

Rick Calder

Leading Through Listening

When Rick Calder was a boy, he was always moving around. In fact, in one year alone, he and his family moved three times. His father, an officer in the Central Intelligence Agency, was stationed in the Middle East at the time, and his work took the family to several countries, including Syria and Lebanon, all throughout Rick's childhood. "I had always been told my father was a U.S. State Department official," he recalls. "It wasn't until later that he was able to tell me about his employment."

As was to be expected, the nomadic lifestyle presented some challenges, but it also built a unique foundation in the young boy's character. In moving around the region, he attended a series of schools for Americans in Middle Eastern countries, and each time, he was challenged to find his way in a new situation. "Socially, you might think of junior high as being pretty difficult in the first place," he says today. "But when you're coming to a school where you don't know anybody, it's even more difficult. You have to learn the new environment, build a peer group and a community of friends, and avoid being ostracized. You have to learn to listen to people."

The ability to enter a new situation, adapt, and rapidly learn to navigate it became an essential skillset for Rick that broadened over time, and experiencing life on multiple continents has given him a unique cultural perspective and understanding of people. Fast-forwarding to the very recent past, the ability to listen, especially, aided him in a crucial period of his career. Five years ago, already an experienced executive in the telecom industry, Rick was brought on by Global Telecom and Technology (GTT) to be their CEO. GTT had come into existence only nine months previously, when two separate, private telecom companies merged, one American and one European. Both original CEOs had stayed on for a

time, and although they had engaged in what Rick now describes as a "pattern of effort at integration," GTT struggled to find its way, running \$50 million in revenue without profits, and essentially un-integrated, with numerous redundancies. When Rick arrived in this new situation, he began a structured integration right away. The process took six weeks, and listening was the very first step.

"In my first two weeks at GTT," Rick says, "I talked to each of our 100 or so employees.

When I got down to interviewing the network operations staff, the CEO from the European side asked me what I was doing and whom I was meeting with. When I told him, he admitted he had never spoken to them once."

For some, this leadership style might appear excessively time consuming, but Rick understood that it was an essential step in establishing the compass that would ultimately save precious resources in the long run. "I was getting an

understanding of who was in the business," he affirms, "and what they thought we were about. I had my opinions going in about what I thought we should do to bring the company to profitability, but these people had been at their respective firms for many years. I definitely made a few changes based on this primary feedback."

After six weeks, Rick had successfully integrated the two original firms, and in the same year GTT became profitable. "A lot of that goes back to my early youth," Rick says. "In order to succeed when I was young, I had to learn how to understand new situations, that was based solely upon listening. It's the only way you get at the real answers to the most vital questions at hand — what is the common culture here? What is the norm?"

When Rick reached high school, he stopped attending schools in the Middle East and



started at Northfield Mount Hermon, a boarding school in Massachusetts. This was another new situation that had to be figured out, but it was also that way for many students. For many, high school marks the beginning of a series of new situations and experiences that come faster and faster. The difference was that Rick had already been living an accelerated series of novel environments for years. With his cultivated proficiency in that arena freeing up his attention for other matters, he found plenty still to learn.

"At Northfield Mount Hermon, I met one of my most revered teachers," Rick says. "Bill Batty was my English teacher my sophomore year, when I was 14 years old. He was a great motivator and teacher. I learned critically important concepts from him about stories and the nature of storytelling, and about how stories are an essential part of how people communicate with each other and motivate each other. He was an incredible storyteller, himself."

Rick, who just attended his 30th high school reunion, sees Bill Batty once every four to five years, and still marvels at the way he inspires and motivates others. Impressive, as well, is that an English teacher was able to win over someone so science-oriented. "Even within the humanities," Rick says, "I've always been more of a history buff than an English buff. But that's what I learned from him—the power of relating to others through stories and anecdotes."

After Northfield Mount Hermon, Rick went on to Yale, where he got a BS in electrical engineering. After graduating, he went straight into the telecom industry with Tellabs, which was based in Chicago. As in high school and then college, his focus at Tellabs was in the hard sciences. There, he applied his engineering degree to the task of shrinking computer hardware. But after a year and a half, an opportunity came along that was more aligned with his interests in listening and storytelling: marketing, sales, and management.

"The CEO at Tellabs eventually said that we needed a few more people in the marketing division to bridge our sales people to our engineers," Rick explains. "As an engineer with a background in liberal arts, I fit well into that mold. So I joined their small marketing band, and it was really fun!"

As an engineer, Rick had an insular experience dealing with a computer terminal. But

the change he made at Tellabs was one that ideally suited him, and he embraced it. And while much of his technical expertise has since lapsed, he still maintains a firm basis for understanding technology and the jargon of technologists.

"The CEO was Mike Birck," Rick says, "and I was very impressed by him. In part, he was what set me on the path of entrepreneurship. He had taken a big risk, leaving a firm to form Tellabs in 1975 in his kitchen and then growing it to a \$100 million enterprise by the time I joined. I always admired him, and once I got the opportunity to get into the marketing and sales side of things, I never looked back."

As Rick's talents and potential grew, Tellabs encouraged him to attend business school. But at the end of Harvard's MBA program, Rick faced a significant dilemma: Tellabs would only pay for the program if he came back to their headquarters in Chicago, but his long-term girlfriend lived in Washington, DC. Analyzing his options, Rick consulted the Harvard Business School directory, looking for individuals in telecom in Washington. The first name that came up was Brian Thompson. "Brian Thompson was a very senior executive at MCI at the time," Rick says. "I called his office prepared to speak to his assistant, but then he answered his phone personally. I was dumbstruck. I had a script ready for the assistant, but here I was talking to the man, himself."

Brian helped with some introductions, and a few months later, Rick accepted an offer from MCI. "It was a hard decision at the time," he says, "but I am absolutely certain I made the right call."

As Rick continued his career in marketing, business development, and management, he drew more on his formative experiences as a child and young adult than he did on his specific academic training. On top of the ability to decode new situations that he developed out of necessity, important lessons came directly from his parents as well.

"The most interesting lesson my dad imparted," Rick says, "was this concept of really understanding people and how they're motivated, which is key for a career in the CIA." Ultimately, for him, the whole concept was about listening. And that's true in leadership as well. If anything, most people in business talk too much. They talk, and they don't listen. The concept of listening was really taught to me, both by my parents and by my

experiences.”

After working at MCI, Rick went on to co-found a wireless communication company and then to serve in senior management positions in several telecom firms. Then, seventeen years after Brian Thompson helped Rick come to Washington, the two had another conversation about Global Telecom and Technology, of which Brian Thompson was the chairman.

“While we had not come to know each other that well in the intervening years, we had many mutual acquaintances, and we trusted our networks,” Rick says. “The past five years have shown the wisdom of that. We just finished our latest acquisition—the fifth major company we have added to the consolidated GTT—and we’re growing rapidly. We have a strategy to grow, both organically in our three segments of enterprise, government, and wholesale, and through acquisitions. We plan to grow the business in the next 3 to 5 years to four or five times the scale we are at today.”

Today, Rick sees GTT as the biggest success of his career so far. In advising young entrepreneurs just entering the business world and hoping to find success of their own, he encourages those interested in a similar path to always be willing to do the menial work at first. “In business,” he explains, “your supervisors will ask you to do all kinds of things. Just jump in and do all the things you can to learn about the business. Those things might not be fun at first, but you stand to learn a lot and demonstrate your willingness to get anything done that gets put in front of you. That’s key.”

Beyond his professional success, Rick is most proud of his family. From meeting his wife in college in his freshman year, to finding a way to

be with her in Washington, to having three children together, the Calders know what’s most important in life and aren’t afraid to stand by that principle. “Going to every sporting event or activity with my kids is the most fun I have,” he affirms with a laugh. “I had to miss one recently because clients were in town and wanted to meet me. That was important, but it was such a disappointment to miss out on that time with my kids. In my professional career, I get a lot of enjoyment from my business successes. But in my personal life, nothing compares to the reward and motivation I get from watching my children grow and succeed.” In learning how to listen, both at home and in the office, one acquires the elemental building block of leadership—that building block upon which strong successes and enduring happiness are created.

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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](#).

