

# **The Lucky 13**

## **13 Strategies for Becoming & Being a Great Leader**

By: Vic Pepe

### Chapter 1

#### My Journey

I grew up in an apartment building surrounded by extended family in Brooklyn, New York. I constantly and conscientiously observed my parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles as they diligently worked to support their families. This ultimately allowed me to acquire many key attributes that drove my success later in life. I had an incredible set of role models. Again, I am a lucky guy

for being surrounded by a family defined and driven by a strong work ethic.

As a kid, I helped my grandfather, Luigi Pepe, manage our bustling apartment building. As the superintendent, he handled the general and day-to-day operations of the building, and I often tagged along on his rounds. One of the traits I observed in him early on (as well as in my father, who worked in insurance) was the importance of keeping your word. With more than 60 hard-working families relying on him, he had to earn trust by keeping his word in

making the building their home every single day of the year.

If he told Mrs. Benjamin (Apt 6G) he'd be at her apartment at a specific time to fix the sink, he would be there and fix the sink right. He made it an unbendable principle to treat people fairly regardless of who they were or what problem surfaced in their homes.

Even as young as age 8, I recognized the importance of completing a job you had committed to on time and without excuses. My grandfather adhered to that credo: always where he said he would be; completing the

job he said he would do; and if delayed for any reason, he made sure to inform tenants honestly and respectfully.

I spent summers polishing brass fixtures around the building, such as door kickplates and banisters, or anything that kept up the building's appearance. I took my time with these tasks, spending hours, if necessary, making the brass works as shiny as possible. Like the apartment building, the kickplates had more than sixty years of wear and tear, but I polished them until they shined like 24-karat gold.

I felt good about the outcome because I saw the immediate results of my hard work. Tenants and visitors to the building commented, "Wow, that's beautiful. Did you do that? Wow. You cleaned that?" The experience helped me understand at a very young age how satisfying it feels when people recognize you've done a job well. I basked in 24-karat praise of my grandfather and the families who took pride in the appearance of their home building.

My work ethic flourished in those hours of scrubbing and polishing, and as I matured, my

work ethic permanently solidified thanks to that ancient building and the support of those around me.

Although a child, my grandfather often asked me to help him work with the building's incinerator. Yes, I got to play with fire! It was exciting work, and I loved this part of the superintendent's job. In the early '70s, each building in New York had incinerators for burning garbage. I shoveled the incinerator dregs into pails to be picked up by the city's sanitation department. So, picture an 8-year-old kid

working with the inferno of a giant Brooklyn incinerator and seeing it as more play than work.

Grandpa put a lot of trust in me, and by today's standards, he may be locked up for endangering the welfare of a child. Occasionally, he'd send me alone to the basement to fill the water in the old boiler, often without supervision. His old-school mentality dictated that young people like me learn adult responsibilities through hands-on experience. So that's how I grew up.

Those experiences left deep impressions on me, especially realizing I had been assigned adult jobs that made a difference in the lives of so many people. They taught me the importance of "love what you do." Grandpa allowed me to do things I wouldn't have been able to do anywhere else, and he supported me even when I inevitably made an occasional mistake.

He once asked me to help him tighten the filters on the oil-burning furnace. He tightened one, and I was responsible for another. He told me to tighten it as much as I could.



“Vittorio,” he told me, “Make sure it’s good and tight. You don’t want it to leak oil. Tighter, Vittorio! Make it tight!”

I followed his directions and snapped the bolt. Oil gushed out like Old Faithful, creating a greasy, grimy mess. My grandfather cursed in Italian. I cried. I assumed his cursing to be a prelude to a fit of anger, but he laughed inoffensively at what I’d done instead. He said, “You are like Bruno Sammartino” (one of the great WWWF now WWE wrestlers back in the ’70s).

He allowed me to make a mistake, which taught me how not to make mistakes. I learned lessons from my family that would last me a lifetime, allowing me to screw things up at the apartment building during my childhood. They had one simple, healthy philosophy regarding mistakes: Don't break the law; mistakes can always be fixed.

Over one summer, I broke at least fourteen windows with a baseball. The ground-level/basement windows seemed to magnetically attract wayward baseballs hit or thrown anywhere in their vicinity. Rather than

punishing me or barring me from playing near the building, my grandfather told me I would have to learn how to replace broken windows.

So, that summer, I repaired windows broken from my baseball habit and those broken by random acts of nature. Grandpa taught me to cut glass since we could not easily find glass to fit the building windows' varying sizes. Grandpa bought larger pieces of glass, handed me a glass cutter, and showed me how to measure and cut the glass to fit perfectly correctly. I learned to cut glass like a professional before age 9 - yet another likely

violation of the local child labor statutes! Nevertheless, I had been allowed to understand and learn from mistakes, from the old-school mentality of Grandpa, far outweighing the minor legal issues.

Before I could go to a PG movie, I knew how to remove broken windows, cut glass, and install new windows with putty and small metal pane holders called "push points." This otherwise tedious task taught me extremely important lessons in simple accountability, along with owning up to my actions and dealing with the consequences.

My dad, via Grandpa, became very handy with tools and could fix almost anything when he put his mind to it. Growing up, when my family eventually moved out of Brooklyn, he put a small workshop in the basement of our new home. I had access to every tool he ever owned. I made unbelievable things in that basement: speaker cabinets, weight benches, shelves for Mom, birdhouses, etc.

The ability to use those tools and for Dad to teach me to use them provided an exceptional parenting example I have carried over to my son. It wasn't about being handy; it helped with

confidence, problem-solving, task completion - you name it. Those slices of my early life gave me the guidance I draw upon now as a parent and a leader. I've carried forward the concepts of being allowed to fail and benefitting from failure through the learned experience. I catch myself with my kids when the urge strikes to correct them. My Grandpa and Dad taught me to allow them to make mistakes, not expect perfection, and to take away valuable lessons from the mistake that will inevitably happen.

The messages my father and family sent me as a youth came through as, "Hey, you can learn anything. You can do anything. You can fail, and the world will not end." I was truly lucky growing up among such hardworking people who provided the type of support system which encouraged effort without fear of failure. Realizing this advantage at an early age, I consciously used it at virtually every step to succeed.

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I had a clear mission as my grandfather's helper. But as I aged, my responsibilities became

less clear, and my goals foggier.

Upon graduating high school, I had no direction or real idea of what I wanted to do with my life. To be honest, I felt completely petrified about my future. My parents raised me well and exposed me to a life few kids experience, but neither had gone to college and therefore had no frame of reference for showing me the way. The internet didn't exist in those days, so when you graduated high school, the world outside your neighborhood was a big mystery unless you studied encyclopedias.



Thanks partly to an apathetic high school guidance program and partly to my disinterest, I had never really had a conversation with anybody about higher education or the possibilities beyond high school. So, not knowing the path to a four-year college or even what I needed to do to get into a college, I began considering local community colleges since enrolling at those required virtually no effort.

I didn't think highly of the closest school at the time, Ocean County College, as it seemed more of a punishment to

me for not excelling in high school, sort of an educational purgatory for underachievers - many of whom I knew from high school - uncertain of what they wanted to do in life. However, not enrolling there proved a mistake because it may have been a fantastic experience had I applied myself.

Instead, I enrolled at Brookdale Community College, almost identical to OCC but located in neighboring Monmouth County. For us Ocean County residents, even that short drive made a significant difference in breaking free of the hometown distractions of the local

community college, which I assumed would be a great benefit.

Unfortunately, I still had no idea what to do, what I wanted out of college, what classes to take, or how many credits I could handle in a semester. Unlike four-year universities or community colleges today, they didn't automatically send you to an advisor to review an academic plan with new students back then. So, after a somewhat rudderless high school career, I went into my college career with literally no direction and no guidance.

Not surprisingly, none of the college classes captured my excitement, but it nevertheless felt like what my family expected of me. I had so little interest in college that I developed a habit of waiting to register until the day before classes started, often wishing I hadn't registered at all. I walked into the registration hall and said, "I'm going to take some classes!"

I got in line and registered for whatever classes had openings and paid little attention to the class names or if they appealed to my interests.

I recall reaching the registration desk and a school official asking, "What do you want to do?" All I could muster in response was a vague interest in engineering since my uncle had been an engineer and my brother took engineering classes early in college. Out of sheer independence, I chose electrical engineering, which required advanced mathematical education. While I had a pretty good grasp of math, I lacked high-level math skills due to not paying much attention in those classes during high school.

I did reasonably well in high school without studying very hard. In retrospect, I may have found my way to a prestigious university, perhaps earned an academic scholarship, had I applied myself and received adequate guidance. I could have crushed it. Nevertheless, I am writing this book about success.

I played guitar and other instruments throughout high school, often focusing on music and joining a band over math homework assignments. Whether taking guitar lessons, practicing in my room, or practicing with my band in the basement of my parent's home - I

estimate spending approximately 10,000 hours on my music interests during my high school years. If not directly playing an instrument, my spare time often went to the band in other ways: finding gigs, building speaker cabinets, creating a lighting rig, or anything to help us find our way as budding musicians.

I cannot claim to have had a solid music plan as a teenager, yet I possessed a genuine passion for something legitimate and devoted all my free time to it. From that passion, I discovered first-hand how willing you can become to put

forth hard work into something you care deeply about.

Moreover, I began to understand the connection between effort and outcomes, as much of my hard work resulted in gigs for the band and valuable lessons learned about the music business.

After limping through the first semester at Brookdale with less than stellar grades, I decided to transfer to Ocean County College, conveniently located near Garden State Music, a retail store I liked and found myself spending more time in than classes. So I figured I'd get a job at Garden State Music,



work there part-time, and take courses at OCC when not working. It seemed like the perfect plan at the time!

I found out Garden State had no job openings after registering for classes that, again, I didn't want to take. I signed up for a voice course taught by a professor known for being brutal with his students and several electives that didn't interest me. My heart wasn't into college, despite my parents and society's general expectations.

As I muddled through higher education, I grew increasingly

interested in the music profession and its infinite possibilities, further developing my passion as my interest in college waned. This prompted me to drop out of college with no firm plans for the future and only a vague notion that a music career sounded fascinating.

I met Jack Ponti at Garden State Music. He carried himself with supreme confidence. When we met, the band Jack founded was on the verge of being signed to a major label. He had figured out the steps to succeed in the music business long before I did, so I immediately began to

learn much from him as we became friends at Garden State Music.

Jack just knew what to do and how to do it. But, first, he had a maniacal discipline when writing original material - a skill very few musicians ever obtain.

Secondly, he treated the band like a business, which struck me as an entirely new concept. Even rehearsals he took exceptionally seriously and demanded his band do the same. He'd put time into working the phones, hustling, and marketing to people from the record labels. He called producers, publishers, and all

types of industry representatives with the intent of building a network. He put his name out there and ensured the labels knew his band's name and brand. He tried to convince anyone who would take his calls that his band was the next big thing. And he believed it, so many of those people listened. He secured a notable industry attorney who landed Jack a record deal on the EMI label.

In high school, my bandmates and I saw music as a means solely to have fun, kill time, and meet girls. Of course, we had big dreams like every other fledgling high school group, but

we had not the first clue how to realize them. Jack had a clear vision of success and had no use for those who didn't buy into it.

That summer, I worked at the Thunderbird Hotel in Mantoloking, New Jersey, where I worked with a guy named Ricky Bitter. Ricky also knew Jack and occasionally worked for him as a roadie.

Before one of Jack's band's gigs, Ricky asked, "Hey, you want to come along and help? We could use some extra hands."

Next thing I know, I'm a roadie, setting up guitars and getting the stage ready for Jack's band. Before long, Jack and the band hung out more frequently in the music store, sometimes decked out in full rock and roll gear as if about to play Madison Square Garden. Me, the chubby college freshman making scratch at a music store, hanging out with an 80s rock and roll band - not the plan I had envisioned for my climb up the music industry ladder!

But they took a liking to me regardless, and when they went into the studio to cut an album,

guess who they invited along to help? Well, me, of course.

I had the official title of production coordinator - usually a paid position in the music business - but I worked for free since I made just enough to pay for gas and food working at the Garden State. Technically a professional in the music industry, I told my parents I planned to drop out of college to work with Jack's band. Rather than lament over my decision, Mom and Dad supported me. Though they were petrified, they realized I loved the music business and that the opportunity offered a legitimate

chance at a career. I wanted to go down the music path. If it failed, the world would not end.

I went from a rudderless community college student to setting up amps and microphones and guitar tech-ing for a band signed to a major record company within a few years of graduating high school. Not too bad, all things considered. However, despite working hard on the album, the record company dropped the band from its label shortly after releasing it.

Jack followed some advice and directed his career into music



publishing as a writer. He took me along for the ride.

With few solid connections in the music publishing world, we had to be extremely creative to make our mark. Early in the game, I learned that reputation means much, if not more than anything else, as in any business. To get anywhere, you have to find a way to get noticed by the powers that be, particularly in the music industry.

To achieve that, we generated our buzz by playing pseudo-con games with publishing companies. For example, we'd travel to New

York and tell one publishing company that we had a meeting scheduled with another company to make it appear we were in high demand. It didn't matter if we genuinely had a meeting as long as we booked an appointment with the target company, which we often did. As we landed more meetings with more companies, others suddenly became interested in Jack, leading to more meetings and expanded possibilities.

Jack had been in an earlier band with the one and only Jon Bon Jovi and a song they wrote together made it to his debut album. POW! Leverage - a skill

Jack had learned to master. And he leveraged his Bon Jovi credentials into a publishing deal, bringing me along for the ride as a songwriter.

For roughly two years, we collaborated to fulfill the publishing obligation. Backed by a budget, we became a song factory, writing songs together at a frantic pace and working with unsigned bands on production deals with publishing companies so that once they signed, we had cuts on their records.

The opportunities opened for us fast and furious, but only

Jack had the formal publishing deal. So, as a show of commitment, Jack arranged for me to meet a lawyer who shopped around my deal, and lo and behold, I soon signed a publishing contract with BMG, one of the music industry's biggest names.

Amazing. Simply amazing. I received a monthly check, a small advance, and a demo budget. I had become a true professional songwriter being paid by a major publisher. So, Jack and I focused on the work, and the work ethic, with a vengeance. We'd write a song on a Monday, record it on a

Tuesday, write the next song on Wednesday, record it on a Thursday, and somewhere between all that, we'd mix both songs. At a minimum, we'd have one. Maximum, we wrote and recorded two songs a week.

Because we produced so well in the eyes of the label execs, they let us produce the debut record for an up-and-coming band out of Louisiana called Baton Rouge. Jack had the producer spot, and I took on the associate producer role. We truly experienced a meteoric rise.

Because Baton Rouge was signed to Atlantic Records, we met with Ahmet Ertegun, the legendary founder of Atlantic Records and the man who discovered Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones. Yes - I have the audio of one of our meetings with this truly fascinating music industry icon. Honestly, we were in the presence of a living legend and were not worthy of being in his presence (insert Wayne's World chant here).

Jack and I experienced a particularly frustrating writing session at roughly the same time. We labored for hours to

create music, but nothing sounded right. After nearly a 10-hour, non-stop session, we finally left the writing room to eat. In the kitchen, I played around on an acoustic guitar. Jack abruptly stopped making sandwiches.

“Woah, what the hell is that?” he asked.

“Just something I came up with,” I replied indifferently. But he insisted we return to the writing room to work with it.

In 15 minutes, we had written: “Love’s a Loaded Gun.”

The song snagged the attention of Bob Pfeifer, the

Artists and Repertoire (A&R) rep for Alice Cooper's record label at the time, which elated Jack, who considered Cooper his greatest childhood idol. Jack knew Alice and his manager Shep Gordon, but that detail is for his book. We wrote more with Alice Cooper in mind and eventually met him in an Asbury Park hotel. We brought along an acoustic guitar to pitch to him what we considered the lead single from his next album, "Hey Stoopid." A song title he seeded us with. Our impromptu audition succeeded: we co-wrote six songs on that album. The record label management had such high hopes for it that on one conference



call before the release date, Tommy Mottola told us to start looking at Ferraris. We believed we were on our way.

Sony released the album about the same time Grunge became popular in the Pacific Northwest and swept throughout the United States. Cooper offered a sound that didn't resonate with the newfound rock audiences, and the album failed to meet the lofty expectations of the record company. The disappointment marked the beginning of the end of my music career, although I didn't realize it at the time. I soon lost the publishing deal,

followed by a painful falling out between Jack and me.

Jack and I would reconcile years later, but at the time, my career screeched to a halt, forcing me to return to square one with no plan, no skills to parlay into another field, and no promising outlook for my future. Newly married with a baby on the way, confused and rudderless, I was truly crushed coming out of that phase of my life. I had a brief run as a recording studio owner - but I didn't have the business savvy or the capital to make the magic happen. I was, again, crushed.

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On a day that would alter the course of my life, my wife introduced me to one, Michael Kolbrener. He knew I was refocusing my career efforts and heading toward technology. It seemed logical as the studio was becoming high tech and I was quite capable there. In a phone conversation, he saw right through my lack of pedigree and commented, "You're a really smart guy with a lot of real skills - you just need someone to give you a job in tech doing anything so that you start building a resume."

I replied, "You need a guy like that!" The rest is history.

We became life-long friends from that moment. Michael is intelligent, hard-working, passionate, and as solid of a friend as anyone could ask for.

So now, I have maneuvered my way into the mortgage industry as an Information Technology guy. Not surprisingly, I started at an entry-level position but knew I could and would rise in the company. Determined to broaden my skillset, I spent my early tech years learning as much tech as possible from industry giants such as

Microsoft, Novell, and Cisco. IT education came very quickly to me despite its complexities. It felt natural to me, as if waiting all along for me to show up and absorb all I could as quickly as possible. I became a giant sponge with a voracious, insatiable appetite for information and skills in various disciplines.

While employed with Ivy Mortgage, which sold to Staten Island Savings Bank two years later, we rebranded the mortgage company to SIB Mortgage Corporation. The new CEO before the sale, Richard Payne III (aka Dick Payne and RichieP3), saw

great things in me. So, when my friend Michael departed SIB to explore other opportunities, Dick passed me the ball with these encouraging words of wisdom: "It's your job to lose - don't fuck it up." I was now the Chief Information Officer or CIO of the company.

The sale of the Mortgage company funded enormous growth, and I suddenly found myself in charge of all of the IT and facilities. Not only did I manage all tech operations but all the company real estate functions as well. Oddly enough, my childhood experiences in the Brooklyn apartment

building helped me transition smoothly to the new responsibilities and facilities at scale - easy stuff, right? SIB grew rapidly nationwide, so I partnered with CBRE (a premier commercial real estate firm) to surround myself with expertise in areas (Thanks Marc Trevisan) that I had little experience at that level of property management. The theme is written!

In 2004, the Staten Island Savings Bank sold the Mortgage company to Lehman Brothers, adding to a portfolio that included another, much larger, mortgage outfit called Aurora

Loan Services, headquartered in Colorado. As a result of the merger of the two mortgage operations, I earned a promotion to Chief Information Officer for the combined companies.

HOLY SHIT! Did I mention being a lucky guy? Less than seven years into my IT career, I reached the CIO level in a prominent national mortgage company owned by one of the most well-known financial institutions in the world!

Lehman gave me carte blanche in bringing along my team from SIB, thereby launching my "caravan." In other words, I



realized early in my career that I would only be as successful as the people I surrounded myself with. I knew that the team concept mattered much more than my personal goals because the two necessarily depended on each other. My success depended on my team's success too. Everyone who came with me - my caravan - moved up with me. I take enormous pride in ensuring other peoples' lives improve when my life improves.

This is a critical leadership skill I will discuss in detail shortly.

We moved to Colorado, and the Lehmanization began. The Aurora

firm and staff were highly polished professionals compared to my experiences in the mortgage world. I consciously studied people I perceived as successful and began emulating them to a certain degree. I dressed like them, used the buzzwords, ran my meetings like them, and patterned my management style after theirs, along the way defining my style. My strategy worked! They soon embraced me as one of their own, although my primary focus always remained strong from doing a great job, treating people with dignity and respect, and being completely transparent. Those

aspects are what I refer to as the "table stakes."

The mortgage market heated up over the next two years, prompting Bear Stearns to recruit me via their EMC Mortgage Corporation subsidiary. We moved to Texas believing it would be a two to three-year stint and not expecting to enjoy the Lone Star State way of life. A lot of the caravan took the journey, too! To the surprise of everyone, we loved it there and decided to stay in Texas permanently. I had the title of Senior Managing Director, which in many ways translated to receiving an on-the-job MBA. It

turned out to be a great job with a great company.

Eighteen months later, Bear Stearns collapsed, and roughly half the firm fell into the waiting arms of JPMorgan Chase.

I found myself working for a company with more than 260,000 employees globally. Finally, I found a home, I thought. JPMorgan offered significant roles and recognized my leadership capabilities by giving me broader responsibilities. In time, I reported to a new leader, Mike Zbranak, a smart mofo with incredible capabilities. He

knew how to run large programs. He was a funny somebitch, too - you see, Texas has grown on me. If Mike lived next door to you, he's the kind of guy you'd race home to hang out with on a Friday night for a happy hour.

I learned much from Mike over the next few years - some things to emulate and things that didn't fit my style. For example, Mike was wicked smart but liked to utilize an 8-pound sledgehammer when it came to managing people; an overly aggressive approach didn't work well with me or for me, so I ultimately sought alternative opportunities with the knowledge

I'd amassed. That all said, Mike was a pivotal leader in my journey. He forced me to get better painfully, but I got better retrospectively.

In the late winter of 2012, I became the CIO of Nationstar Mortgage. In my brief, two-year stint, we quickly became one of the largest non-bank mortgage servicers. But, more importantly, my short time with Nationstar provided one of the most valuable experiences in my career, particularly in committing to other people's growth.

It was here that I became further committed to growing people. People have joined me on my journey for almost 15 years—opportunity to opportunity. I have a great collection of talent! I am a lucky guy!

I enlisted long-time friend and Executive Coach Tony Palmucci, and we created a coaching program to elicit greatness within my leadership team. Coach Tony (not Robbins) is the best of the best. He helped me grow and shape leaders at a pace I had never experienced before. Tony and I came up with this, and then he

introduced the Thinking Without Restrictions (TWR) and Business First (BFM) mindset to my leadership team. Soon enough, we had folks going from Tech to Exec. People were noticing too!

As I was getting a bit burned out with the day-to-day overhead of managing large teams and dealing with the ever-changing regulatory environment in the Mortgage business, I started looking for a new opportunity outside of it.

Fate would align me with Cash America International, where I became the Chief Information Officer and then the Chief



Marketing & Technology Officer  
from April 2014 through  
September 2016.

I had a seat at the table,  
and the leadership team was  
tasked with stabilizing the  
organization and growing market  
share/market cap. We did so  
with great success, as the  
company's market cap doubled in  
less than two years.

Along with Coach Tony, we  
continued the journey of  
building leaders. After all,  
the primary responsibility of a  
leader is to grow other leaders.  
So, we did. The TWR and BFM  
were alive and well, and the

Lucky 13 were born. I am the luckiest guy in technology!

Our success at CashAm presented an opportunity to merge equals with a competitor called FirstCash. Our valuation was now at a point where legally, a merger of equals could occur, giving a significant tax advantage - which, in turn, meant greater shareholder value. I exited CashAm in September 2016 with a substantial runway to rethink the rest of my days (That's a more polished way of saying they paid me a lot of money on the way out as part of success compensation)

Two weeks after sitting on the bench, I got a call from a long-time service provider and someone who had become a friend (and ultimately a brother), Steven Gerhardt. Steve was a telecom guy who found his way into the Channel in 2001 and started building a successful company winning customers and providing white glove service to his customers. The world of telecom (for customers) can be a maze; Steve's company (D&M Enterprise Group) helped customers navigate that maze successfully.

Steve asked, "What are you going to do next?" I had a HUGE

opportunity with a prominent technology company serving the Mortgage industry. Still, I was determined to take the chance to flex my entrepreneurial muscle and start something on my own. I told Steve I was going to build a boutique consulting firm from the ground up. He said, "Don't do that just yet; come with me to the Intelisys Channel Connect in Napa in October, just weeks away." I took him up on his invite, and Steve opened the doors of Channel Sales for me - WIDE OPEN!

I was stunned at the size, scale, and professionalism of the environment - more so, the

community - WOW WOW WOW! People were really happy - Like thousands of them... The Channel is a story for another book, but I would end up partnering with Steve and a long-time colleague (turned friend and brother) named Tim Rees, and from late 2016 on, we began building D&M 2.0.

In addition to being Managing Partner at D&M - Steve, Tim, and I started a new company called Capteon in January of 2023. It is a holding company for agents in the channel that focuses on creating stability for our customers and employees while allowing us to optimize a coordinated exit strategy to

maximize value. At Capteon, I serve as the Chief Executive Officer or CEO.

In each of those companies, I faced challenges I wasn't sure I could handle until I did. I tried to learn as much as possible from every situation the job threw at me and use those opportunities to carve out new places in businesses for myself and others. It's not easy to break into a new industry with no formal training and succeed.

I may not have had a college degree, but I did have people skills picked up from years of helping my grandfather and

working on a team in the music industry. Those 'soft skills' elevated my standing in offices and made me an easy pick to lead.

What I now know is; It starts with knowing what is considered valuable to an organization, focusing on obtaining the requisite skills, and specifically, what makes you valuable to that organization or company.