

Richard Bodson

Teamwork Makes the Dream Work

In 1972, people didn't know much about ALS. Commonly referred to as Lou Gehrig's disease, the progressive neurodegenerative disorder was still poorly understood, and treatment options were limited. That year, Richard Bodson was a first-year student at the University of Virginia. And that year, when his mother was diagnosed with the mysterious illness, his life changed forever.

At the time, ALS patients weren't expected to live more than two years past their diagnosis. But Dick's mother survived twelve, radiating positivity and hope every step of the fight. "She had a deep love and appreciation for everyone and everything," he remembers today. "It just shined through. No matter what, she believed that life was beautiful."

It wasn't only his mother's attitude in the face of adversity that shaped Dick's outlook through that period. His entire family came together, sacrificed, and prioritized his mother in her time of need. "We all pitched in," he says. "I would come home from school to help out on weekends. My sister and brother-in-law took a hardship transfer from Buffalo, New York, where he was an FBI Special Agent in charge, putting his career on hold. Dad sacrificed tons of time at work. It was incredibly challenging, because back then there was no support for patients and families."

Hospices were not yet common, and the few that existed were too overwhelmed to take Dick's mother. Walter Reed wasn't equipped to care for her full time, but Dick's father wouldn't take no for an answer. "The deal he struck was that one of us would be there for the evening shift," explains Dick. "That way, the nurses could focus on taking care of wounded warriors and their families."

Seven years after Dick's mother passed, his father became one of the ALS Association-

DC/MD/VA founders. "That was typical of my father," says Dick proudly. "When something's not right, he took action to fix it. The way the family handled all of that—by pulling together as a team to keep mom as comfortable as possible, and then taking action to try to help families and patients in the future—that's the way you conduct yourself when you're faced with challenges."

As a leader today, Dick knows that a good team is the critical difference between success and failure. In April of this year, he acquired SysNet

Technologies, a cybersecurity services contracting firm, and is now President and CEO of the company. His decision to pursue the deal was based in no small part on his feeling that he and SysNet's four founders share similar values, and he expresses true admiration for the way they grew their business. "The four gentlemen—Will Poe, Tim Irvin, Tom Schubert and John Kleinhans—were all cybersecurity experts for a large business," he

explains. "Then one day in 1999, they decided to do it on their own. Their biggest customer, the Federal Aviation Administration, continued with them as a small business contractor. They had learned there were many ways that IT systems were vulnerable, and had developed an expertise in analysis and risk mitigation to protect the systems."

Thanks to their distinct methodology and excellent customer service, the business grew. Yet until Dick entered the picture, they had no formal back office infrastructure. To keep costs down and focus on customer service, they did the back-office work on nights and weekends. "They did an incredible job," Dick remarks. "Now that we're establishing contracts, finance and accounting, HR, and recruiting frameworks, we can expand our critical infrastructure protection services impact."

Thanks to the tireless efforts of the four



founders, SysNet Technologies is now a respected federal cybersecurity services company that provides consistently successful methodologies for risk assessment, vulnerability analysis, and mitigation plans and recommendations to clients, as well as follow-on audits to ensure vulnerabilities have been addressed. The four founders chose to sell the business when Will Poe, the former President, announced his intention to retire. "Will did most of the finance, accounting, and contracts work by putting in extra hours," says Dick. "The other three founders decided that, rather than taking on Will's many responsibilities, it would be best to sell the company to someone who could preside over its evolution without drastically restructuring it."

But the founders didn't want to sell the company to just anyone. The FAA had been one of Dick's customers for fifteen years. He knew SysNet's contracts and teammates, and quickly proved to be a perfect complementary match. Now, as CEO, Dick has plans to expand the business while maintaining the founders' commitment to doing great work. He's brought in new administrative leadership to handle the back office work, and mapped the business plan going forward—one designed for new success while preserving its culture and values. "We've relieved the founders of some of the infrastructure responsibilities so they can focus more on customer support," says Dick. "I also want to diversify the customer base while maintaining the full integrity of our FAA support."

Dick's emphasis on working together for a higher purpose stems in part from his upbringing as a U.S. Army brat. His father served the U.S. military for forty years, with 28 years spent in the Army and another 12 years at the Department of Army, and Dick learned early on to value service and giving back. He was born in El Paso, Texas. The family soon moved to Alaska and then Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, when Dick was four. At Ft. Sill, the Bodsons were close friends with the Brown family, and Dick was particularly taken by their daughter, Barbara. Today, Barbara Brown is Dick's wife.

A few years later, Dick's father served a year in Cambodia, while the rest of the family moved to Reno, Nevada, to live near relatives. There, Dick learned to fish and spent a lot of time appreciating the great outdoors. "I learned to play sports, and we'd ride our bikes and roller skate everywhere," he recounts. "Back then, you could

ride a bike through downtown Reno. It was just a gorgeous, natural place—the desert, Sierra Nevadas, Truckee River, and Pyramid Lake. I gained a great appreciation for the environment there."

The following year, the family reunited and moved to Arlington, Virginia, where they settled. The Browns were nearby, and Dick reconnected with Barbara, but their friendship remained just a friendship for years to come. He played football, ran track at his junior high school, and in high school was a competitive discus thrower. He did well academically, got his first job working as a clerk at the photo and music counter at Drug Fair, and valued his friendships deeply. "There are a bunch of us who graduated from Yorktown High, Class of 1971, who are friends today," he recounts. "We still get together regularly, and I'm thrilled to have friendships that are so rock solid."

After high school, Dick enrolled at the University of Virginia and majored in English with an equivalent Environmental Science double minor. Between running home to care for his mother, exerting himself academically, and being a Varsity Track discus thrower, he somehow found time to get heavily involved in campus volunteering. He became a tutor for Madison House, and over his college career, distinguished himself as a leader. "In my fourth year, I was asked if I would run the program," he recalls. "It was a great experience, and the first true management experience I had. I worked with wonderful, altruistic people and coordinated 250 tutors across the Charlottesville-Albemarle County public school system."

Dick went above and beyond as the leader of the tutoring organization, setting up an orientation process for new tutors and organizing a training library while developing a process for matching student needs and tutor capabilities. "We had standard business issues, but I'd never really dealt with that kind of thing before," he says. "All of a sudden one day, I was told to prepare for a presentation to the Board of Advisors at UVa to justify the money we were getting. So I put together a presentation of the processes I had put in place. They loved it and gave us more money!"

Dick graduated from UVa in 1975 and went to work for a moving company before landing his first white-collar job as a patent editor

for International Computaprint Corporation in January of 1976. "We were a federal contractor," explains Dick. "When a patent landed on your desk, it had already been approved. We edited for specific language, and computer-coded the text for master tape input. That work exposed me to the IT world."

Then, in late 1978, Dick was hired as a writer and editor in the publications department of a company called Potomac Research Incorporated (PRI). Six months later, PRI was acquired by Ross Perot's company, Electronic Data Systems (EDS). Dick stayed with EDS for the next fourteen years, rising up the corporate ladder. After he demonstrated his talent for proposal writing and editing, his boss, Bill DeHart, decided Dick should get some IT training. "The next thing I knew, I was in charge of all federal, state, and local government proposal development," Dick recounts. "Then DeHart said it was time to get me into operations, so I went to work on one of his projects as Deputy Project Manager. General Motors bought us, and my boss went off to Flint, Michigan for the transition, so I became the Project Manager. My career just kept evolving. I kept getting more and more opportunity, and Bill DeHart was always helping me."

During his years at EDS, Dick flourished personally as well as professionally, as he finally reconnected with Barbara Brown and got the courage to ask her out. "She had gone to the University of Miami because she liked warm weather," says Dick. "She stayed there for thirteen years. But one Thanksgiving she was visiting her parents, and I asked her out. We went to the movies and saw *ET*, and me being the romantic I am, I made the ultimate offer. I asked her to go bowling! All of a sudden, this woman I had been in love with my whole life was interested in me." The two continued dating and were soon married.

Then, in 1994, Dick decided to follow Bill DeHart to a company called DynCorp I&ET, where he stayed for six good years and became a Vice President until he chose to try working for a small business called RS Information Systems (RSIS). Dick jumped at the opportunity, embracing the challenge of overseeing half of the company's operations. "It was a 115-person company when I joined, and two and a half years later, we were 1,200 people," he remarks. "The 'S' in 'RS' stands for Scott Amey, and Scott and I are still good buddies today."

Dick also particularly remembers some of the veterans he brought onboard at RSIS, especially retired Air Force Colonel Jim "Bogie" Bogenrief. "I hired Bogie for his first job out of the Air Force," says Dick. "He was a war fighter, leader, and brilliant technologist. We collaborated on a lot of things. We started with a handful of people working in Colorado Springs, and a couple of years later we had grown that to 275 people. It was all business that we bid and built, and I credit Bogie with a lot of the insights that got us there. He absolutely subscribes to taking care of your customer first. I still think about how much I loved working with those folks, and what great things we did for the Air Force and other customers. There is no greater honor."

In 2002, a former RSIS employee contacted Dick about an opportunity at a company called FC Business Systems (FCBS). It was a \$60 million company at the time, and Dick relished the idea of helping another small business grow. He joined FCBS as an Executive Vice President and helped expand their operations, working alongside a great CFO named Allan Shure. "Allan did a couple of acquisitions that grew the company tremendously," he remembers. "I was enamored with the Air Force, and with Defense in general, so we expanded on that and quickly became a \$150 million company."

After several years of successful growth, FCBS's owner decided to put the business up for sale. In 2006, the company sold to General Dynamics, and Dick stayed on for a few months before choosing another small business opportunity. "I love being able to just collaborate with a few people, and make a decision," he says. "I was in love with small business by that point." An acquaintance from his FCBS days, John Chapel, had bought two small companies and was in the process of restructuring them as one entity, called AVIEL Systems. John offered Dick the COO position at AVIEL, and Dick, as usual, was eager to try something new.

"I'd never been a COO, but I thought, let's give it a go!" he says. "Ninety percent of our business was up for re-compete in the first year. We won all that and then began to grow. I worked with one of the best teams ever and really loved it there. In fact, when John decided to sell it in 2008, our CFO, Vince Kiernan, and I tried to convince him not to because we were having so much fun. But John knew it was time to sell, and he was right,

as the economy collapsed by the time of sale.”

Dick was a big believer in John’s leadership by that time, and decided to follow him on his next endeavor. “John and his wife, Jinnie, had invested in a marketing and communications company called Leapfrog Solutions, so I joined that and helped them emerge in the federal marketplace,” Dick recounts. “We won a \$100 million FEMA contract as a \$2 million company, catapulting us into federal contracting. After setting up the company for success, I broke off to consult on my own.”

During the consulting period, a company called Subsystem Technologies brought Dick on to consult for six months, and ended up hiring him to be President. The company grew and Dick left in March of 2016. Barbara was undergoing breast cancer treatment and she fell, breaking both legs and ankles. Dick employed the lessons in love and home care he learned with his family taking care of his mom. He took care of Barbara full time. “Our daughter graduated from West Virginia University, and she moved back to the area to help out,” says Dick. “Our son was torn up because he was in St. Petersburg, Florida, but he supported her in every way he could. Today Barbara is again healthy.

Barbara, as well, has been nothing but incredibly supportive of Dick through his long career. “She’s a very compassionate, caring, and beautiful person, inside and out” he affirms. “In one company where I worked, the owner was unethical, and even though I didn’t have the next job lined up, Barbara encouraged me to quit. I’ve always been so appreciative of that. She’s always stuck with me and encouraged me.”

As a leader, Dick emphasizes honesty, loyalty, and relationships above all else. “For me, the work has always been about the customers, the employees, and the teammates,” says Dick. “And a customer is not just a person at the FAA; it’s people on an airplane. We are all part of an ecosystem. You don’t have to study environmental science to know that we’re all interdependent.”

To young people entering the working world today, Dick advises finding what drives you, and building on that. “Focus on what you most enjoy,” he insists. “Find something valuable and productive, not just for yourself, but for others. Then try to wrap your career around that, taking on opportunities that come your way even if they aren’t exactly what you had in mind. On hard days, take a deep breath and bowl through it. Do your best and know that, ultimately, that experience is going to be valuable.”

Through it all, more than any destination he’s reached along the way, Dick has most valued the people that have worked alongside him, inspiring hard work and great leadership. “There’s always something to learn,” he reminds us. “From difficult people and situations, I’ve learned how not to be. And from great people, I’ve learned great things. I’ve learned to stay positive, do the right thing, and be your best. Now, SysNet Technologies is the culmination of 35 years—the dream at the end of the rainbow. Teamwork makes the dream work, and I can’t wait to see what we’re able to accomplish together.”

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