HBS alumni share the words of wisdom that helped shape their lives and careers

During spring reunions this year, the Skydeck team set up camp on Spangler lawn and asked HBS alumni to answer one simple question. *What is the best business advice you’ve ever received?* The answers ran the gamut. It was advice on how to manage employees, how to find the right job, how to manage work/life balance.

And the sources of this career-changing advice were varied too. Alumni told us they had been offered by everyone from former professors to CEOs, and even sometimes interns. And in this special episode of Skydeck, we offer some of our favorite words of wisdom from that day.

—Joanna Stone Herman, and I’m class of 1997. My professor, Carl Sloan, who was our lead professor, gave the advice that you will probably achieve greater monetary and overall career success than you initially thought possible, but you’ll have to make some trade-offs and think carefully about what those trade-offs are, because some of them, like time with your family, you can’t get back.

—My name is Rosy Fynn and I am class of 2007. So best piece of business advice, I would say, put your employees first and make sure that they are satisfied because they are the ones who will eventually make your customers and, inherently, your revenues come.

—My name is Riccardo Concha the class of 2007. I believe the best business advice that I have received so far that has been most useful to me, being curious about things that you don’t know and trying to embrace the challenge in a way that you’re always trying to uncover new facts about things that you do even regularly, but you’re trying to find new ways of thinking about it.

—Lider Sucre class of 1997, MBA. The best piece of advice I ever got for business and, really, for life, I got from my father, who traveled from Panama to Costa Rica by bicycle in the ‘40s. And he was the youngest of four kids trying this. And his father told him, don’t focus on how far San Jose is. Focus on the next hill. You just want to make it to that next hill. Your path is clear. All you want to focus is in the next hurdle. And as long as you do that, you will not lose faith, and you will make it. And it worked.

—Bob Murphy, class of 1957. I had my first and second year interrupted by three years in the military, where I served in the US Navy. My basic advice in my career was, try to network. Get to know people. Recognize, too, that it’s a global world in terms of religion, in terms of business techniques. And try to develop trusting relationships with people. And delegate as much as you can to your subordinates, and show your trust in them, and hope that they also reciprocate that trust in you.

—My name is Jian Bao I’m from the class of 2002. The best advice is really to simplify everything. One of my bosses founded probably one of the most successful investment companies in the world based in China, growing from $30 million in assets to $25 billion in 11 years largely through organic performance.

So I had the opportunity to work for him and often receiving his admonishment for spending too much time on too many things, getting tempted by too many things. Instead, have your own sense of direction. Where do you think the world is going? And then just pick one or two ideas and go really deep, and get a very, very thorough understanding on that.
And sometimes, maybe the outcome is no action. But that's fine. You learned it. And then you never know when the external environment changes. There will be something actionable.

—Sarah Wright, 1997. All leadership is very close in nature to friendship. That's all you're doing, is trying to connect with people, trying to get them to trust you. And the more authentic that bond is, the better leader you become.

And it's that simple. You don't have to come up with any other fancy formula. And as soon as I internalized that, it totally changed the way I interacted with people. And it just became more real, and it got easy. And in that one little moment, all of a sudden, I had a pattern of behavior to model.

—Danny Cho, HBS 2012. I think as new grads think about their next career step, they should really follow their career passion. And that I think that can't be underestimated because I think a lot of people, up until that point in their lives at HBS, think about how they've compared to others. And they've succeeded in that construct.

But at some point, post-HBS, it stops mattering, the comparative part, because everyone's living their own lives. And ultimately, it rests on your own individual happiness. And I think that's really derived from pursuing your own passion.

—My name is Jeff Perls, I'm the class of 1967. Keep your eye on the ball, basically. It really revolves around making sure you knew what you had to focus on to get the job done. And that was good advice going into my first real job after business school.

—My name is Chris Lloyd. I'm class of 2012. I think the best business advice I ever received was to always have a perspective. I actually think that came from HBS in a case methodology-- coming in, reading in the cases, and just in case you get cold-called, have something to say. And I think in business meetings or in a lot of different contexts in business, people might just ask me my perspective. And I always feel like I have a ready response or perspective on a tough or easy business problem.

—I'm Don Yacktman, class of '67, section B. I think the one I would give is to be honest with yourself and with others. If you're honest with yourself, that means looking in the mirror, deciding who you are and what you want to do. Because when Monday mornings are fun, life is good.

—I'm Gwarlann Kerviler, 2007. Basically, it's about not thinking that the other person is doing something wrong, but it's more that collectively, we're not able to work together. So it's more this idea of collective action versus me and another person. Hannah Vazzana, 2002. You don't work for the company; the company works for you. I had a manager when I was really, really young, and I was trying to make a decision whether to leave this particular company or not. And he just blurted that out, sort of. And it has always stayed with me and helped me make a lot of decisions in my career, actually.

—This is Vvivi Hu class of 2007. The best I learned at HBS is leadership is not entitled, but really earned.

—Obinna Isiadinso, and I'm class of 2002. When I think back to when I was here at HBS, one of our professors actually did give us an interesting piece of advice. He mentioned that when you're developing a company, when you're developing a business, when you're developing the team, try as much as possible to put together a team that has an unfair advantage somehow.
—My name is Heidi Kuglin Beck from 2007. Keep an open mind because anything can change, and life can change in a second. And having an open mind means being able to see the good in what's there and to make an adjustment if you need to.

—Julia Issembert class of 2012. Be honest. Be a good partner. People like doing business with people that they like and respect. So I always act as such.

—Skip Vonckx, MBA, 1962. Never believe that the business will fail without you.

—Scott Knoll, class of '97. It's funny. Before I got here, everyone told me to pay attention to lead and said, it's all about lead. And like everyone else, when you get here, you kind of think it's the soft class that isn't as important as some of the harder classes with finance and everything else. And in the end, it's all about lead. Focus on leadership and organizational behavior because most of my life is trying to figure that out, and it's been that way for the 20 years I've been out.


—Steve Banks, class of '67. I would say the best piece of business advice is when you know things aren't working and there needs to be a management change, do it. Don't hope that things are going to get better.

—Tom Fishburne, and I graduated in 2002. Well, I was in this funny stage where I was working for a company but had an idea to start a business. And I was in this limbo of, like, when you actually make the leap.

And so I was in that limbo for a long time and met an entrepreneur who told me that he thought of making the leap in terms of an airport runway. And he said when you're flying a plane, you're headed down the runway. There's this point called V1 speed where you either-- basically, it's the point of no return, where you either take off or you crash.

And so I had a V1 marker that I wanted to have moonlighting revenue at half my salary. I'd have a business plan to get to the remaining half within a year. I'd have a home equity line of credit, and I'd have the support of my wife. And so I rumbled down the runway, and I eventually hit that point.

And for me, it really helped get out of the present and into the future. And it made it more of an event that when I hit that V1 line, it was just time to make the jump. So I did.

—Connie Zhang I'm from MBA class, 2002. So after I graduated from 2002, then I stayed in Boston for a year, working here. Then my husband graduated from 2003. So when he graduated, he found a job with United Health Care in Minneapolis.

And I said, OK, so we're relocating to Minneapolis. Then I've found a job with GE for the Global Marketing Leadership Program, which I have to rotate for two years at different locations. So my first rotation was in Chicago. So we set up a home in Minneapolis. Then I have to go to Chicago for work.

So during three days of house-hunting for me for getting an apartment in Chicago, we're driving around. And my husband suddenly said, maybe it's not right for you to be in Chicago and me in Minneapolis. But as an HBS couple, you're always struggling, how to balance your life versus your career. So I was really struggling because I wanted to have a good job with GE. I think that's a great, wonderful career path. But meanwhile, family is important too.
So I called on Clayton Christensen, our professor here, because he's a really close, personal friend as well, not only just my professor. I said, Clay, we're facing this. This is a really good job, but this is how we're going to deal with life.

And he said, Connie, think of it this way. When you and your husband are separated in different locations, you tend to make individual decisions. You'll be more and more independent from each other. But as a couple, when you grow more independent, if there are any disagreements happening in life, you might walk to a totally different way, different path. So he left it there.

So that really made us think what do we want in our lives. After prayer and stuff, I quit the GE job and come back to Minneapolis and then look for a job there. But I was really blessed-- five offers on the table within a month. I think that decision was very critical in our 15 years of after-graduation life, that job, you can find anywhere. But the family is only one.

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