

Chris Deegan

Anything is Possible

In life, we make many choices that create a lasting and profound change in our destinies. For Chris Deegan, the first came at age fifteen. Chris had a speech impediment that years of public school therapy could not correct. His throat and body would tense up to the point that breathing would even be difficult.

Chris was open to anything—perhaps even desperate—and came across a therapy in which he would deliberately sing his words into a microphone, then hear them on a two-second time delay through a headset. With improvement, the delay was shortened. As his speech improved within the comfort of his headset, he then had to practice outside his comfort zone. “I would call the hardware store and struggle to simply ask for the price of a hammer,” Chris recounts today. “I had to continue to apply the clinical experience to real life situations. So I asked the grumpiest person I knew—my English teacher, Mr. Bell. He and a friend would patiently listen to me read aloud after class hours.” Within a year, the impediment largely disappeared, enabling an outgoing personality. “In hindsight, that experience provided me the confidence that anything is possible with perseverance and personal sacrifice,” he affirms. “It took many months of humility to learn how to talk at such a self-conscious age.”

Though normal conversation was no longer an issue, the anxiety caused by talking in front of groups persisted through college and early in his career. To face this hurdle, he sought leadership opportunities in work and church groups, taught Sunday School, lead a fundraising campaign, and was elected as Parish Council President. “Learning to speak again was the most profound, life changing event in my life,” he says.

Chris is now the President and Chief Executive of Gibbs & Cox, Inc., the nation’s largest

independent naval architecture and marine engineering services firm. As President of a company with staff in nine US cities, Canada, Europe, and Australia, communication skills are critical to success.

Gibbs & Cox was chartered in New York City in 1929 by William Francis Gibbs, among the most preeminent naval architects of the twentieth century. He was featured on the cover of *Time* in 1942 for his work to support the war effort by designing Liberty ships to be built across the U.S., and by 1945, the company had 3,000 employees. Gibbs went on to design the fastest passenger cruise liner to ever sail, the *SS United States*. “Gibbs’ design earned the Blue Riband, a special industry recognition for Atlantic passage,” Chris says. “It was the first time a U.S. design had earned that honor since the 19th century.”

Since the mid-1930s, the company has designed the majority of the U.S. Navy’s destroyers and frigates, and as it nears its ninetieth birthday in 2019, its resilience is nothing short of remarkable. The firm has paced technological advances and resisted industry consolidations, riding the peaks and valleys of market demand. “The integrity of our name has always been our lifeline when times were lean,” Chris affirms. “Gibbs, himself, founded the business under the banner of quality, and that legacy lives on in the work of each and every member of our team. Every single employee here is committed to quality in everything they do. We couldn’t have survived this long as a company without that universal commitment.”

A true testament to that commitment, Gibbs & Cox today remains at the top of its industry. It currently has four major designs underway—an unprecedented level of productivity for the company. Its team is constantly integrating new technologies and



finding new markets. “Change is endemic in the highly complex nature of ship design and marine engineering,” Chris affirms. “But thanks to our exceptional team, we’re able to meet it with excellence.”

Chris came onboard in 2013 as the Vice President of Engineering, and assumed the presidency in 2016. Since then, the Gibbs & Cox team has nearly doubled. Growth has been across all segments of the company, which entail commercial and naval vessel designs, and domestic and international government services. “Though we’re the busiest we’ve been in years, it is truly a team effort,” Chris says. “The company and the legacy is bigger than any one person. Our history is important to us, but it doesn’t win new work. Quality and competitive pricing defines today’s market.”

Dedication to family and personal sacrifice defines Chris—important qualities that were passed on to him by his parents. Born and raised in Tyrone, a small paper mill town in central Pennsylvania, he grew up the youngest of three children. His father spent long hours working at the mill. As a teenager, his mother was offered a music scholarship to Juilliard, but turned it down to become a nurse. “She wanted to take care of people,” Chris says. “She quickly rose in the ranks of the local hospital, and then gave that up to stay at home and raise her children. She was a renaissance woman with so many skills.” Direct yet nurturing, his parents created a closeness in the family that is shared today, long after their passing.

Chris enjoyed the idyllic youth of small town USA. He loved fishing, cub scouts, exploring the forest, worked a paper route, and playing pickup baseball and football with whoever was available. “We’d walk a mile unaccompanied to elementary school each morning, play outside all day, and come home when we heard the dinner bell. I believe that freedom, wholly unappreciated at the time of course, set the stage for me to have courage in my pursuits.”

At the age of twelve, Chris’ father was promoted to corporate headquarters in New York City, and the family moved to Fairfield, Connecticut. Moving to the metropolitan suburbs would be a huge change for most, but Chris found a core group of friends with whom he is still close. Any athletic aspirations ended when he broke his left arm twice—first while wrestling at 2 AM, and

then riding a dirt bike—so in his free time he liked to work. At fourteen he placed an ad in the local paper and began doing odd jobs, and in high school he worked twenty to thirty hours a week at the nearby grocery store.

Scouting provided a great source of adventure. “Mr. Bartholomew was the Scoutmaster,” Chris remembers. “He was retired Army, and we were his enlistments. He would sacrifice a lot of his time to take us camping, including a 50-mile Adirondack canoe trip, two weeks in New Mexico, and one winter weekend we slept in tents at -20 degrees.” At fifteen, Chris promised his maternal grandfather on his deathbed that he would make Eagle Scout, which meant wearing a Boy Scout uniform for a couple more years. “Fulfilling that promise to my grandfather was my first real accomplishment, and I had a great time doing it,” he says. “Scouts really taught me a lot about leadership, self-confidence, perseverance, and dealing with people.” With that, at sixteen, Chris was learning to talk again, wearing a Boy Scout uniform, and meeting girls—a truly odd mix by most standards, but the foundation for the future.

Upon graduating from high school, Chris and a fellow Scout hiked 330 miles of the Appalachian Trail over nineteen days. He enrolled at Penn State’s Erie campus, leaving home twelve hours behind. “After the hike, I was ready to face the next big adventure,” he says. On his first week of school, he launched a campaign to get elected as Dorm Floor President, promising his constituents a keg of beer a week. As the leader of the floor, he coordinated a great social life, but spent so little time on academics that he barely passed his freshman and sophomore years.

Thankfully, the following summer, Chris had a defining moment working as a fry cook at one of his three jobs. “In the kitchen worked Joey The Expeditor, a guy whose only job was to bark commands to move the orders,” Chris recounts. “I realized that if I didn’t straighten out my act, I was going to be him. That scared me, and coming back to college for my junior year, I was changed. Suddenly I was focused, and I started to excel.” Joey also taught Chris how *not* to lead, an equally important lesson.

Over the next two years, Chris took extra credits to make up for the classes he had missed. As a senior, he aced an aptitude test to become a Navy pilot. “I didn’t want to join the Navy, but got

an offer as a civilian engineer with the Naval Sea Systems Command," he says. "I knew I wanted a new adventure after college, so I figured I'd move to Washington, DC for a year, then flip that NAVSEA job into something else." Instead, Chris ascended the ranks of Federal Service over the next 28 years supporting U.S. Navy shipbuilding and weapons acquisition programs. For the last ten of those years, he was a member of the government's Senior Executive Service.

Along the way, Chris developed an aptitude for analysis and systems engineering, initially as a submarine cost estimator. He would later hone his leadership skills in management positions of increasing responsibility, supporting nuclear submarine programs. He developed high standards for himself and those around him. "I truly enjoyed working among those possessing demanding standards and a strong work ethic," he says.

In 1993, Chris received the NAVSEA Engineer of the Year Award, and in 1997, he was selected for a Brookings Fellowship. In that capacity, he spent a year working in the office of Congressman John Murtha, the powerful Ranking Member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense. There, he was assigned to Mr. Carmen Scialabba, the Military Legislative Aide. Carmen was a tough Korean War veteran and a U.S. Marines gold gloves boxing champion. In 1960, when he was preparing for his first professional fight in Madison Square Garden, he was diagnosed with polio. "That was when Carmen truly began to fight—not for himself, but for persons with disabilities, a constituency possessing a 70 percent unemployment rate, when no one in society seemed to care." Carmen possessed all the great leadership traits of those in the Navy, but had a passion for something bigger, helping those that are disadvantaged. Chris identified with this deeply, and later in his career worked to do the same for those at NAVSEA.

A year after returning to the Navy from Capitol Hill, he was called into the front office and addressed directly by the Admiral. "Deegan, I got this program. Nobody wants it. It costs too much and when it fails I don't want to lose an O-6 billet (a Captain's job, in Navy parlance). Do you want it?" "What is it?" Chris asked. "SSGN, OHIO Class conversion," he responded. "Oh and if you succeed, you'll be relieved." It was Chris' first opportunity to prove he could lead a program,

uncommon for a civilian. At 36, he would be treated as a peer among Navy Captains. He accepted, and eighteen months later, was relieved. Today, four SSGNs prowl the oceans for the US Navy.

In his next position, Chris was assigned as the lead civilian in the SEAWOLF submarine program office. The office was set to close over the next several years, and the staff had to find new positions. "I brought in a gerbil wheel and used that as a metaphor for change, explaining that every day, we hop on the wheel and spin it until the sparks fly," Chris says. "At the end of the day, we get off in the same spot. Every day, on and off at the same spot. How are we ever going to move down the road if all we're doing is spinning in the same place? We have to get off the wheel and find a new way."

He also applied the lesson to himself, enrolling in night school and earning his master's. He entertained several private-sector offers but ultimately decided to stick with the Navy, becoming a Senior Executive at age forty. He kept the gerbil wheel in his office for the next decade. "For me, I felt the need to move the wheel every three years or so throughout my federal career. You can't get off too early—the trick is knowing the right time, preferably after making a difference."

Later in his career as a Senior Executive, Chris was assigned an Executive Coach and underwent a routine 360-degree team evaluation, where he received the highest scores his coach had seen. When the coach asked what peers he confided in, he said no one. "That was a huge red flag," he recounts. "The coach told me that if I continued believing I knew all the answers in life, I was doomed to fail. So I started talking to other executives, learning how to listen and trust as I developed stronger relationships. That was a big turning point for me as a leader."

Through those years, Chris occasionally crossed paths with the President of Gibbs & Cox, Rick Biben. Rick saw Chris as a proven leader who welcomed industry perspectives, had strong name recognition within the Navy, and offered a diverse skill set that could grow his company into new markets. He asked Chris to join the company as VP of Engineering, with a clear three-year pathway to becoming president. "While I had always vowed to reconsider my civil service career at fifty, I never dreamt I would leave the federal sector to become

president of a ship design company,” Chris reflects. “But I ended up leaving, literally, on my fiftieth birthday to do just that.” Over 180 people attended Chris’ farewell dinner, and he gave away the gerbil wheel he had used to guide people along their own career paths.

None of this would have been possible without the love and support of Becky, his wife of 31 years. They met as freshmen at Penn State, and she recently retired from her position as an elementary school teacher. When their two children, also Penn State grads now in their twenties, were young, her requirement of Chris was to read to them each night before bed. “I’d walk through the door at 8 o’clock, sit down on their bedroom floor, then fall asleep while I was reading out loud,” he laughs. “The kids still remember that to this day. Becky made sure I followed through with that on a daily basis. We’re a very tight family today, and it’s all thanks to her.”

In advising young people entering the workforce today, Chris extends the same counsel he offered to his team in the Navy when they’d ask about the keys to success. “Two things define our jobs: Respect and Contribution,” he says. “You need to respect others and be respected. If you have a bad day or a bad week, get over it. But if you’re not getting respected after six months, you need to get off that wheel. As for contribution, find something bigger than yourself and be a part of that.”

Beyond that, Chris reminds us that career

development is really about personal development. “Your career is all about you, and how you manage it matters,” he affirms. “We can’t predict where we’ll end up in our careers, so be bold and open doors. The result will always be the same if you don’t try to change. Leadership is learning how to set expectations, demonstrating personal sacrifice for the good of the team and giving others credit. In the end we are all so transparent it just comes down to being real. Ask simple questions, both of others and of yourself. You never know what ability you’ll unlock, or what path you’ll take next.”

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