

# Bob Lasser

## Vision to Value

For Bob Lasser, it all begins with setting a vision—a goal to be achieved a week, a year, or maybe a decade down the line. Then comes the fun part. Barrier after barrier, Bob is most motivated by the process of knocking down obstacles along the journey of translating vision to value. “In the beginning, you just have a hope, a dream, an abyss,” he says. “There’s nothing to grab onto, so you have to leverage the resources you have around you to make it a reality. I have a good day when I make things happen that way.”

That’s exactly what Bob had to do when, in 1996, he took on the role of President and CEO of Imperium, the company launched by his father. When he first came onboard, his father had landed a contract with the Navy to complete a research study on a technology concept for a very simple handheld medical ultrasound device. “I was going to join the company as a leader to write a business plan, form alliances, hire the right people, bring in money, set up operations, and find customers,” he remembers today. “I really had no idea what I was getting myself into.”

Over the next five years, the Imperium team drew on a mix of research funding and private investment to develop the Imperium-600 (i600), their flagship product. Applying the concept of a DSL camera to ultrasonics, the highly innovative product adapted ultrasound to the world of optics to create a new mode of imaging. Bob helped secure IP protection and then analyzed the countless applications across various industries, cognizant that they needed to settle on a strategic direction if they were to successfully commercialize their technology. “We needed to narrow down the market to a focus in which we could succeed,” he says. “The medical space was highly saturated, so we decided to go industrial instead.”

With that, the Imperium team set to work

building a device to detect the properties of materials like composites, aircraft wings, and pipelines. To survive, they were able to sell one-off iterations of the technology to early adopters in the research field, generating enough revenue to keep perfecting the product. “We were never well-funded enough to throw more gas on the fire and just let it happen,” Bob remembers. “There was a lot of trial-and-error, figuring things out step-by-step along the way.”

Then, in 2013, Bob faced his greatest barrier yet. “After years of work, we finally had an application-specific system, so I called up Boeing to let them know we had something better than their current solution,” he says. “They informed me that if we wanted to be approved, one of their customers had to request us.” With that, Bob hit the pavement, running down the list of the industrial giant’s many partners. After a long string of meetings, his work finally took him to Japan to test the product out for ANA Airlines.

Bob will never forget returning home after his exhausting week-long sprint overseas, when he finally received the call he had been waiting for. The Boeing executive congratulated him on a productive week in Japan, because their customer had just made the request for the Imperium i600. Bob now had to develop a written procedure for the product’s use on a specific area of the aircraft—a tedious process that took a full year to complete. Once that was done, the product was officially approved by Boeing, launching Imperium into a new echelon of credibility and name recognition. “It really is remarkable, the barriers of entry you face in shifting a company from R&D to a commercial engine,” Bob affirms. “It took a full twelve years to develop our core technology into a standardized device with real traction in the marketplace.”

Securing the Boeing approval marked a



defining achievement that took Bob out of his comfort zone, advancing his confidence and skill set to the next level. He then tackled the next challenge of setting up his first overseas distributorship. "Once I got the first one up and running, I was like, you know what? We can do this," Bob recounts. "Now, half our revenue is overseas, and we're ready to take the company to the next level by consolidating into a lower-cost, higher-model approach. It was hard to get to this point, and it wasn't what I started out to do, but it was what I had to do. There were sleepless nights and high-stress situations, but I broke through the barriers one by one and found that I could succeed."

Bob never would have been able to achieve this success if he hadn't learned how to set such lofty goals to begin with—an ambition he learned from his father. Marvin Lasser grew up during the Great Depression and used education to advance in life, earning his PhD in Physics and landing a job at Philco, a company at the forefront of technology in batteries, radio, and television. In 1966, the year before Bob was born, Marvin was appointed Chief Scientist of the U.S. Army and Director of Army Research, running the nation's fifty Army laboratories. Specializing in infrared imaging, he was the first person to use dogs to find mines, and routinely testified before Congress. The appointment was only supposed to last three years, but his fervent commitment to excellence and service extended his tenure by a remarkable seventeen years.

That timeframe spanned Bob's birth at Washington, DC's Holy Cross Hospital and entire childhood spent growing up in Potomac, Maryland. "As a young kid, I thought it was super cool that my dad had a huge office and the respect of the military," Bob recounts. "When we went on vacation, we stayed at Army bases, not hotels. He would take us to the Secretary's Mess, the cafeteria reserved for Two-Star Generals or above. My older brother and I loved walking around the Pentagon, and my parents loved the nightlife of the DC scene. It was a great way to grow up."

Bob's mother, a housewife and artist, was fiercely loyal and devoted to her sons, instilling in them the sense of security required for building intrinsic self-confidence and successful lives. His father, the ultimate paradox of ambition and humility, modeled the importance of having the integrity and strength of conviction to downplay

his own achievements. "On paper, he was so impressive that you'd think he was a scorched-earth, take-names kind of guy," Bob explains. "But in person, he was the exact opposite. You'd never guess how ambitious he was because it was never about personal glory for him. His character was the template for what I saw as important in life."

Despite tending toward shyness, Bob got involved in sports as a kid, enjoying basketball and especially soccer. His parents often took him on family outings to the American Film Institute Theater at the Kennedy Center to see old movies, which ingrained in him a lifelong passion for film. His mother was very involved in the community through her art, and Bob's own drive toward artistic expression translated into guitar lessons and love of music. "Even today, I love breaking out of my daily grind to go to concerts or music festivals," he says. "It's incredibly important to me to plug into creativity, both at work and in life more generally."

Bob made his first buck putting away books at the public library at the age of fourteen. "It helped me grow up a bit and also gave me the opportunity to spend time with people outside my high school, which was more cliquey and privileged than I liked," he reflects. His outlook was further honed when he dropped basketball in eighth grade and picked up karate and tae kwon do, embracing the supportive atmosphere and methodical milestones represented by the various forms and belts. "It was so different from competitive team sports because you're competing with yourself," he says. "I really liked that because I could push myself as much as I wanted to. It was a situation where you got out what you put in, and it was on my own terms."

Bob's father reinforced this lesson through insisting that if Bob wanted a better car than his old rusted '69 Chevy Bel Air, then he had to work for it himself. Through his savings from the library job and subsequent gigs in retail, he bought a slight upgrade and fixed it up himself. "My father taught me that I had to work for the things I wanted in life because you don't get anything for free," he says. "It taught me to be self-sufficient and was the first real goal I set my mind to achieving."

Bob set his mind on another goal in tenth grade when he realized he'd need better grades to succeed in life. He buckled down academically, raised his GPA, and also got involved in debate

club. These efforts ultimately landed him admission to the University of Michigan, a big school with big opportunities and competitive rankings. When he started college, he had an array of career ambitions that included running his own company, becoming a lawyer, and getting into real estate. "I always heard that I'd be better off in life if I pursued autonomy—the kind of autonomy where you can make a difference," he says. "That's where those ideas came from."

Bob always knew he wanted a college experience far from home that drew him out of his comfort zone, and his personality transformed as he made the effort to develop new friendships in his new environment. During his first term, he decided against joining an established fraternity to instead revive a long-dormant fraternity as a charter member. "We didn't have traction, credibility, or a meeting house," he laughs. "It was tough, but over the next year, we tackled each obstacle until I eventually found an old house to renovate. By my junior year, we had established a beautiful fraternity house and accrued around seventy members."

Balancing his obligations as social director of the fraternity, Bob did well in school and spent his first several summers painting houses. By that time, his father had retired from the Army and started a consulting group, and Bob spent one summer setting up a lab and running an experiment to support a government contract they had won. "It was the first time I had to run a project like that on my own," he says.

When Bob graduated in 1989 with a degree in Applied Mathematics and Actuarial Science, he decided he wanted to move to New York City to experience something completely new and exciting. But his job with the defined benefit group at PricewaterhouseCoopers, studying mortuary tables to determine pension plan contributions, proved to be quite the opposite. He couldn't afford the city's plethora of restaurants and shows, and it was hard to meet people. After a year, he moved back to Washington and took a job with Andersen consulting, where he was able to use his analytical skills while taking on a more dynamic role. With a friend from college, he moved into a Glover Park row house and fell in love with the city, full of beautiful neighborhoods he had never gotten to know growing up.

In 1991, Bob decided to take a job as a software manager for Manugistics, a Rockville-

based company in the process of transitioning from hardware to software. Their products helped companies forecast consumer goods, getting the right product to the right place at the right time. "I helped develop software that could determine the appropriate production timeline for the appropriate number of batteries in order to get them to the distribution center in time to get them to south Florida before its hurricane season, for example," he explains. "Once we built it, I did the pre-sale product demonstrations and then became a group manager."

While he enjoyed the experience, Bob was itching to try something new and entrepreneurial—a chance to push the limits of his own creative possibilities. In 1996, his father invited him to join him at Marvin E. Lasser Incorporated, the one-man shop later renamed as Imperium. At first he was apprehensive about joining the family business, but he knew their strong relationship and positive dynamic would outshine any potential pitfalls. "Conflict just wasn't in our DNA," Bob says. "My advice to others is to only get involved in a family business to foster a deeper relationship with family, as we did. Then make sure you have the same objectives in mind so you can develop things on the same page and set complementary roles for each other. Those were all things my dad and I wanted to do together, and I wasn't afraid to take a pay cut and step outside my comfort zone to make it work."

This same inclination to step beyond his comfort zone was mirrored in Bob's personal life later when, at age forty, he decided to convene a group of men to play soccer on Sunday mornings. After dropping his son off at Hebrew school, he met with a group of five guys—mostly other fathers in the neighborhood. "We weren't interested in being ultra-competitive," he says. "It was about creating a group that gets men out of their comfort zones to do something socially."

Within two months, the small gathering expanded to around thirty men, and the group has been going strong since it was formed in 2011. "We found guys from all age groups, nationalities, and backgrounds, coming together in a supportive and welcoming atmosphere," Bob affirms. "What's more, we've actually become friends. It was a defining moment for me to realize that I was able to break through peoples' routines and create this sense of community and connection where there otherwise wouldn't be. It's so easy to exist inside

our own bubble, caught up in the grind. But our soccer group reminds us to take a step back and remember that there's more to life."

Today, Imperium has defined itself as a world-class manufacturing company with solid margins and boundless possibility. Bob works to inspire his team by connecting them to the broader mission, showing them how their specific jobs contribute to the whole. "Imperium is truly an engineer's dream," he says. "Our team loves the work for the work itself." Bob continues to refine and improve that dream by perfecting the company's operations, honing in on opportunities for optimization and eking out as much value as possible. From strategic national and global alliances, to licensing, to sales and marketing, he's at his best when he's pushing the bounds of business development. This creativity landed the company an Innovation Award from Frost & Sullivan, an important industry watchdog.

When Bob's father passed away in 2012 at the age of 86, he still had one last defining lesson to teach his son—the power of conviction. At the funeral, Bob stood up to give a speech about his father's remarkable life and character. Beyond the substance of the words, Bob took on a poise and presence he had never felt before as he imparted the powerful message to the crowd. Typically a laid-back person, the speech was an out-of-body experience that became a catalyst for his power as an orator. "In speaking, I found myself projecting the strength of conviction that my father always had," Bob says. "It was a defining experience that showed me I could convey that same fortitude."

But his greatest pleasure comes from time with family, especially watching his two teenage boys play baseball. One highlight was watching his oldest son hit a double when his high school baseball team played the DC championship game in Nationals Stadium. The team ultimately lost nine to two, with his son responsible for the only two runs of the game, but the meaning of the moment extended far deeper than that. "He worked hard at it, and we worked hard with him," Bob recounts. "We watched all that labor come to fruition in that hit. It was great."

Through it all, Bob has been grateful for the love and support of his wife, Maria. "Leading your own company can be an absolute roller

coaster, and she's been my rock," he says. "I always run my business decisions by her and rely on her intelligence and creativity, which are very inspiring to me. She always has the long-term view in mind and helps me keep my eye on the ball. She's a great coach. She keeps me going."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Bob underscores the importance of listening and learning. "Read as much as you can and always keep an open mind," he says. "Know what you're doing, and throw everything you have into doing a good job at it. Like my father, I'm big on the value of developing real substance to your character and knowledge. Once you've got that, you can really make a difference, which is what technology and entrepreneurship is all about. I believe in being well-read and strategically looking for opportunities to improve mankind."

Beyond that, Bob echoes the example set by his father, who never took a day off in his life and tackled each challenge with unbridled good will. "He taught me to look on the bright side of life," Bob affirms. "Life is a series of challenges, one after another, and you've got to be a glass-half-full kind of person to sustain the momentum. With substance, knowledge, ambition, and optimism, you can be visionary about how to attain a better future for the world, and impactful in transforming that vision to real value."

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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](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*