Work Comes Fifth

Hard work, deep faith, and lessons learned over a lifetime in business



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At 12 years old, Eric Rubino discovered that taking a job seriously didn't necessarily mean getting the best assignment.

Growing up in Runnemede, New Jersey, he secured working papers through a friend's father, a township councilman, and began helping municipal crews with painting, mowing, cleanup, and other projects.

One day, Eric and several other workers were digging a trench for a sewer project. Their supervisor, watching from a tree across the street with binoculars, noticed that only two people had shovels in their hands: Eric and the mayor's son.

Everyone else was fired on the spot.

Eric and the mayor's son were sent to the township's sanitation plant for the rest of the summer.

On his first day, Eric was gagging from the smell. He wanted to quit, but his father refused to let him.

"You need the work. You got this job. This is what you're gonna do. It's gonna build some character," Eric recalled him saying.

"He was 100% right."

His father's insistence came from a lifetime of practicing what he preached. A parts manager for a trucking company, he worked six and a half days a week, sometimes bringing paperwork home to manage at the kitchen table until eight or nine at night.

Despite the long hours, he made time for his family. Every Saturday afternoon, he visited his parents. Every Tuesday evening, Eric's grandparents came to their home.

Eric was the younger of two children in a loving, middle-class Italian household. His mother stayed home while the children were young and later worked as a dental receptionist.

"We were Italian. We ate like we were super wealthy," Eric recalled, contrasting their meals with otherwise modest circumstances.

His father's devotion to work and family was accompanied by an optimism Eric still admires. Even as he remembers his father, who recently died at 97, the affection is unmistakable.

> "Just always glass half-full, always positive. Just did not have any energy for negativity in his life."

At Eric's law school graduation, his father proudly watched him receive his degree, then asked, "Why didn't you just do this after high school?"

"It doesn't quite work that way," Eric recalled, laughing. "Anyway, a great guy."

His father, he added, remained positive throughout his life.

"Til the day he died, just always glass half-full, always positive. Just did not have any energy for negativity in his life, which I think is a great trait."

Eric's childhood also included plenty of sports. In seventh grade, he became a point guard, developing skills that would later give him a useful way to think

about leadership.

He was an effective ballhandler with both hands, had a reliable shot from the top of the key, and described himself as "selfless and distributing the ball."

When asked about the similarities between playing point guard and serving as CEO, he explained that the position requires running the offense, breaking the opposing team's press under pressure, and directing the action.

"You're the leader," he said. "I think that translates into business."

Eric has spent much of his professional life doing just that—helping teams navigate changing circumstances while keeping their attention on the larger objective.

His career began with positions at RCA, General Electric, and Bell Atlantic, where he worked in finance and contract administration. He pursued additional education while working, attending graduate school at night with assistance from RCA and later earning his law degree with support from Bell Atlantic.

In 1990, he joined SAP America as its 80th employee.

Over the next 12 years, he served first as general counsel and then as Chief Operating Officer of Americas. During his tenure, the company's revenue throughout the Americas grew from approximately $5 million to $15 billion.

The experience took him around the world and gave him an extensive education in the workings of a rapidly expanding international business.

Subsequent opportunities brought him into different industries, often through companies backed by private equity. He helped guide Neoware toward its sale to Hewlett-Packard, Infologix toward its sale to Stanley Black & Decker, and the Ohana Companies toward its acquisition by 360insights.

The transitions required him to become familiar with new products, customers, and markets. Eric is quick to acknowledge that he isn't necessarily the most technically knowledgeable person in the room.

"I don't profess to be Mr. Technical," he said, "but I do understand the value of what applications and software bring to customers."

Of all those experiences, his years leading the Ohana Companies brought one of his most difficult professional challenges. Partway through an eight-year journey to build and eventually sell the startup, its private-equity backers began withdrawing support.

Eric could have walked away, but the decision came during an especially demanding period for his family. His children were attending Bucknell, Lafayette, and Lehigh, and the tuition bills were substantial.

He compared the annual expense to driving a Mercedes-Benz off a cliff every year.

With the business under pressure, he faced a choice about whether to continue.

"This is the test, man," he remembers telling himself.

He stayed, working with five or six trusted colleagues to bootstrap the company through the difficult period. Together, they brought the business to a successful sale.

The team recovered its investment and more. The original private-equity backers also made some money, an outcome reached through an understanding Eric describes as a handshake agreement.

He credits the people who worked alongside him, including a longtime chief operating officer with whom he has worked for more than two decades.

> "I will say empathy came later in my career."

"That was tough," he acknowledged.

Yet when Eric considers his career as a whole, gratitude comes easily.

"I've been so blessed. I mean, it's been a good ride."

His professional experiences have also changed the way he leads.

Eric readily acknowledges that his work ethic and a healthy fear of failure have helped drive him. But not every quality he considers important today came naturally or emerged early.

"I will say empathy came later in my career."

He has also developed greater patience and tolerance, recognizing that effective leadership requires more than setting expectations and measuring results.

As CEO of Energage, a company dedicated to helping organizations strengthen employee engagement, develop talent, and build thriving workplace cultures, Eric brings a unique perspective to the relationship between leadership and the employee experience.

“Psychological safety is really important in the workplace,” he said. “And I think it brings out the most in people.”

For Eric, that doesn’t mean avoiding accountability. When he believes someone on his leadership team has made a mistake, he prefers a private conversation over confronting the person in a group meeting.

Those discussions can be direct and uncomfortable. He believes in being candid about problems while giving people room to disagree and express their perspectives.

It’s a distinction that reflects his own evolution: the expectation that people take responsibility for their work remains, but his understanding of how best to support them has grown.

Through professional successes and difficult periods alike, Eric has also drawn strength from his Catholic faith.

“I’ve been through a lot, just on experience, but I also have childlike faith.”

That faith is deeply personal, but Eric doesn’t keep his convictions separate from conversations about work and leadership.

At a recent company-wide gathering, he spoke openly about his priorities.

Jesus comes first in his life, he explained, followed by his wife, his family, and his friends.

Work comes fifth.

He also made clear that he doesn’t expect employees to place their jobs above the people and commitments that matter most to them.

> “I’ve been through a lot, just on experience, but I also have childlike faith.”

It’s not a lack of enthusiasm for business. Eric still enjoys a challenge and the satisfaction of building something with others. His family is active in charitable giving, and although he expects to retire eventually, he believes in staying engaged mentally, physically, and spiritually.

After more than four decades in business, he has experienced remarkable growth, unexpected setbacks, and the satisfaction of helping companies succeed. He has also come to appreciate that some of the most important qualities in a leader aren’t measured by a company’s performance.

Eric still believes in showing up, working hard, and honoring commitments. But he has learned to make room for patience, empathy, and the perspectives of others.

And for all the energy he brings to his work, he is comfortable knowing that the most important parts of his life exist beyond it.