

Faculty Featurette - Jim Lopresti Senior Instructor, Business School



You've had a long and varied career teaching in business schools at a variety of universities along the Front Range, but your academic background is in English literature. How does one mix Thoreau with Hegel?

So, when I received my PhD from DU back in 1992, I was also teaching at what was then, the Colorado Women's College. Since I brought emotional intelligence into my teaching, several students who worked for Lucent Technologies (formerly AT&T) asked me for my CV to pass on to their HR director. One thing led to another, and I was offered a position in the education and training division of Lucent. I worked there for three years as a manager and left when I was made an offer I couldn't refuse from Sun Microsystems. There I was a senior manager and had a team of 50 people. I tell people I wasn't hired at either IT company for what I know, but rather for how I use what I know. I believe a liberal arts degree can provide invaluable transferable skills. Librarians taught me to be empathetic, to think critically, to be compassionate, and how to communicate clearly and to listen actively. As a result, I was consistently promoted to people management positions. Since I teach management and leadership, my corporate background and practical experience fit in well with a business school. Believe it or not, many of Thoreau's ideas translate nicely into leadership skills and competencies.

Tell us something about how your experiences varied or were similar between corporate culture and academic culture?

Culture, whether in a company or the academy, is a derivative of leadership. In all the organizations I worked for, both corporate and academic, their success was directly related to their culture, which was directly related to their leadership. It's the leaders of an organization that make or break it. Cultures become toxic when leaders make bad, ill-advised, and self-serving decisions. Working for two global IT organizations like Lucent Technologies (spin off of AT&T in 1995) and Sun Microsystems was an education in innovation and inertia. Lucent was AT&T's telecommunications equipment and R&D division (Bell Labs) founded in 1875 as Western Electric. Bell Labs was part of Lucent Technologies and one of the most prestigious R&D facilities in the world. With eight Nobel prizes in physics, Bell Labs was the source of game-changing innovations like solar, radar, the transistor, microwave oven, optical fiber, and the microprocessor to name only a fraction of the Lab's inventions. Whereas Bell Labs was the leading edge of innovation and discovery, Lucent Technologies was stuck in the inertia of 127 year old way of doing business. Leadership came and went, and the decision makers at the top faded miserably over and over again. Lucent Technologies, a rising star in the technology world, crashed and burned by 2006 and was acquired by the French telecom company, Alcatel. Sun Microsystems was also a victim of its own lack of consistent, innovative leadership. By the time I left Sun to work full time at CU Boulder, self-serving leaders took the organization to the edge of bankruptcy. They were acquired by Oracle in 2010. The academy is no different. In the 10 years I worked for CU Boulder, the Business School had 3 deans which didn't allow for consistency in leadership. In contrast, CU Denver's Business School had the same dean for over 20 years. Our new dean, who took over in 2021, has created and sustains a culture of industry, innovation, and fairness. It's the kind of culture where, obviously, I am the most comfortable. At the end of the day, it all can be traced back to leadership.

Your courses here include entrepreneurship. Some believe, as Schumpeter taught, that a true entrepreneur necessarily possesses a particular set of personality characteristics that enabled them to engage in a process of "creative destruction." Is entrepreneurship something that can be taught—or is it more like a talent, something innate to the person?

I always get this question in terms of leadership. Can it be taught or are leaders born with that skill? My reply is always the same: yes, I believe my perspective applies equally to entrepreneurship. I don't believe it's a binary - either/or - situation. Yes, there are particular characteristics and qualities necessary to be a successful entrepreneur. Does one have to be born with them? No, they don't. I have been teaching and consulting on emotional/social intelligence for a long time. Ironically, it's one of my most popular consulting programs. The basic entrepreneurial qualities of persistence, comfort with risk, ferociously independent, etc., can be taught through emotional/social intelligence. Self-management and self-awareness are foundational characteristics for entrepreneurs, as are relationship management and social awareness. Of course, some folks are "born" with these qualities, as there are some "natural born" entrepreneurs/leaders. But many entrepreneurs acquire their talent through nurture, in addition to a touch of nature. Although both of my grandfathers started their own businesses when they immigrated from Italy to the US, I had no desire to be an entrepreneur. I had the guaranteed monthly paycheck and other benefits inherent in a full-time job. I became an accidental entrepreneur after being trained as a professional certified coach with a foundation in EISEL.

You also do professional consulting, coaching, and training for a range of companies throughout Europe and beyond. Tell us something you've noticed that differs particularly in the corporate cultures overseas in contrast to those here in the States?

When I worked for Lucent Technologies, I was sent to eight European countries as a project manager because my manager said I just "get" other cultures. What I "got" was that Italians, Spaniards, French, Belgians, etc., are all relationship oriented in business in contrast to many US companies focusing more on task orientation. When I began work on a project in Paris, the first two weeks I was there, we only talked about "business" 2 days. The other days were spent building a relationship with the company, Viatel - so that they felt comfortable signing a multi-million dollar contract for services essential to their business transition from telephony to network services. I have been told repeatedly by my European and Asian clients that Americans introduce themselves, shake your hand, and then hand you a pen to sign a contract. Viatel wanted to build a relationship so that if anything interrupted their service, we would be on top of resolving the issue right away. I took very good care of Viatel because I knew the people on the other end of the contract with whom I had built a strong relationship were good, hardworking people that I considered friends.

Hopefully you manage some time for leisure activities or other pursuits—what might you pick for a sunny Colorado weekend escape?

Well, I have lived in Colorado for 37 years now. I have downhill skied before! I just couldn't get it. However, I do a lot of cross-country skiing and snow shoeing in the winter. Spring, Summer, and Fall I hike and camp a lot. Rocky Mountain NP is my personal therapist. I leased a horse for a couple of years, and she was also my great emotional stabilizer. My wife and I also like to take occasional road trips to Taos and Santa Fe. They are close and a lot of fun.