



Martin Leuw

For most business leaders it's their first time
at most of what they do

Dear young(er) Martin,

You've always wanted to run your own business. But without the capital to do so, you've charged at new opportunities that might become the launch vehicle to achieve your ambitions. The last 10 years have been a rollercoaster, with your first CEO role at 32, creating a corporate venture at 34 and running a pre-IPO dotcom at 37. Now with the dotcom bubble bursting, you've been offered a CEO role of a PE-backed accountancy software business in Windsor which, at 100 people, is the largest business you've ever run.

What you've not yet realised is that, whilst everything you've learned to date is going to be instrumental to your future success, the learning curve over the next 10 years is going to be even steeper than before. So, take a deep breath...for most business leaders it's their first time at most of what they do - you're not alone

What you are going to find out next is the following:

Before you take on a new role, “kick the tyres” rather than just believe what you are told. In the past, you've not always done this as thoroughly. This time you did - and it will pay off.

You are 10 years younger than most of your senior management team (and you look and feel it). Be confident and remember your role as CEO is to conduct the orchestra, not play all the instruments. You'll learn the importance of setting big goals that everybody can buy into and work towards. Put the customer experience at the heart of whatever you do, as that's what binds great teams together. This is where your interest in “purpose” will be seeded.

As you build your strategy, start with the assessment of the accessible market and the compelling customer need to determine your direction and the reason you “do what you do”.

Understanding people and what motivates/demotivates them will be more crucial to your business growth both organically and by acquisition than any other function. Don't compromise and always hire the very best people you can. Create a team environment of learning and development to become a magnet for talent. But be quick to lose those who don't buy into the values of the organisation as the longer you leave it, the more damage they will do.

Focus itself can be a victim of business success and is most dangerous when things go well. Your team will teach you to have 3 buckets: the first with 6 core things the business has to do, the second with the things you could do when the first is complete and the third with all those interesting ideas which are a total distraction and should be left well alone.

Don't be afraid to be a contrarian. Get into the minds of your competitors but don't feel the need to follow them - differentiate; be provocative. You'll create a SaaS business before the term becomes commonplace because the way to grow market share and lifetime value is to lower customers' cost of entry. This will make you obsessive about customer loyalty and retention.

As the business grows to multiple locations and hundreds of people, a graphical dashboard will be as crucial to you as if you were flying a plane.

Recognise that technological change is accelerating and make sure you keep a wide perspective on what's coming next to be a disruptor rather than disrupted.

Enjoy the journey and look around as well as forward. Too often, we speed through time before we look back and realise how far we've travelled. It can be a lonely place and you need to look after yourself, so make room for family, friends and interests. You'll join a CEO network (the YPO) just before you are 45. Do it much earlier, as peer-to-peer education will set you up for lifelong learning.

Yours,

A (less young and hopefully wiser) Martin

About Martin

Martin Leuw knows what it takes to scale a business successfully. During his ten years as CEO and significant management investor at IRIS Software, he developed the business into the UK's largest private software house, growing from £2m pa EBITDA to £50m pa.

Martin is now Chairman, NED and investor in multiple technology and talent management businesses. He is equally the founder of Growth4Good - a business accelerator focused on partnering and investing in high-growth social businesses in the digital media and technology sectors.

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