’re going to go, and here’s why we’re going to get there.’ And then people would spring to action and work together toward that goal, even if it maybe wasn’t where they thought they should go the first time.”

The takeaway for Lightbody: “You can’t dictate if you really want to be successful. You’ve got to align and get people feeling like they have an ownership position in that vision.”

That didn’t save him from learning a hard lesson when he started at BCLC as VP heading the lottery division. Asked to transform the business, he went away and crafted a one-page document. “I go to my leadership team, and I say, ‘Here’s our vision,’ and they all go, ‘This is great, Jim,’ and all these nodding heads.” The rest of the division nodded dutifully, too. But then nothing happened. “It just fell like a wet noodle on the floor,” Lightbody says. “They didn’t feel like they were part of it because it was foisted on them.”

Next time, he got the whole leadership team involved. “It was an understanding that our people, you almost have to treat them like they’re customers,” Lightbody says. “With customers, you try to learn what their needs are, you try to communicate what the benefits and features of your organization or product

What three things would you tell a young person who aspires to become a CEO?

- 1 Be patient, because it doesn’t always happen overnight or as fast as you want it. And you have to sometimes have a little luck, to be in the right place at the right time.
- 2 Choose the right company. Don’t go for the title. It might mean you’re taking a job title that doesn’t sound that great, like sales representative. You might be vice-president of sales at XYZ company, and you’re just a glorified sales representative. Or you could be a sales representative for a company like Procter & Gamble, and you can get a lot of autonomy and responsibility with a company that really is committed to developing their people.
- 3 Be the leader of your career. Seek out mentors. It doesn’t have to be a daunting task: “OK, will you be my mentor?” It can be, “Can I buy you a coffee, go for a beer, have lunch, and let’s have a great conversation.”



are, and then you try to earn their loyalty.”

Throughout his career, Lightbody says, he’s been an engaged employee when given a challenge—and the autonomy to solve it. “That’s what we try to do here, is give our people challenges to overcome, and to work

in teams and to really collaborate to solve problems or capitalize on opportunities.” BCLC also supports future and current leaders through two efforts: its Emerging Leaders program and another it developed with UBC’s Sauder School of Business. In the latter program,

a cohort of about 20 spends 18 months learning about everything from finance and marketing to innovation and product development.

At BCLC, Lightbody wants leaders to make the business nimbler by pushing as much decision-making as possible down to the appropriate

level. “It’s what a lot of entrepreneurial organizations do every day,” he notes. “We are really trying to push that agility around this organization by saying, ‘Don’t have email chains going around. Get the appropriate people in the room, solve the problems, and then move on.’” —N.R.

What qualities does a successful leader need in today’s world?

Be calm. I saw this as a manager, as a player—if the coach or the boss was blowing his top, disengaged or screaming, it didn’t inspire me, and I know it didn’t inspire any of my coworkers or teammates. You start to worry: does this person know what they’re doing? Ensure that you get the perspective of those around you. I’m really committed to diversity and inclusion in our organization. If we want to make better decisions, then I want to hear very diverse points of view. I don’t want to have yes men or yes women around me; I want to have people who are going to say, “You know, Jim, that light that you think is at the end of the tunnel is actually a train coming right at us.”

What’s a common myth or misconception about leadership?

“He’s a born leader.” I think leaders are developed. You have to be born with an energy that you will get from leading people, but once you have that energy, you need to practise to become a better leader, just like any vocation or sport or skill.

Technological Progress

As head of software developer Copperleaf, Judi Hess favours a collaborative leadership style. But she isn't shy about pushing to hire more women in a male-dominated industry

Judi Hess supports affirmative action. Since becoming CEO in 2009 of Vancouver-based Copperleaf Technologies Inc., she has increased the number of female employees from roughly 10 per cent to about a third. Over that period, the company's total staff rose from 29 to more than 120.

"I think it's a big deal," says Hess, who is slender, with a mane of blond curls and an easy laugh. "I overtly, to everyone in the company, support the value and the benefits of diversity." She agrees with James Baldwin, the late American writer and civil rights activist, who said that people are formed by what they see: "so women expect men to be leaders, and men expect men to be leaders because that's what we see. And men and women both expect there to be more men inside these technology companies because that's normal. That's what you see,

so that's what you expect—that's what you absorb in your environment. I don't accept any of those things."

The Toronto native has worked in the tech industry since joining MacDonald Dettwiler and Associates Ltd., a global aerospace and information company based in Richmond, as a software engineer right out of university in 1981. She has an honours bachelor of mathematics from the University of Waterloo and a minor in business administration from Wilfrid Laurier University.

In 1995, Hess moved to Creo Inc., a Burnaby company specializing in printing technology, where she held several management positions, ending with president from 2002 until 2005, when U.S.-based Eastman Kodak Co. bought the business for US\$1 billion. She became a corporate officer and VP of Eastman Kodak and in 2007 was also appointed managing director of Kodak Canada.



At Copperleaf, which provides decision analytics software to help utilities like Ontario's Hydro One Ltd., the U.K.'s Northern Gas Networks Ltd. and Essential Energy in Australia manage critical infrastructure, "I'm doing the thing that nobody likes—I would actively like to hire women," Hess says. "Because I believe that diversity is your strongest hand, and there are not enough women in tech. If there were too many women in tech, I would try to hire more men." In addition to promoting gender diversity, she feels employing people who are from a range of

cultures and speak a variety of languages brings Copperleaf closer to its worldwide client base and contributes different ideas, concepts and ways of thinking that make the company stronger.

Hess mentions that when recruiting, "I'll say, 'Can we find a woman on that?' and they all look at me with a frown. 'Can we find a person of colour? Maybe we need more Hispanics or something.'" She chooses the person best suited for the position but feels strongly that a qualified woman is probably better than an equally qualified man in the

same job, or she would not have been hired. "I would assume that for a woman to appear as capable as a man in tech, it is most probable that she is the better candidate given all the biases against women in tech," Hess explains, pointing out that Charlotte Whitton, mayor of Ottawa from 1951-56 and the first female mayor of a major Canadian city, said: "Whatever women do they must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good."

Her leadership style was also shaped by her experiences, especially at Creo, but is not related to gender. It stems from what she has observed to be more successful in a high-tech environment with smart, well-educated and highly skilled people. When Hess started in leadership positions, her style was more directive and "command and

control." Now she describes herself as an extroverted, demanding collaborator. With age and experience, Hess found that people are most motivated and connected when they can shape the organization and contribute to its vision "because a little bit of them is in it." There many good ways to do things, and it doesn't always have to be her way, she says. By allowing employees to drive the decision-making process, she has discovered that things she had thought wouldn't work actually did, and very well.

Hess tells her staff that she didn't hire them to tell her what she knows but what they know and think. "Otherwise I don't really need you, because I already think that," she says, "so I want you to speak out. I have a good overview of a lot of things, but I don't know specifically

Copperleaf Technologies is one of the fastest-growing software companies in Canada. How do you lead in an industry that is growing and changing?

You have to be very agile. You need to respond quickly. You need to have people accept change. Something's always breaking, so when you're growing really fast, I focus on making sure we have the right culture in the company to be able to say we accept change.

What's the best way to motivate people and inspire loyalty?

The people in the company have to shape the culture. If they don't contribute, then it's not their culture; it's something you gave them. People want to shape things, and then they become loyal, and they become much more into the company and have that loyalty to the company.

about your area, so you tell me what you recommend." Working with many colleagues over more than 30 years in various countries has taught Hess that everyone is similar. "It doesn't change with where you are or what gender you are or what race

you are or what religion you are," she asserts. "People just want to be appreciated for the effort that they've put in and what they brought to the table. I think that's about as simple as it gets. That would be my key thing, is to appreciate people." —F.S.

Passion Project

BMO vice-president Mike Bonner nurtures a new generation of leaders with a mix of drive and empathy

B.C. and Yukon division.

"Leadership has nothing to do with the business card; it has nothing to do with your position," Bonner contends. "I don't think you have to look very far to find examples of leadership. I think you see leadership, good and bad, at every level of an organization."

If anyone can recognize the hallmarks of a strong leader, it's Bonner, who has worked jobs ranging from meat cutter to newspaper salesman to bank teller. He's also gained exposure to a variety of businesses through his 27 years in the financial sector. "Leadership is about situations," says Bonner, who oversees some 2,000 staff. "It could be a robbery, it could be something unfortunate that



happens with a customer, it could be an opportunity—but there will be a situation today, and there is every day," he warns, citing last summer's wildfires. "The needs of the team and the business will determine what type of leadership comes out."

Bonner describes his own leadership style as a hybrid,

likening his approach to that of a mechanic with different tools for different situations. He regularly reevaluates how he leads; one recent influence is the book *Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity* by former Apple Inc. and Google Inc. executive Kim Scott, which preaches a balance between

What three things would you tell a young person who aspires to become a CEO?

1 If anyone asks you to take on additional leadership, your answer should be yes. They probably know better than you.

2 If you take some time to grow into your leadership role over time in a more incremental fashion, that will improve your chances of being successful as a leader and as a better, stronger leader.

3 A collaborative approach to leadership builds in more resilience and more success and more happiness in an organization overall.

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empathy and directly challenging employees.

Bonner has striven for that balance since childhood. His father, who served in the infantry and later laboured as a factory worker, taught him the value of hard work and being organized. From his mother, a homemaker dedicated to community service, he learned the importance of empathy and connecting with people.

“They put me in tough jobs at a very young age, so I had drive to make sure that I could evolve and do better and to keep pushing for improvement,” says the Chatham, Ontario, native, who started working at age nine as a corn detasseler, pulling the flower from the top of the plant. “Whether it was school doing an MBA, or whether it was making money,” he recalls, “I think my upbringing helped me.”

Bonner completed a year of training as an electronics engineer, but working solo in huge machines quickly lost its appeal. He later became a tutor with the school board in Chatham. “I’m a people person, so I guess I got it wrong with the guidance counsellor,” he quips. “I

really love technology and science and engineering, but I think that what drives me, really honestly, is working with people and trying to develop people.”

Finally Bonner settled on finance. Starting as a teller at a Royal Bank of Canada branch in Blenheim, Ontario, in 1991, he was promoted to assistant manager, personal banking, within 18 months. In 2000 he landed at BMO, which gave him roles all over the country, including Halifax, Calgary, Toronto and Windsor, Ontario. While rising through the ranks, Bonner completed an MBA at Dalhousie University in Halifax. He moved to Vancouver in 2014 to take his current post.

Although some believe leaders are born, Bonner doesn’t buy it. He acknowledges that there are innate leadership qualities, though. “Somewhere along the line, you have to have the natural grit to gravitate toward leadership,” he maintains. “It’s not for everybody, and it’s not about the paycheque, and it’s not about the title.”

Bonner sees those qualities all around him. Every month he hands out 10 to 15 business cards to people whom he encourages to take their career to BMO. “You’ve got to be a talent master,”

What’s a common myth or misconception about leadership?

If you just let people gravitate and move into the direction they’re naturally going to go, they’re going to show you honest leadership, true leadership. It’s not about the hierarchy or the org chart; I think that’s the most common misconception about leadership.

What was your biggest leadership mistake?

An early leadership mistake is you want to make a difference. You really want people to know that you got promoted or you got the job because you know what you’re doing. When in fact, most people know that. You got promoted because of skill or attitude/apptitude seen in you or experience; some of it’s technical. I tried to prove myself too fast, and I should have proved myself through my actions, not necessarily what I said but what I did.

Bonner says. “The mistake that people and organizations make is they think [sourcing talent] is an HR job.” But HR can’t do it alone, he stresses: “Everybody needs to have a talent mindset. Everyone needs to be on the lookout.”

That’s especially true in the financial world, where high-tech upstarts threaten to disrupt BMO’s 200-year-old success story. Competition for talent is fierce, and Bonner tries to assemble agile teams from diverse backgrounds. Besides finance grads, his hires include former bartenders and baristas, and a cemetery salesperson. “You can teach

finance; you can teach banking, tangible technical skills,” Bonner says. “You can’t teach passion, real fire-in-the-belly passion to do what’s right for the customer.”

When Bonner thinks about life after work, he gets philosophical. He says he wants to look back in his 80s with no regrets about how he led his employees. Some have moved across the country to work with him, something Bonner takes pride in. Others have grown into leadership roles of their own. “How have I helped people accomplish things personally?” Bonner asks. “That will be my true scorecard as a leader.” —S.N. ■

What three things would you tell a young person who aspires to become a CEO?

1 Be patient. You’ve got to hang in there, and don’t be in a race to move through a position too fast, and you should learn everything you can from the position you’re in. Max it out—so what if it takes you another 10 or 12 or 24 months? You don’t ever want to go back to that job.

2 Be realistic. You’re good at many, many things, but you’re not good at everything, and you don’t have to be. Everybody’s got different types of experiences, skill sets; learn when to pull those in. It’s OK. You don’t have to win everything.

3 Be strategic. I’m talking about very early on developing strategic and critical thinking muscles. Try to understand micro and macro thinking, and try to migrate your thinking between what you’re going through at your level, in your role, and what the macro environment might be.