





# Thomas J. Tierney

MBA 1980

Chairman and Cofounder  
The Bridgespan Group

When Tom Tierney announced that he intended to step down from the top spot at Bain & Company, several of his colleagues thought he should have his head examined. But Tierney knew exactly what he was doing as he shifted his focus to the nonprofit world and launched Bridgespan, an organization dedicated to helping address society's most complex problems.



## TIMELINE

- 1954 Born, San Francisco, California
- 1976 Earns BA, Economics, University of California, Davis
- 1976 Joins Bechtel International, Algeria, Field Engineer
- 1980 Earns MBA with Distinction
- 1980 Joins Bain & Company, Consultant
- 1983 Named Partner, Bain & Company
- 1987 Named Managing Partner of San Francisco office, Bain & Company
- 1992 Named President, Bain & Company
- 1993 Named Worldwide Managing Director, Bain & Company
- 1999 Cofounds The Bridgespan Group
- 2002 Publishes *Aligning the Stars*
- 2011 Publishes *Give Smart: Philanthropy That Gets Results*

### *From top:*

Tierney outside his home; taking a walk with his wife, Karen; participating in a meeting via Skype.

Tierney has a knack for making it seem like his success is accidental. As a high-school student when the Vietnam War was raging, he wanted to join the Air Force and serve his country, but his father, a factory worker, convinced him to go to college instead. When he graduated from the University of California, Davis, he intended to keep his job as a city bus driver, but through a friend's father, he got an interview at Bechtel International.

"At that point I'd been to Tijuana for four hours. That was the extent of my international experience," recalls Tierney, who was ready to explore the world and agreed to join the company as a field engineer in Algeria. Working overseas was a tremendous education, and it also was the first step along a path of remarkable success punctuated by steep learning curves and grounded in solid values.

Tierney arrived at HBS—his first trip to Boston—wearing work boots and a flannel shirt and feeling out of place. "Everyone seemed more educated, more experienced, more worldly," he says, but he quickly settled in. "HBS opened up all these possibilities for me," adds Tierney, whose summer internship at Bain & Company turned into a full-time position upon graduation. Although he claims to have gotten off to a rocky start, in three years he was promoted to partner. "It was like going from the minors to the majors," he says.

Over the next decade he proved that he was up to the task, so much so that in 1993, when the firm hit hard times, Bain CEO Mitt Romney (MBA 1974/JD 1975) asked Tierney to head the company. "The rational response would have been to decline," observes Tierney, who instead led a turnaround of the organization.

At the height of his success at Bain—having restored the firm to solid ground—Tierney decided to make a dramatic shift. "I wanted to put my experience to work being of service to the world," he says. With a desire to build bridges between philanthropists and the social sector and to bring business skills to nonprofits, Tierney cofounded The Bridgespan Group. "We are committed to increasing the impact that philanthropists and nonprofits can have," says Tierney, who has created a unique organization that privately collaborates with a wide range of billionaires, advis-

**"When we launched Bridgespan, the phrases 'social entrepreneur' and 'venture philanthropy' did not exist. We took a page out of Bain & Company's book about how to add value, customizing it for the social sector to create extraordinary results."**

es the likes of the Gates and Rockefeller Foundations, and consults with the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, Harlem Children's Zone, and the Salvation Army, among others.

"One of the things that's remarkable about Tom is his discipline and intentionality," says Bridgespan cofounder Jeff Bradach (PhD 1992). "Tom has a personal commitment to making a difference in society." From the beginning, the founders conceived a consultancy that would apply data-driven strategy to deepen social impact. Today Bridgespan employs about 200 people, and its free online library of articles, background reports, and tools designed to enhance philanthropic, organizational, and leadership effectiveness is used by hundreds of thousands of individuals and organizations around the world. Additionally its webinars, impact labs, and online insight centers support sector-wide creative problem solving.

Peppered throughout any conversation with Tom Tierney are words of wisdom. "What matters in life is who you are," and "Build a life not a résumé," for example, are mantras that he is fond of sharing. By turning his life's passion into his work and applying a rigorous discipline to his calendar, Tierney has built a life of purpose. The proud father of two grown sons who counts his wife of almost 32 years, Karen, as his best friend and closest advisor, Tierney is clearly a man versed in practicing what he preaches.