

David Schmidt

Ahead of the Game

David Schmidt could hardly believe what he was hearing.

“Mr. Schmidt, we are very impressed by your work at Vanderbilt,” the campaign worker said. “We’d like to invite you to greet Mr. and Mrs. Reagan when they arrive in Nashville for Unity Day.”

It seemed too good to be true. Since attending a political rally at the age of ten in 1968, David had looked to Ronald Reagan as an iconic figure. Throughout his formative years, he had followed the politician, and he even launched a group called Students for Reagan at Vanderbilt University. Peers had ridiculed him that Reagan was washed-up, and that he was wasting his time, but David had researched enough to know that Reagan was just getting started. He had been right, and by the time he received the invitation, Reagan was a leading public figure and just months away from taking office as President.

Needless to say, David agreed, and in 1980, he met the Reagans, shook their hands, and escorted them to Nashville’s Unity Day. “It was one of the most exciting times of my life, even to this day,” he avows. “I remember coming back for Homecoming and some of my former classmates telling me I was a prophet for having predicted Reagan’s success as a candidate.”

Since that day, David has stayed strongly involved in politics, and has made a career out of always staying a step ahead of the game. After working for several leading food companies and serving a presidential appointment at the US Department of Agriculture for the first Bush administration, David is now the President and CEO of the International Food Information Council & Foundation (IFIC), a trade association with an associated foundation dedicated to providing science-based information on food safety and nutrition to the public. “Our job is to debunk the

myths surrounding food safety through scientific facts,” David explains. “We do this through communications rather than government representation, which makes us unique. Ultimately, it’s our job to stay ahead of the game when it comes to health, nutrition, and food safety, so that we can make sure the public comes out ahead as well.”

Founded in 1985, IFIC was initially formed in response to the controversial ingredient aspartame, which was being introduced in soft drinks at the time. While the FDA confirmed the safety of the product, some consumers continued to hold reservations. IFIC thus began as a small group supported by the industry while still maintaining a third-party representation of the scientific facts. As they navigated the aspartame issue, the association began forming close relationships, which have remained a key aspect of IFIC’s success in the years since.

“The American Academy of Family Physicians Foundation became our first partner to give their stamp of approval on our work,” David recalls. “We did the arms and legs of putting the messages together, and having that stamp of approval was very important. Knowing that, we worked extremely hard to make sure what we put out was accurate, and we have maintained that commitment to excellence ever since. While we have been challenged because we accept funding from the food industry, we’ve never been credibly challenged on our accuracy.”

These values, which center upon hard work and integrity, have always been cornerstones of David’s foundation, even as a young child. He was born in Covington, Kentucky, as the fourth of six children. His mother had grown up on a farm, and while she stayed at home with the family, she often assisted his father, an orthodontist, in his offices in Northern Kentucky as well as in Cincinnati, OH. Young David immersed himself



in his school work, which he always excelled in, as well as in various sports, such as cross country, tennis, and golf. He raked leaves and shoveled driveways for extra cash, and his innate entrepreneurial spirit compelled him to hold small backyard carnivals that neighborhood children could pay fifty cents to attend. While he made small amounts of money, his grandfather encouraged him to always put a portion of every check he made, no matter how small, into a bank account.

For this reason and many others, his grandfather was one of his greatest mentors. He owned a tobacco and vegetable farm five miles away from where David grew up, and David and his siblings would go the farm to fish or have family dinners. When he was sixteen, David was given a row in his grandfather's giant garden to grow whatever he wanted, which led to David's lifelong dedication to food and agriculture. Additionally, he learned how to be financially responsible from his grandfather, who had always been financially secure.

When his mother was not working at home or in the office, she was an avid volunteer in their Church, as well as for the Republican Party, for which she led the Northern Kentucky Republican Women's Organization. Her enthusiasm for politics drove her to encourage her children to get involved as well, either by assisting for campaigns or attending events. In 1964, when David was only six, his mother brought him to a campaign event in which the then-presidential candidate Barry Goldwater was speaking. He was one of the youngest attendees at the convention, and while he was perhaps still too young to understand everything Goldwater told the crowd, he can still remember the intense energy in the room and the rush of adrenaline in the presidential candidate's voice. From then, politics became the forefront of his interests, and he kept a Goldwater campaign button close to remind him of the life-changing episode.

Since that time, David shared his mother's deep love of politics, and after attending that first campaign rally, he became involved in any way he could. In high school, he served as President of the Student Council and played Nixon in his school's mock election. He joined his mother in volunteering for campaigns, and in 1968, she took him to Ronald Reagan's rally—the event that would bring his life full-circle many years later.

Despite his love for politics, David did not feel driven to pursue a political career himself. His father had encouraged him to go into dentistry, but after enrolling at Vanderbilt University, he found he was much more interested in business, prompting him to major in business administration with a concentration in marketing and English writing. He gained his first experience in sales by taking a summer job working for American General Life Insurance, which he found at once challenging and fascinating. "I never considered myself to be a natural salesperson," he notes. "But I've followed many people who are, and I've learned that it's really about returning phone calls and doing what you say you're going to do." Shortly after graduating, he was offered a job with Oscar Mayer as a sales trainee, and after proving his value, was granted a permanent position in New Orleans. He stayed with the company for four years before transferring to PepsiCo for two years. He then took a job with Canada Dry, which moved him to Dallas, Texas. In all three of the companies he worked for during those eight years, he served in sales in food service, building a strong skills base that would serve him well in the years to come.

Throughout his post-graduation years, he attended every Republican Convention but one and continued to volunteer for the Reagan campaigns. "I decided pretty early I would support then Vice President George Bush due to his loyalty to Reagan," David comments. "I met some people through a Republican Club in Dallas who had been with Bush when he ran for Senate in 1964, and I helped run the phone banks for Dallas County during the primary." Shortly after Bush was elected in 1988, David received a phone call from White House personnel asking him to come in for an interview. He happened to be in D.C. for a company meeting, so he went in the next day and was offered a position with the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service. "They usually bring in people with great campaign experience but not so much experience beyond that," he recalls. "I had a strong corporate background, which they liked."

Within weeks of beginning his appointment, David was promoted to take over legislation and media relations for the agency. "I went from a staff of three to a staff of sixty," he laughs. "That's where I learned the organizational management skills and personal skills that I hadn't

developed as much as a sales person. I learned how to read the body language of a staff that large, which opened up a whole world of sensitivities I hadn't been aware of." One such sensitivity was the importance of recognizing and rewarding his staff for their hard work. "You can't do enough of telling people how much you appreciate what they're doing," he notes. "But it has to be sincere; you can't just praise everyone and not truly mean it."

David stayed on in that capacity for the full four years of Bush's term, and then left after the president lost his reelection. During his time with the USDA, however, he had become familiar with IFIC. "I'd gotten to know the group a little through my government work and found them to be very credible," David says. "After we lost the election, the president was out of a job and so was I, so joining IFIC seemed like a good fit." David was most drawn to IFIC for their exceptional professionalism in communication, as well as for their stamps of quality and credibility. "They really made sure the information they presented was backed up and accurate, which is a model I'm very drawn to," he says. "It's a matter of integrity."

Thus, in 1993, David joined as Director of Communications of IFIC, which at the time had thirteen staff members. Since that time, the association has grown to twenty employees with a budget of \$5 million, and has expanded its target issues to encompass not only ingredients, but also manufacturing and agriculture. "We receive multinational support," David says. "This year, we had thirty-nine multinational leaders that range from Coca-Cola to Kraft, Monsanto to DuPont, and even to food service, such as McDonalds."

Over the following thirteen years, David received various promotions, from Vice President of Food Safety, to Senior Vice President, and finally to Executive Vice President, until in 2006, after a vigorous yearlong process of interviews and competition, he was named President and CEO.

While David loves working at IFIC and helping his supporters and American consumers stay ahead of the game through scientific research and advocacy, it's too soon to tell if he will finish his career with the association or try something new before he retires. Regardless of what he decides in the future, he is deeply committed to his role, and he's currently working on a new business

model for IFIC that sets optimal standards for accomplishment within the organization and continues to expand the vital relationships that bring success to IFIC and its affiliates.

Though David is most proud of his wife of three years and his four children, his personal triumphs over the challenges of leadership are also among his greatest accomplishments. "I believe I have naturally gravitated to leadership roles," he comments. "I wouldn't say I was a born leader, but people trusted me, and I'd get named to things for that reason. I wasn't always seeking it out, but when I saw a situation I knew I could make better, I went for it." This character trait was certainly demonstrated in 2000, when David was recruited to run for the Town of Leesburg, VA Council, and successfully won the election. He served a four-year term and was asked to fill in for another councilmember's unexpired term in 2008, but he has not run for office since.

In advising young people entering the working world today, he encourages them to treat trust as sacred, and to always keep in mind the power of communication. "Communication in whatever you do is one of the most important things to master," he notes. "This involves being able to put yourself in your audience's shoes, whoever they may be, and understand what will resonate most with them. Knowing your audience is crucial to a successful career." By honing communication skills, building a nuanced understanding of industry terrain, and putting yourself in the shoes of others in this manner, you're effectively putting yourself ahead of the game—and ready for the next one.

© March 2013 Gordon J. Bernhardt. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

— By **Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®**

About Gordon J. Bernhardt
President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money.

For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).

