

THE VIRGIN WAY

How to **Listen,**
Learn and Lead

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P R E F A C E

LIFE'S TOO SHORT

Don't enjoy it? Don't do it!

From my very first commercial venture at age sixteen with *Student* magazine, right up to today's far loftier adventures with such things as Virgin Galactic and space tourism, I have always had one paramount philosophy: if a new project or business opportunity doesn't excite me and get my entrepreneurial and innovative juices flowing, if it's not something with which I sense I can make a difference while having a lot of seriously creative fun, then I'd far rather pass on it and move right along to something else that does excite me.

This same line of thought flows into my attitude towards writing books: if I don't enjoy writing them, then the chances are pretty good that nobody is going to be too happy reading them. The simple fact is that if you don't enjoy what you're doing and the people with whom you're doing it, then there is no possible way that you are ever going to do it as well as something that you do enjoy. As some wise person once said, '*Life is not a dress rehearsal.*' This is it! So unless

you plan to give it a better shot in your next life – assuming you are lucky enough to get a second chance – then why risk wasting any of your limited time on this earth doing stuff that doesn't light your fire?

I am constantly amazed at how many people appear to live their lives either always looking in the rear-view mirror or talking about how things are going to be different in the future. There is nothing wrong with cherishing and enjoying memories and hopefully learning from past experiences just as planning for the future is something we obviously all have to do as well – but what about today? All too frequently 'now' gets lost in the frenetic shuffle to rush ahead to tomorrow. Face it: these are 'the good old days' that you'll be looking back on twenty years from now – so why not move heaven and earth to enjoy them while you've got them?

Mahatma Gandhi is one of my all-time heroes, and a quote from him that I think I first read in a school history lesson has stuck with me ever since: '*Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever.*' This good advice has been popularly abbreviated to, '*Live every day as if it were your last*', which is a wonderful sentiment even if it has frequently become a worldwide rallying cry for never-mind-the-consequences hell-raisers. I remember well the one time (as an apprentice hell-raiser) I tried using the latter version on my mum as an excuse for some mischief or other. 'But Mum,' I implored, 'I was only doing what Gandhi said I should do.' Unimpressed, she gave me a straight-faced reply of, 'Pull that trick again, Ricky, and today could very well be your last!'

Actually the best quote on living every day like it's your last belongs to Steve Jobs, who in a commencement speech he made at Stanford University in 2005 said, 'If you live every day like it's your last, someday you'll almost certainly be right.' It would be funny but for the fact he courageously gave the address just twelve months after he had been diagnosed with the cancer that would kill him six years later.

As fallible human beings we all make our share of mistakes and get ourselves into the kind of predicaments that result from making the wrong choices, but in the vast majority of such situations we all have the ability to pause, take stock and say, 'Sorry, but I'm really not happy with this so I'm out of here.' I recognise that in a lot of instances – particularly when friends and family are involved – this may be easier said than done and taking any such drastic action usually calls for a lot of courage. However, as the old adage goes, when you make mistakes at least try to make them quickly.

I have often had people say to me, 'Well, sure, Richard, all that stuff is easy for you to say when you've built your business and you've pretty much made it in life.' To this my response is always along the lines of, 'Yes, that's true – to a degree. But why do you think I have all those companies? They almost certainly wouldn't be there had I not repeatedly dug my heels in and refused to spend my time on things I recognised as just not right for me.' One of the earliest examples of a situation in which I felt off-kilter was my time at school. When I shocked my parents as well as friends by dropping out of the prestigious Stowe School at age sixteen, I

did it with my young eyes wide open in order to pursue a dream of starting my own magazine publishing business. In my heart of hearts I knew that making *Student* magazine a success simply didn't necessitate me spending any more of my precious time sitting in stuffy classrooms. The idea of spending another couple of years memorising mind-numbing facts from textbooks, wrestling with the joys of calculus and defining little-known Latin verbs seemed totally irrelevant to my future life and so I had to escape or risk losing my sanity.

Please don't misinterpret this as some kind of 'burn your books', anti-education tirade – quite the opposite. Availing yourself of the best education you can get is an imperative particularly in today's ultra competitive commercial world. When I went to school, however, learning was much more of a memorisation and regurgitation process than it seems to be today. The old way was particularly challenging for someone like me with dyslexia and borderline ADD – attention deficit disorder. There were several excellent teachers who did make their subjects come to life, but with my early-stage entrepreneurial juices starting to flow I had mentally moved on already. The paradoxical twist is that ever since I dropped out of school I have spent the balance of my life with a thirst for learning about new things, businesses, people and cultures. The big difference, of course, is that my learning process has involved experiencing all these things first-hand as opposed to reading about them in books or third-hand from someone who frequently had never lived outside of academia.

Although I had serious trouble tuning into teachers in school, when I struck out on my own I had to quickly set about honing my dubious listening skills. One of the first of many tasks I took on at *Student* was that of 'cub reporter' so when interviewing someone, I had no option but to listen intently while scribbling down notes that sometimes were almost completely indecipherable. Whether it was with John Lennon or John le Carré, I had to rapidly acquire the art of simultaneously listening, writing and thinking about my next follow-on question. It was somewhat of a 'Chinese plate trick' as you had to keep all the components spinning or you found yourself helplessly adrift. But the ability to lock in and listen is a skill that has served me well in life. Although it seems to be somewhat of a dying art, I believe that listening is one of the most important skills for any teacher, parent, leader, entrepreneur or, well, just about anyone who has a pulse.

What's become known around our various companies as 'the Virgin way' is something that has evolved since day one. When someone who has just joined us from outside comes out of their first, usually highly informal, strategy or product meeting and says, 'Wow, you folks certainly do things differently, don't you?' the response is often, 'Yup, that's the Virgin way', usually said with a smile and a knowing wink.

As you will (I hope) understand, one of the keys to 'the way' we do things is nothing more complex than listening – listening intently to *everyone* who has an opinion to share, not just the self-professed experts. It's also about learning from each other,

from the marketplace and from the mistakes that must be made in order to get anywhere that is original and disruptive. And perhaps most importantly, it's about having fun with a capital F while we're doing it. Leading 'the Virgin way' often has quite unpredictable consequences and takes us to places where other 'more sensible' operations might fear to tread. And with a brand that is now as visible as it is, this means leading from the front and sticking your neck out in ways that a lot of leadership styles might not consider 'prudent', a word that I do not use on a frequent basis.

I don't profess for one moment to have some kind of secret formula or a panacea for the challenges of business in general. What I write about in the coming pages is simply what, in my wide-ranging experience, has served me and, by extension, Virgin extremely well – the vast majority of the time at least. Having what we like to call 'serious fun' is at the core of 'the Virgin way' and that's something for which I will never apologise. Being passionately engaged and enjoying every minute of what you do is an attitudinal thing – a spark – that cannot be mandated, trained, put in a job description or an employee manual. It's something that's either in a person's DNA or not, and as such has to come from within.

If you're someone who believes in going your own way and having a lot of fun doing it, then you're already on the right track and there's probably very little anyone can say to modify your course more than a few degrees. I'd just urge you to do a lot more listening than talking, don't be afraid to wear your passion on your sleeve for all to see, and when in doubt trust your instincts.

I only mention all of this in order to be totally transparent on how I have lived my life and to put my, perhaps somewhat less than traditional, take on listening, living, laughing and leading in the proper context. There are a lot of slightly crazy things I have done with boats and hot-air balloons, jumping off tall buildings and more that certainly had the potential to shorten my life expectancy. Some may call it recklessness but I prefer to call it taking 'calculated risks'. One way or the other, though, I'd certainly put many of my past adventures in the category of 'Don't try this at home'. What I do believe to be an essential, however, particularly for anyone with entrepreneurial aspirations, is an unfettered willingness to trust their instincts and to follow their own star, even if at times it might appear to be leading them towards the edge of the precipice.

My star has certainly led me over quite a few cliffs and in some pretty wild and woolly directions and so I should also confess that from an early age, my idea of 'having fun' might not be the same as a lot of other people's. Whether the challenges are physical or financial – or sometimes both – fun, aka excitement, has for me always been inextricably linked with taking risks and sometimes perhaps some pretty insane ones. The problem is that being told 'You'd have to be crazy to even think about doing that' has to me always been like the proverbial red rag to a bull. Whether it's starting a Christmas tree farm, a capital-intensive business like an airline, kite-surfing across the English Channel in my sixties, fighting to reduce the suffocating carbon blitz that is killing our planet, or seeking to commercialise space travel, I love nothing better than what appears to be an

outlandish challenge. As any of my colleagues at Virgin will attest, in my vocabulary the phrase ‘seemingly impossible’ is defined as ‘something that should be a lot of fun disproving.’

After a Laser dinghy ride around the island with me, one frequent guest on Necker (who wishes to remain anonymous) once laughingly commented, ‘Wow, Richard! After that experience I now understand what makes Virgin different: you really take the “shortest distance between two points is a straight line” thing very seriously, don’t you?’ When I asked what exactly he meant by that, it turned out that the thrill I get from sailing at high speed through, and frequently right over the top of, the island’s encircling jagged rocks was clearly not what he’d had in mind when I suggested we go sailing. The way I see it, though, just about anyone can chart a safe course and laboriously pick their way around a field of obstacles – but where’s the fun in that?

My approach to sailing around Necker is perhaps a pretty good analogy for my view on leadership in business. If your vision is to reach a distant beach where, because of the reefs surrounding it, no one has ever set foot, then the chances are that reading the same old charts as everyone else has used isn’t going to get you there either. And the readily available excesses of data on just about every subject tends to give most people more ammunition on why *not* to pursue any even slightly off-the-chart objective. I have spent my life trying off-the-chart things and going places that friends and colleagues have told me were bad ideas. Does that make me nothing more than a contrarian? Perhaps. However, pushing the envelope and zagging

when everyone else zigs is something that just seems to be part of my DNA, and to date it has worked pretty well for me – most of the time, at least.

I didn't take any business courses or read any books on leadership to figure out how I would make it in life, so be warned that some of the pages ahead probably aren't for everyone. While I wouldn't necessarily categorise this as a 'leadership book', on a whim I decided to search the term on Amazon and was more than a little blown away by the results – on the day I checked, I found a mere 93,467 matches! Not only that, but I have to confess I don't believe I have read a single one of them. As a result I have no idea what the other 93,467 authors have to say, but I doubt that few if any of them can have had a fraction of the fun I've had in the forty-plus years I have been leading the charge with the Virgin group of companies.

Then I had a thought that perhaps 'leadership' simply isn't the right word for what I have been practising? So when I went back to Amazon and searched, *'Having a great time while building a highly diversified global business with an extended family of simply wonderful people'*, guess what? There was not a single match – at least not until now!