

Pete Lamont

The Importance of Kindness

Like a lot of recent college graduates, Pete Lamont thought he knew it all in his early 20s. He was working as an assistant administrator at a law firm, and in spite of his low position on the totem pole, he was confident and even bossy. “I was being a little bit of an asshole,” he confesses. Finally, a senior partner at the firm pulled him aside for a heart-to-heart. “He told me, Pete, the owners of the firm do not like to be ordered around by their employees,” he recalls. “It was a defining moment for me. I was mad because I didn’t like to be told I was wrong, and I was disappointed because I knew I screwed up. I was embarrassed. That lesson was 31 years ago and I remember it very clearly. It was one of those moments where you get your head kicked in. You really have to pay attention to what’s going on around you. It’s part of growing up, and I grew up quite a bit that day.”

From then on, Pete always remembered the importance of good manners, sensitivity, and kindness, and strove to leave a positive impression on anyone he worked with. “Using please and thank you goes a long way,” he observes. “I say ‘please’ or ‘thank you’ in most everything I write now. At the time, I was being very task-oriented and was getting stuff done, but there’s a right way and a wrong way to do that especially when the person is your boss!”

His attitude adjustment has taken him a long way from that administrative role at the law firm. Today, Pete is a Partner at INTEGRITYOne Partners, a government contractor that works in IT and Project Management. The five partners employ 36 billable consultants for a total staff of over 40 people. They contract mainly with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and have contracts with HHS, ICE, USCIS, and FBI. The main focus of their work is immigration and law enforcement with some additional focus on

the healthcare sector.

Coming to the firm from the giant KPMG was a big change of pace for Pete. INTEGRITYOne was founded in 2001, Pete joined in 2005, and he helped build up the firm’s project management business. “In a big firm, you stay in your lane since there’s so much structure and so much support behind you,” he reflects. “When you come to a small firm, you can do everything. Believe me, it’s exciting. All of a sudden there’s so much to learn and so many opportunities. But you also have to be careful because you can chase butterflies all day long if you don’t have clarity about what must be done. So you have to hunker down and bring some rigor and structure to what you’re pursuing.”

Coming from the hyper-structured world of KPMG, Pete brought that rigor and structure with him. So much so that his coworkers nicknamed him ‘Box Boy,’ a teasing reference to his need to fill out org charts and carefully demarcate responsibilities.

Additionally, he’s worked to imbue INTEGRITYOne with the same culture of kindness he learned early on in his professional career.

“On World Kindness Day, I sent a note to everybody,” he says. “One of the things I love about the firm is that everyone is so kind and caring. I want to create an atmosphere where my employees are comfortable coming to me with critique. An environment where people are too scared to share ideas or criticism is not productive.” Another of Pete’s values is his commitment to what he calls “relentless learning.” “If you stand still for ten minutes, someone’s by you already,” he notes. “In the tech space, everything is moving hyper-fast.”

There’s another reason kindness and commitment to others, and especially family, is so important to Pete. Raised by an alcoholic father, Pete had to deal with unpredictable violence and



anger from an early age. He, his mother, and his five siblings became especially close in the face of these outbursts and sometimes even fled the house at night to stay with neighbors. "When he was sober, he was fantastic," Pete remembers. "He was charming, he was funny, and he was one of the smartest people I've ever met. It's really sad that he was an alcoholic. No one sets out to be an alcoholic. But to a great degree, that made me who I am. I wanted to be the dad my dad should've been, the dad he could've been. I think that's why I'm a great dad, and a wonderful husband."

Pete's father was a pilot in the Air Force, and his four older siblings—one brother and three sisters—were born all around the country—Virginia, Alabama, Massachusetts, and Florida. By the time Pete was born, the family had settled in Camp Springs, Maryland. His father retired four years later, a couple of years after his youngest sister was born. Their neighborhood was mostly military, and the kids had plenty of other children to play with. After retirement from the Air Force, Pete's father went to work as an aircraft accident investigator for the National Transportation Safety Board.

Pete's mother stayed at home where she ran a tight ship and demanded attention to manners. "She was the biggest influence on me," he nods. "She was big on table manners and would tell us, 'You never know when you'll be dining at the White House.' She was tough as nails, but she loved her kids. The love never stopped. She made sure I was a gentleman, and she raised us to be good people with good morals." Because of the chaos in the house, she went out of her way to make Holidays a big deal for the children and would decorate and cook for days before Thanksgiving and Christmas. She was always trying to provide a sense of normalcy and would leave dozens of presents under the Christmas tree.

One of Pete's positive memories of his dad are their trips to a communal farm that one of their neighbors owned. Pete and his dad farmed five acres there. Every Saturday morning from early spring to late fall, they would go there and plant vegetables, pick peaches, or fish in the little pond. Until Pete was about 13, the two went there each weekend, and Pete loved spending time with his dad learning about farming and driving a tractor.

After years of turmoil dealing with his father's alcoholism – years that even included physical fights between his father and older

brother – the family reeled when Pete's dad was diagnosed with colon cancer. The disease was brutal and the treatment options were limited in the late 1970s. He quickly declined, and before long he was completely dependent on his wife and younger children to take care of him.

The change in circumstance, though sad, helped to develop Pete's compassion. He remembers lovingly taking care of his father and being able to help him when he was in pain. "I think it gave me a chance to help him ease his pain. I loved being there for him," Pete reflects. "He could ask for anything, and I would bring it to him. Bringing him food and changing his bedding was rewarding. I had a desire to help, and I think it helped me as he was dying to help him pass on in a beautiful way. I took a class in college on death and dying and that's when I realized that we really did give my dad a beautiful death. There was no stress in the house. He wasn't in pain. And while it was very sad, it was the best we could do under those circumstances."

A few months after his father passed, his sister Genise brought home a black Irish Setter puppy they named Clancy. He was a wonderful dog and Pete says Clancy helped the family heal from the tough years they'd been through.

With their primary breadwinner gone, money was now tight. Pete's mother had returned to the work force a couple of years earlier as a secretary at a local high school, but they were still pinching pennies to get by. "We ate a lot of hamburger helper," he remembers. "Anything to stretch that food dollar. My mom even tried to bring powdered milk into the house but that didn't go over well. As I got older, my mom and I had a tradition of going to the commissary together on the weekends. Part of the reason I did it when I was younger was to try and get pop-tarts and the food I wanted into the grocery cart. We continued that tradition until a few weeks before she died when I was in my 40s."

At school, Pete always did well, but was never an extraordinary student. He could earn As when he tried, but often found himself disinterested in his classes and would settle for more average Bs and Cs. A great teacher though, can be a great motivator. "In 3rd grade, Mrs. Yates was one of my favorite teachers," Pete recalls. "We were learning our times tables and had a competition. I worked my butt off thanks to her encouragement, and I won the competition. That

was the first time I really saw how hard work can pay off. When I put my mind to it, I can always do great things. I had that realization that hard work can produce outstanding results."

In his free time, Pete loved to play soccer, and continued to play all the way through high school. As he got older, he also began to work as a paperboy delivering the *Washington Star* and then the coveted *Washington Post*. The gig took up hours of his mornings and afternoons, but he loved the feeling of earning and saving money. Eventually, he got a job at a local gas station, and continued saving until he was able to buy his first car at 19.

In the meantime, he'd started at Prince George's Community College before transferring to the University of Maryland College Park after his first year. "Community college was the right decision," Pete explains. "I wasn't ready to go to college yet. I needed to get my grades up. I didn't love to study and was still focused on making money. My mom encouraged me to get my grades up to prove I was ready to go to college. I took a program called the College Success Seminar, and it changed my attitude on school and studying. It was a fantastic program and gave me the confidence that I was capable. It gave me the tools to be successful. I became a more disciplined and consistent studier and began to see the results."

At Maryland, Pete's first year was tough, but he powered through it. After a semester of low grades, he knew he needed to buckle down and commit. He introduced more structure to his study time and was able to right the ship. Initially, he'd planned to major in computer science, but ended up switching to economics. Throughout college, he worked at the gas station and UPS. Before his senior year, Pete decided he wanted to try an experiment—what would happen if he quit his job and focused on getting straight As. "I'd never had straight As and wanted to see if I could do it," explains Pete. "It took a lot of discipline, a lot of saying 'no' to fun stuff. But when I focused, it worked. I once again saw what happens when you work hard and apply yourself. I got straight As in those 300 and 400 level classes. I was really proud of that moment."

After leaving college on a high note, Pete landed his first adult job at Dechert, Price and Rhodes, a law firm where he joined the accounting staff. He loved working there and being surrounded by smart, driven people—especially, one in particular. It was at the firm that he met his

future wife and the love of his life, Marielena. "She was the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he gushes. "The rest became history."

The two married in 1994 shortly after Pete had gone on to work at another law firm where he received the life-changing lecture from one of the partners. Since then, the two have had a fantastic partnership raising their children and balancing each other's personalities. "We're complete opposites," Pete muses. "She's been that natural governor to keep me from being too Type A. I can just go, go, go and work, work, work, but she is a stop and smell the flowers kind of person." Today, Marielena stays home with the kids. It is an arrangement Pete appreciates as it has given him more freedom to devote himself to work while making sure never to prioritize it over them. "When you marry your best friend, you can talk about anything. It makes things so much easier and fun," Pete smiles. He considers his wedding ring to be his most prized possession.

Around the time he met his future wife, Pete also had the transformative experience of participating in a Dale Carnegie course where he confronted one of his biggest fears—public speaking. Despite being continuously pushed out of his comfort zone over the 12-week program, he really enjoyed the program. In fact, he enjoyed it so much that he's gone back three times to help teach the program. He's also a member of Vistage, the world's largest executive coaching organization for small and midsize businesses.

After leaving the second law firm, and graduating with a Master's in International Management, Pete moved to KPMG, where he stayed for almost one decade. While there, he met one of his most influential business mentors—Doug Moll. Doug was brought in during the midst of a crisis that was affecting the team both professionally and emotionally. Pete's partner on a major project died suddenly and unexpectedly, and Pete was left picking up the pieces as he processed his grief over losing a friend.

It was a high-profile project for the Department of Justice, and the client was demanding results. Doug came in and began putting things in order. "He arrived, and there was an immediate sense of calm," remembers Pete. "He gave instructions to each team member about what to do, and he gave me the tools to be successful. I learned a lot from him and did a lot of things I never thought I was capable of doing. We always

go back and forth on who saved that project; he says it was me, but I say that I couldn't have done it without him."

Pete loved his time at KPMG & KPMG Consulting, but over the years, the tireless schedule began to wear him down. He realized the environment was no longer enjoyable for him. The culture was becoming more political and when the firm went public, the core principals changed. Pete was running a book of business worth \$14 million while the average partner only ran about \$5 million. It didn't seem right to him. It was then that he reached out to a friend who suggested INTEGRITYOne as a great place to work. Within nine months, the firm had won enough work to hire Pete full-time, and he made the leap.

As a leader, Pete considers himself to be consistent above all else. "The important thing for my team is that they know who they're getting every day with Pete," he says. "The people I work with don't have to worry whether Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde will show up today. They're going to get Consistent Pete. I'm always trying to improve, and I try to lead by example."

To young people entering the working world today, Pete reiterates his commitment to continuing to learn and grow. "You need to be a relentless learner," he stresses. "You never know everything. You have to be voracious in learning new things. It's learning your job, but it's also learning the people part of your job. How do you work with people? How do you get along with

people? You have to really make sure you're learning the people piece of the puzzle. So, stop and listen. When you're 22 like I was, you think you know everything, but you don't. You need to pause, pay attention, and listen to what is being said. Reduce the number of distractions around you. And don't forget good manners, they never go out of style. Say please and thank you. I learned the importance of that lesson the hard way. You have to get things done in business, but you get things done through people. And if you're a jerk about it, you're not going to get very far."

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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](#).

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