

in conversation with...

Peter Conlon

President & CEO
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Peter Conlon was an independent consultant providing strategic expertise to electronics companies when he was approached to take the reins of Nautel Limited. He became president & CEO of the radio frequency technology company in February 2006. Drawing on the knowledge he gained in the telecommunications industry with organizations such as Newbridge Networks and Mitel Corporation, Conlon has led the company to increased sales, an expanded engineering team and several prestigious industry accolades.



Probably the biggest influence on my leadership style is Terry Matthews, the founder of Mitel and Newbridge. I remember seeing him one day walking through the offices of Mitel with a plunger over his shoulder. He had been plunging the toilets. ...It was then I learned the importance of leading by example.

In 1990, I was asked to run a Mitel subsidiary in Mexico - the first time in my life I'd been given such an opportunity. I thought I was doing well, and I invited Anthony Griffiths, the president and CEO of the parent company, down so I could share ideas for things I wanted to do. He absolutely exposed how unprepared I was to run a company, such as understanding financial statements. I was so embarrassed about that incident that it eventually drove me to get my MBA.

The MBA was a two-year program, and I studied six nights a week from 6:30 p.m. until 2:00 a.m. It was difficult to manage because I had just been promoted to vice president at Newbridge and I had a family, but I was determined to do very well. When the program director complimented me on the work I had done, it was a major achievement for me.

I've always worked for good companies, but if I had to pick the worst job I've ever had, it would be my experience in the venture capital world. All due respect to venture capitalists, but it taught me how mercenary people can be.

This is the best job I've ever had in my career. I remember going through the recruitment process, meeting the people here and thinking, "This is a wonderful gem that just needs a little polish." I honestly believe that fitting into this job has been like a hand in glove. To find something so right, it's a really good feeling.

I'm in a state of transition as a leader. I used to believe that forging ahead and optimism could overcome all evils. Now, I'm learning from my Board to take a more measured view in certain areas. That balanced approach is an amazing strength I never fully appreciated before.

I've stepped back a bit from running the company over the past year to allow our management advisory team to take that on. I think that's the greatest and most difficult thing for a leader to do - to bestow leadership. Yet by supporting them in the decisions and mistakes they make, I'm beginning to recognize that I can be a better leader by using this approach.

Truly great leaders are inspirational. They don't lead by decree. It's all about getting people to go in the same direction because they believe in it, not because they have to. You have to show them which way you want to go, why that is the right direction, and fill them with the courage to go for it.

For the most part, there is no sense of entitlement in Atlantic Canada. Which means that when you put opportunities in front of people, they will treasure them, and they will do really great things. Plus, there's the lifestyle. People work to live here, not live to work. Given that there's likely to be intense competition for skilled workers in the near future, that's significant.

My advice for the next generation of leaders is this: You don't learn from success. You learn from failure. If you have consistent success and you're satisfied with that, maybe you're not trying hard enough.

Interviewed by Tony Case, senior consultant, Knightsbridge Robertson Surette - Atlantic Canada's leading recruitment and human resource consulting firm. Leader's Insight conversations are published in each issue of *Atlantic Business Magazine*. Feedback: dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com