

# north to alaska

## ON BOARD THE MS RYNDAM OFF THE COAST OF ALASKA

Anne and I were married before my last year at Yale Law School. We were exuberant. The sky was the limit. We were going to have six kids (we ended up having four) and we were going to live in Alaska. During that final year of school I wrote to several firms in Alaska. The classic response was from a partner of a firm in Juneau, "When you're in Juneau, look me up." We never made it to Juneau and instead spent our meager savings on a trip to Indianapolis, Kansas City and LA. I accepted an offer in Kansas City.

Now it's forty-five years later, and we are on our way to Alaska. As the trip progresses, it is apparent to me how much our past aspirations and our present journey parallel the inner journeys CEOs take in their lives.

## SEEKING THE LAST FRONTIER

In 1960, the last Eisenhower year, space was not the challenge it later became under Kennedy. Alaska, which had become a state in 1959, was the only frontier left in the continental U.S. The longing for adventure and the new and the unspoiled attracted me.

Many CEOs start out with the burning desire "to go where no man (or woman, or at least very few men or women) has gone before." This burning desire for adventure, and passion for contribution and experiential (and financial) wealth powers many to great achievements. Not all get to their Alaska, but the burning desire propels each to their ultimate destination.

## EARLY NAVIGATION

Coming out of Vancouver, we encounter fog, and can only navigate the sometimes narrow channel with radar.

Young CEOs don't always have enough experience to internalize their radar for the marketing, production, finance, personnel or information technology shoals they must navigate. At times they may be thankful that the vessel of their ambition merely sustained a slight scrape and did not sink from the impact of their lack of experience.

## KEEPING BALANCE

I regularly exercise on a Life Fitness

machine, but exercising on one in the shipboard gym as the MS Ryndam pitches and rolls is a new experience for me.

CEOs struggle to keep balance with the siren songs of power wafting around them – "Yes, sir/ma'am," "What may I arrange for you, sir/ma'am?" "How may we meet your every desire, sir/ma'am?" "What civic/industry leadership role would you like, sir/ma'am?" While CEOs listen to these songs, they try to keep their passion for adventurous excellence, for their personal journey to Alaska, burning bright and their company sailing along with a manageable pitch and roll.

## UNDER THE EAGLE'S WINGS

The name of Ketchikan, our first port of call in Alaska, is derived from the native Tlingit word meaning "under the wings of an eagle." On a hike near the Mendenhall Glacier, our guide mentioned that eagles can see clearly for a mile.

CEOs are the germinators, the spreaders and the tenders of the vision for their companies in good times and bad. Some have a very clear vision, but like the eagle, do not have a strong voice. Their people do not hear or respond to the vision because of CEO self-isolation or because layers of bureaucracy shield the CEO from "the troops." Only when the CEO comes out from behind his/her desk, walks among the people of the company, and is seen as "one of us" do employees truly feel "under the wings" of their particular eagle, and freely share in the CEO's vision.

## GOLD RUSH

Gold strikes in Alaska and the Yukon resulted in the U.S. Mints in Seattle and San Francisco receiving ten million dollars worth of gold between July and November of 1898, and another thirty-eight million by 1900.

The media is fixated on the salary, bonus and benefits that a CEO takes home. The excesses of Tyco and Enron show us that, no matter the income of a CEO, a life style can consume all of it and more. For most CEOs a point arrives at which the pure financial

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drive alchemizes into something else – which often has "giving back" as a primary theme. The Gates Foundation, with its emphasis on worldwide childhood immunization, is a current example. The philanthropy of the Rockefellers, the Fords, Carnegie and others further exemplify that gold becomes truly meaningful when quickly circulated to help society.

## HUNTERS AND GATHERERS

The original inhabitants of Alaska, the Tlingit, were hunters and gatherers.

CEOs need some of the hunter and gatherer mentality. They must hunt for something the whereabouts of which may not be apparent and may resist being caught or tamed. They must also gather those things that naturally occur and put them together in ways that will sustain and nourish their company through good and bad times.

## ASCEND THE HEIGHTS AND COUNT THE COST

The White Pass and Yukon Railway goes from Skagway to Whitehorse in the Yukon. It was built to accommodate the Klondike

Gold Rush of 1898. Known as a “Railroad to Hell” it was constructed in two years by thirty-five thousand men working in temperatures reaching minus 60 Fahrenheit. Countless men and horses died.

There are CEOs who will say, “Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead,” but many will spend sleepless nights counting the human and other resource cost of accomplishing their vision. They may often wonder, as the costs and tolls rise whether the end really does justify the means, and they constantly seek ways to reduce the human and other cost. This fact gives their followers confidence that the CEO considers their welfare part of the equation. In turn, the leader earns their increased loyalty.

### **THE GREAT ONE**

Mount McKinley, at over 20,000 feet, is the highest peak on the North American continent. Its native name is Denali, which means “the great one.”

Some distance between CEOs and employees is unavoidable and necessary. As a CEO, I consciously retained emotional distance because I needed to be able to discharge anyone in the corporation if the need or justification arose. CEOs who recognize this know they will have to satisfy their needs for close friendship outside the company.

### **THE RED EYE**

We flew back from Anchorage to Baltimore on the Red Eye.

The CEO position does not mean less work, but work of a different kind. It is often more strenuous. The buck literally and figuratively does stop here. Leading is conceptually quite different from doing, and realizing the vision can only be accomplished by both. The “Red Eye” for the CEO may mean tears as well as lack of sleep. Tears can come from failure to achieve a goal, associate loss or personal sacrifice or loss. Dealing with this emotional “Red Eye” while maintaining leadership is one of the great challenges of being a CEO.

The Alaskan experience includes the sheer wonder of finding what hides beyond the horizon or over the next ridge... Therein lies the essence of Alaska.

*Insight Guide to Alaska*

May you always continue toward Alaska by keeping your sense of wonder keen and your passion for adventurous excellence burning bright.

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