

AARTRIJK

# Leadership Lessons: 20 Lessons in 20 Years

## 20 to 16

July 2020

## PETER VAN AARTRIJK

2020



**Peter** is a sports junkie with uncanny insurance industry insight and a fondness for fun. After 20 years as a team-player journalist and public relations specialist, he decided it was time to call his own shots. In 1999, he started building a team of professional communicators — fun factor is a condition of employment — to clarify communications in an industry that’s often misunderstood and rarely considered the life o’the party. To prove he has a great sense of humor, Peter gave his company the unpronounceable family name he inherited from his Belgian ancestors. If only he’d give us their chocolates instead.

# NO. 20. IT'S ALL ABOUT LOVE

April 2, 2019



**By Peter van Aartrijk**

Aartrijk was formed in 1999. It's time to reflect on some things, places and people who have mattered to us along the way — 20 lessons for 20 years.

**We'll start at lesson No. 20 and go to No. 1.**

Thank you, valued friends, clients, consultants and family. There are many national and local business networking groups out there. Some you pay for, like Vistage or BNI. Others are more informal, without any dues. You have to find what's right for you. But they're important to the health of any consultant or business owner. No matter how hard you might try to have all the answers, you just don't.

I'm in an informal networking group of a dozen financial services marketing consultants. We call ourselves the 99ers, because in an odd twist, it turned out that most of us launched our firms in 1999. We meet once a quarter over lunch here in the D.C. area.

One of our colleagues in this group has just recovered from a year-long bout with cancer treatments. His business was essentially held ransom by cancer for 14 months. That left him lots of time to think about family, friends and associates.

At a recent meeting, he reflected on the broader lessons he had learned. "The purpose of life is to love," he said. "And that is expressed through connections with others, through vulnerability, and through service. Everything else is a distraction." It made sense to me that examples of "distractions" might include power, money, job titles, recognition, you name it. My colleague went on to talk about the importance of being vulnerable around others. "It's okay to cry," he said. "Tears are the melting of the wall of resistance." If the purpose of life is to love — and how could it not be? — I wonder where our "work lives" fit in.

We spend so much time thinking about work, driving to and from work, being at work ... Are the rules of "life's purpose" different there? Do we suspend our vulnerability and love for others because we are supposed to be wearing "a professional hat"? Do we hide behind our credentials and LinkedIn profiles, afraid to be our authentic selves?

As I reflect on the past two decades, of course I have regrets. Most of these relate to my not following that purpose, and following instead ego, greed or pride. And yet, at the same time, there are mostly happy memories. Where trusting client relationships have meant great friends. Where valuable information is shared without worry of trading in innuendo and career-damaging gossip. Where you want to deliver great service to others, because it's the right thing to do but also because you don't want to let people down. We don't need to make the business of doing business so difficult on ourselves and others.

# NO. 19. WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS...SQUEEZE 'EM ON A SALMON FILET

April 16, 2019



**By Peter van Aartrijk**

It was a frigid Tuesday morning in New York City. Until this particular day in my not-so-storied career, I was working for The Man. Not a bad commute back then, actually, coming up from Central New Jersey via NJ Transit train for a half-hour or so, into Newark. And then the PATH downtown into the World Trade Center. A five-block walk past smelly piles of garbage toward the Wall Street area. Up an elevator to the 24th floor.

**On this January day I learned The Man no longer required my commute.**

Although the fact that 30 other people were in the same boat sort of muted my personal reaction — misery loves company — it stung. It was uncharted territory.

I put my, ahem, “informational packet” about my severance in my briefcase, climbed into my trench coat, and returned home. The ride of shame. There, waiting for me was my wife and two-month-old daughter. Oh, and a brand new mortgage.

I announced I had been laid off. The bride’s response was awesome.

“I’ll go get some fresh salmon for dinner, and we’ll open a bottle of chardonnay and talk about what’s next.”

I love that woman.

It turns out there was a lot “next” for us... once I had stopped wallowing in self-pity, that is. It was tough to get out of my own way on this. You see, I was in the game. In the Big Apple. Come on, briefcase and overcoat! I was relevant!

As difficult as things can appear sometimes, you have to focus on what you love to do. Chasing salary and titles is not the answer. You cannot let others — certainly not The Man — determine your value, your path, your life.

Everything else then falls into place when you focus on what you need to do, which is to find what you were meant to be, and do. And I did, reluctantly at first, and it led to the formation of Aartrijk. I have learned a lot about lemons over the years.

Opportunity often is disguised as adversity.

# NO. 18. YOU SAY ‘NITCH.’ I SAY ‘NEESH.’

May 28, 2019



**By Peter van Aartrijk**

I recall some soul-searching years ago about where I should focus professionally. It went something like this: “What have I done in my career? Insurance? Nice industry but really... Is that it?”

## **Insurance is my niche?**

Later, soon after the launch of Aartrijk in 1999, our team had a serious conversation about whether we should branch out beyond insurance. Or into something entirely different. We had gained some knowledge about sales, underwriting, claims, etc., but were we committing to an insurance or risk management career? As a marketing-communications agency, we could work for any industry.

Was it time to try something new? This question coming from a guy who had already been bouncing around the insurance industry in various roles (journalist, PR guy, marketing communications) for 20 years — since May 1982. That is when I had answered an ad — yes, a classified print ad — in the Newark Star Ledger for an entry level writer at A.M. Best Co. in rural Oldwick, New Jersey.

Over the years, I had admired carriers, agents, brokers and technology firms who were performing better and apparently having more fun by focusing on customer segments. Why shouldn't we, as a firm, continue to do the same? So we did.

The insurance industry remained our playground. Most of what we do is business-to-business within the industry, but we also get to focus on insurance consumers.

Insurance is a wonderful business. Professionals agree that once you get involved, it is way more interesting than at first glance. Insurance is fun, actually.

Our clients say they like the fact that they don't have to explain the business to us. Moreover, and this wasn't expected: Over time, our clients and sources of referral have become friends. In some cases, very good friends.

It's okay to be a “generalist,” but to specialize in an industry? Kinda cool.

As you look ahead at your business or your career, out of all the things you could be doing, what should you be doing? Where's your mojo? What are you best at? What gives you the most joy? Focus there.

# NO. 17. EVERYONE NEEDS A DIDI

June 18, 2019



**By Peter van Aartrijk**

As the boss of your career or your business, you sometimes believe you can do it all. Especially when times are good.

Guess what?  
You can't.

A decade ago, the business was growing, the team was busy, I was the man, and the bride was handling payables, receivables, insurance, state employment filings, payroll, and All Other Scary Things. It all seemed to be going... gulp... okay.

Were some mistakes made? Perhaps. (Please don't tell the IRS.) Compounding our issue was an accountant who was a couple fries short of a Happy Meal, especially at tax time.

I came into the office on a Monday and my adorable bride looked at me and said, "One day, some tax man is going to come in here and haul me off to jail and I will have no idea why." Her eyes welled up in tears. We needed to make a change. How about a professional?

**Enter one Didi Marco.**

Do not mess with Didi Marco. When it comes to the numbers, this is no shrinking violet. Didi whipped Aartrijk's QuickBooks into shape. She had us filing the proper papers to the proper government entities in the proper states, and even at the proper time!

She examined every account and pointed out weaknesses and strengths. She suggested our clients sign agreements and work orders — imagine that? Contracts! Receivables went from 90 days to 60 days to 30 days, with a rare exception that irks us all, and especially Didi.

The Commonwealth of Virginia dropped by for one of those, ahem, "routine" audits. Didi had them headed back to Richmond in 20 minutes; as they left they remarked they had never seen such clean books in a small business.

She even called her own bank because it repeatedly was screwing up her checking account. It was off by... wait for it... two cents. "Hey, it's the principle, people!" is what I heard her say.

Didi brought an undefinable quality to Aartrijk that we hadn't even known was missing. But that's not all she brought. Seeing things from Didi's viewpoint, "in the weeds," as she puts it, made me look at my professional life from a different perspective. She is a trusted co-worker, the voice of reason when I want to "give away the farm," and a really good friend. In a word: invaluable!

Why did it take us so long to get professional financial help? I would have had to hire a psychiatrist if we kept this up.

Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, once they admit them. Your brain has a left, rational side and a right, emotional side. You use both, but are dominant in one. I'm on the right side. So, am I good at math? Not so much. But Didi is!

And there are two sides to business as well: defining the work and determining how you will be paid. Creative folks are good at the first part, and they suck at the second part. Sure, you can have great products or services. But if you can't put a business around those things, then what's the point? You're then talking more about a hobby. That is why you need order and structure in your finances. Everyone needs a Didi!



# NO. 16. BOOMERS RULE. FOR NOW.

July 16, 2019



**By Peter van Aartrijk**

The last 20 years have seen ad-nauseam discourse pitting two generations against each other: baby boomers and millennials. And a highly paid, cottage consulting industry — “Understanding Millennials” — emerged as part of this.

“Learn how to hire and motivate millennials! They’re different than you... For one thing, they’re lazier than you!”

After listening to this money-sucking diatribe for two decades, I’ve come to the same conclusion as Dr. Evil in Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery, in which he tells his much-less-evil brother:

“We’re not so different, you and I.”

## **People are people**

Everyone puts their shoes on the same way in the morning. Everyone craves love. Everyone seeks a happy life. And everyone munches a McDonald’s french fry once in a while.

Aside: Someone explain to me why we call that sliver-of-a-generation between boomers and millennials “Gen X.” Boomers had a name. Gen X... What? Why not start with Gen A if we’re using the alphabet? At least you’d have several centuries of generations before you got to Gen Z. We’re already at Gen Z today.

Differences and cliché comparisons aside, what are the takeaways from this conversation?

## **Get your show on the road**

Well, first, I do have the utmost faith that millennials — my two 20-something daughters included — will fix a lot that is wrong in our society and our world. This is a fascinating group. The most highly educated generation ever. I learn stuff from them every day, especially when I actually listen.

Having said that: It’s time for you millennials to take over the world.

You’re the largest generation ever — 93 million. I hope you’re ready. If not, the boomers (65 million of us) will have to helicopter in again. Just like we did by filling out your teacher evaluations, college applications and tax forms. And SATs — LOL.

Listen, you millennials are half of the workforce now. Your oldest tribe member turns 38 this year. It’s time to get busy. So far you haven’t given us much. Open office spaces, which everyone hates? Mostly terrible music by spoiled, screechy “artists” whining over yet another breakup? Texting and social media? (The jury is still out on all of that.) Baby gender reveals? Some lame apps?

Boomers were just fine with “customer service,” but you hired some consultants and changed it around to “customer experience.”

In fairness, a few nice millennial offerings include the iPhone, Uber, Netflix, Yeti coolers, and craft breweries. Although I truly don’t get your kids running around at breweries. They’re called “adult beverages” for a reason.

## **Boomer boasts**

We boomers came up with tons of great stuff. How about the internet, the web, and email? We gave you smartphones. Starbucks. Color TV. Muscle cars. Classic rock — hello, that still rules. Air conditioning. Saturday Night Live — yep, that was us, not you. Washers and dryers. Cup holders in cars. Napa Valley cabernet. And weed.

Not only that, we’re still cool. Witness all the kids moving back home. I don’t buy the schmutz about “It’s tough to find a job,” “It’s too expensive to live on my own,” or “I might go back to school anyway.” We are still fun to hang around with, period. And we have way more money than you. For now.

Nope, we boomers aren’t going down easy. We’re not “retiring” in the sense of the generation that came before us (aka “seniors”). We’re going to keep working, and we define “work” quite broadly, thank you.

And with our replacement knees and hips, boomers will still be kicking ass on the ball fields, tennis courts and hockey rinks. We’re running marathons at age 70. We’re hiking the Grand Canyon at age 80. Walking Central Park at age 90. And, at age 100, doing 360s in our motorized chairs on the dance floor at weddings, especially if the DJ is playing some Deep Purple, which is rare at weddings, I will admit.

So, thank you, millennials, for your multipurpose Tervis Tumblers. We boomers gave you life. So, there’s THAT.

# WHY AARTRIJK?

**Since we opened in 1999, Aartrijk has built a reputation as the most comprehensive marketing-communications firm in the insurance industry.**

We help our business partners craft and tell their stories with strong and clear voices. We build awareness, understanding and appreciation of their brands among the people who matter. Our services include:

## **Research**

- Market, Customer and Channel Research: qualitative and quantitative
- Brand and Image Assessment

## **Brand Strategy & Creative**

- Brand Strategy, Tone of Voice and Messaging
- Naming
- Visual Identity

## **Marketing-Communications**

- Content Development
- Social Media Marketing
- Creative and Collateral Design
- Web Design and Content
- Media Relations and Crisis Communications



## TESTIMONIALS

“Aartrijk helped us lay the foundation for success by shaping a compelling story and communicating it effectively.” — *program administrator CMO*

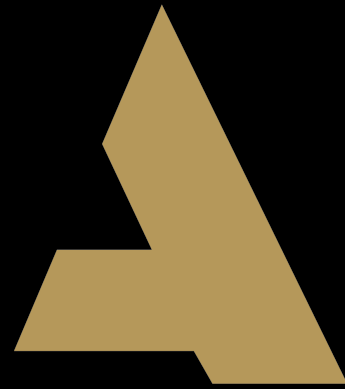
“Your content is fantastic. I can’t say enough about it. You increased our blog post views by 170% in four months.” — *surety marketing executive*

“You guys work with people all across the industry. You have access to research we don’t have.” — *insurtech CMO*

“Thank you for being a part of our webinar. Your presentation and insight were perfect and the response has been extremely positive. We had close to 200 people on the call and I have received several emails and texts thanking us for putting this together.” — *carrier sales executive*

# CLIENTS WE HAVE SERVED





AARTRIJK

Thank you.

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