

# Don Rheem

## On the Science of Thriving

Don Rheem says none of this would have happened if it hadn't snowed that night in the San Jacinto mountains. 'This' means the trajectory of his life.

Don was near the end of his senior year in high school that night. He had recently lost his father to a heart attack—found him dead in the kitchen—and one weekend, to relieve a little of the stress surrounding that loss and its implications for his future, Don shouldered his backpack and headed for the mountains with a friend. They were carrying warm-weather gear because it was springtime in southern California—go light and go far—but the San Jacinto Mountains rise to elevations where the weather has little connection to whatever may be going on in Orange County, and they found themselves walking into heavy snow. What should they do?

"I knew of a school up there near Idyllwild, a private school I had visited on a youth trip," Don says, "so I suggested we go there and ask if we could spend the night—I was remembering the huge fireplace in their great hall. I thought we could just bed down next to that."

Only a Student Body President would think of that solution to the problem of being stuck in the snow. And it turns out Don was the Student Body President—at his own school. Lucky for him and his friend!

"We found the place and went in," Don recalls. "I introduced myself to the receptionist, and said, 'My friend and I came up backpacking, but now it's snowing, so we were hoping we could spend the night in front of your fireplace.'"

Or maybe it wasn't really luck so much as intention. This was Don's second student leadership position—he had served as President of the Junior Class the year before, even though he didn't feel naturally suited for such a role. Don describes himself as an introvert who acts like an extrovert on purpose, to foster connections.

"No," the receptionist said. "Absolutely not."

Don decided to press her—maybe snow fell from his hair when he reached out to shake her hand, and he thought that would melt her resolve. Maybe the voices of his ancestors spoke in his ear, saying, 'Don't quit: ask her again.' Maybe he was desperate.

"I said, 'Well, there aren't a lot of choices for us up here. We're up here all alone.' She said: 'Absolutely not. I'm calling the director.'"

That conversation was the first step toward the mastery of messaging that underlies Don Rheem's professional life today. For a number of years, Don ran a company called RheemMedia, which helped other companies craft and deliver messages more effectively, especially messages that got them out of trouble. "It's about learning how to connect and engage at an emotional level," Don says, "because that's the only place with long-term meaning."

After the second 'Absolutely not', the receptionist realized that Don and his friend hadn't gotten the message, so she called the director. That man, John Wanamaker, Ph.D. came out of his office, and, after chatting with the boys for a few minutes, he explained that the school's liability insurance would prohibit them from staying there, but they were welcome to spend the night at his house if they wished. So they did.

It turns out that Dr. Wanamaker was serving a one-year term as head of that school, on leave from his usual position as head of the Biology Department at Principia College, and by the time the boys went on their way the next morning, Dr. Wanamaker had convinced Don to apply to Principia. Don explained to his host that he didn't have a way to pay for college—one of the stresses associated with the death of Don's father was financial insecurity—but something about the young man convinced the biology professor to



look for a way.

He did that by reaching out to an old friend, Ken Bechtel, who, it turns out, had roomed with Don's grandfather at University of California, Berkeley. Bechtel, upon learning that the boy in question was the grandson of his college roommate, invited Don to visit his home in San Francisco. "I think he wanted to see if I was a chip off the old Rheem block or a sideways turn," Don explains. That meeting led to another, and a few weeks later Dr. Wanamaker called Don and said, "Your college tuition will be taken care of."

"It makes you think that there must be a God," Don says. His spiritual foundation began at a young age and Don has always found the simple three words in I John 4:8 his guide in life. "God is Love." The precept expressed four verses later feels like a central component in Don Rheem's life, "if we love one another, God abides in us..."

He describes the company he currently leads, E3 Solutions, as a combination of two loves—family, especially his own family history, and science. "My family history is in business," Don explains, "and I'm trying to bring more science into the way businesses lead, manage, and inspire their employees."

The history of Don's family is meticulously documented. As a young man he was entrusted with control of an archive containing letters, news reports, oral histories, and hundreds of reels of video footage telling a story that began with his great-grandfather.

"An acquaintance once sent me the copper emblem from an old Rheem water heater—it's the word Rheem in a circle—and I cherish that object because it represents everything my grandfather did, starting with making barrels, and then making water heaters, and then heating and air-conditioning units, and then building factories all over the world. It represents an entrepreneur who would never quit."

"Once, when I was a college student doing ecological field work in Malaysia, I was walking down a street in an underdeveloped area, and there was a store selling Rheem equipment, and it just hit me—my grandfather's vision was to be everywhere. And he was."

Don's grandfather died six months before Don's father died, when Don was a junior in high school. The death of those two men instilled in Don a profound understanding of the importance of sharing with people how you feel about them in

the moment, not waiting for another time. And it made him grow up fast.

The story of Don's family begins with a petroleum geologist who built the first oil refinery in California, at the behest of John D. Rockefeller. "California needed gasoline, and there were no refineries on the west coast, so Rockefeller sent my great-grandfather out there to build one," Don explains. "It's still there today."

"I have his letters to his mother about building the refinery," Don says. "I wasn't there in the early days, but I'm steeped in the struggles he faced."

Rheem Manufacturing grew in a straight line from that refinery. Don's great-grandfather brought gasoline production online in California but then had to wait for storage barrels to arrive from the east by train. He complained about that delay, so his son, Richard S. Rheem, built a barrel factory to supply the refinery.

The next logical step from forming metal into containers for liquid was to make water heaters. "He advanced the technology far beyond what it had been," Don explains. "He covered the inside of the drum with copper, so they didn't rust like typical steel water heaters did. Then he took it to another level that was called Rheem Glass—they learned how to line water heaters so they would last and last, and that's when Rheem just took off."

During World War II, the U.S. Navy approached Richard Rheem and said, 'Hey, you know how to make vessels so water stays in for a long time: we'd like you to help us make vessels so water stays out.' So, Richard built a shipyard in Sausalito. From there he branched out into manufacturing various kinds of equipment, with factories all over the world.

Don's father became a vice president at Rheem Manufacturing and was running the division in Southern California when Don's grandfather made a fateful decision. "He allowed controlling stock to pass out of his hands, and investment bankers in New York realized the company would be worth more in pieces than it was as a single unit." Rheem Manufacturing was broken into several pieces, none of which remained with the Rheem family. Don's father was working for Hughes Aircraft when he died.

Don was born in Pasadena and went to high school in Fullerton, California where his experiences as the Junior Class President and then

Student Body President were formative. “The skills I built were around coalition building, messaging, and bringing people together,” Don says. “That was where I seemed to excel.”

Don was academically successful and especially intrigued by principles he met in biology and chemistry. He became interested in mountaineering, completed a course in mountain rescue, and decided to become an environmental consultant. “My grandfather owned a big spread in Montana, where I would spend sometimes a month or more with him, hiking and hunting. I also spent a lot of time in the mountains of Southern California,” Don explains.

He joined the Sierra Club at the age of 13 and made his first presentation as an environmental advocate at the age of 14, urging the Orange County Board of Supervisors to consider smog controls.

“I was a founding member of an organization called People over Pollution—POP. As a young boy I wrote a letter to the editor at the *LA Times* about the decline in the Cucamonga grape crop, saying this is what happens when air pollution stunts the growth of this grape: it reduces production. When the letter showed up in the paper, I thought, ‘Wow: you can do useful things at a young age.’ That gives you confidence that you can be heard, and maybe make a mark.” That desire to make a mark, and the confidence that it was possible to do so, may have been what John Wanamaker saw in the boy he sheltered for the night.

Don enrolled at Principia College, in Elsah, Illinois, as a biology major, and he spent vacations and summers living with Ken Bechtel and his wife. “He was a great mentor,” Don says, “I had had tremendous respect for my grandfather, and living with Ken Bechtel was a continuation of that respect. They both built something from nothing, something which provided a livelihood for thousands of people, and improved the quality of life for thousands more. That really made a mark on me.” Bechtel is still the largest construction company in the U.S.

After a year as a biology major at Principia, Don added an environmental science major to his program, which meant he got to spend a year doing field studies in places such as East Africa, Southeast Asia, and Geneva, during which time he realized that politicians made decisions about environmental policy, not scientists, so he

added a third major to his program: political science. “No one had ever triple-majored at this college before, and the director of admission wasn’t sure that it was possible. I had to petition,” Don recalls. “It was intense, but I was just driven. You know, when you don’t have a lot—I felt an obligation to squeeze every ounce out of what had been provided to me.”

Don completed his triple major in 1977 and went straight into the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts. He focused his studies on energy policy, and during the summer after his first year he wrote speeches on that topic for a congresswoman. That experience garnered him an invitation to serve on the staff of the House Subcommittee on Science, Technology, and Space, a position which Don describes as nirvana.

“Every week you immerse yourself in a different science topic, you brief the members and help draft legislation—what could be better?”

Weekly immersion in different science topics made Don an attractive candidate to *The Christian Science Monitor* when they decided to hire an environmental writer. After writing about science policy and environmental issues in their Washington Bureau for a number of years, Don was asked to bring the last of his three majors to the professional table. His editor needed someone to cover the presidential election. It just so happened that one of the candidates was the guy—Al Gore—who had been the majority leader of the House Subcommittee on Science, Technology, and Space when Don was a staffer there.

“Al Gore is a very bright man,” Don recalls. “He liked to hold hearings on things that sometimes even other Democrats wouldn’t show up for—I remember we had three days of meetings on circadian rhythms. Sometimes it was just him and me. Years later, when I wound up covering his presidential campaign, we had some laughs about those days, and how the world gets small.”

Don’s work with messaging began when *The Christian Science Monitor* moved him to its short-lived venture in television journalism. When that endeavor ended, he joined a PR firm, doing media training for clients who needed help “after stuff had hit the fan,” as Don says. Some of those clients were companies he didn’t respect, and when he got tired of helping people he didn’t want to help, he started a firm of his own.

RheemMedia advised leaders on how to better handle media interviews, advised the U.S.

Chamber of Commerce and other clients on how to navigate a crisis, and how to connect and engage with audiences at an emotional level. “One of my favorite clients was Her Majesty Queen Noor,” says Don, “because of the purity of her intent and her ability to connect with audiences.” In time, Don’s focus shifted from helping companies clean up messes to helping companies avoid those messes in the first place. “I wanted to stop dealing with the outside and get to the center,” he says, “to culture and values. But I wanted to get there in a science-based way.”

“There are more than a thousand books on leadership available today,” Don says, “but few of them are based on science. Some of them may have tons of data describing what happened, but no empirically validated theorems on why it happened. Companies still manage the way my grandfather did, when there were more people than jobs, so you didn’t have to know much about the brain or the human condition to get people to come to work.”

Don realized if leaders knew how to manage in ways that were consistent with what the brain needs to thrive, they would create healthier workplaces, which would make for healthier employees and healthier families.

“There are two empirically validated theories that guide everything we do at E3 Solutions,” Don says. “One is called Social Baseline Theory (Coan, 2015), which has proven that the brain functions at its highest capacity only when it’s working with others. We’re hard-wired at birth to crave safe, secure attachments with others. At E3 Solutions, we focus on adult attachment in the workplace (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007)—where the research shows adults seek safe and secure connections that allow them to thrive. That’s the space we’re in.”

It shouldn’t be surprising that one of Don’s primary attachments—his marriage—led him into this field. His wife, Kathryn, is a leader in the field of marriage and family therapy. “When therapists need help with their own marriages,” Don says, “they come to her.” And Kathryn’s therapeutic work is also based on adult attachment theory. “I learned it from her,” Don says.

“It just hit me when I was attending one of her conferences listening to Dr. James Coan,” he says, “If this works in intimate relationships, it will work in any relationship, because they’re all governed by the same limbic system.”

Don had already acquired a survey tool for determining employee engagement and quality-of-life, which are the real measures of a company’s health, Don believes. “Leadership is all about making people feel safe and validated so they can thrive,” Don says. “A leader should also help people find meaning and purpose.”

There is now finally one book in the leadership field that’s based on science. It’s called *Thrive by Design: The Neuroscience That Drives High-Performance Cultures*, and its author is Don Rheem.

“It’s called *Thrive by Design* because when you design a workplace culture around conditions we know the brain loves—and needs to perform at its highest capacity—people thrive. So, in the book we explain what those conditions are.” As word of his book got around, Don was invited to share his powerful message at a TEDx event, and a video recording of that presentation is now available on YouTube.

The book’s principles were validated in its production, to some extent. “It brought my whole company together,” Don says. “I was going down one writing path, and struggling, and they circled around me and said, ‘Hey, why don’t you try this.’ And that made all the difference.”

His advice to young people embarking on careers would be to focus on the quality of culture in a workplace, not on salary. “In the future, employees will be more attracted by how they feel than by how they’re paid,” Don says. “We should never let salary become a proxy for well-being.”

Of course, whether any of ‘this’ would have happened if it hadn’t snowed that night in the San Jacinto Mountains remains an open question, but what seems clear is that Don’s decision to deliberately pursue connection and attachment in the wake of his father’s death produced the energy-generating conditions he needed to thrive, in a wide variety of contexts. Both Don’s grandfather and his mentor would recognize E3 Solutions as a company that improves the lives of other people, which is what Don so admired them for doing.

The desire to make a mark, and the belief that it’s still possible to do so, are themes that permeate Don’s life. Everyone deserves the blessing of a legacy like that!

© October 2018 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](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).

