

# JUST FAMOUS ENOUGH NOT TO BE NOTICED

*As told by*  
**Michael Donovan**

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## 1998 – 2000 Best Western | Crash and Burn

*If you can stay calm, while all around you is chaos,  
then you probably haven't completely understood  
the seriousness of the situation.*

**B**y early 1998 I was finding the workload of a one-man-band pretty exhausting. Financially the period was very rewarding and the work interesting. But I was losing interest in planning for others. I was keen to return to implementation. I needed to run something. I got my wish.

In late May of 1998, head-hunter Frank Kandelas of Woodbury Consulting called and opened discussions resulting in my becoming the Chief Executive of the large hotel and motel chain, Best Western Australia (BWA). The date was my fifty-first birthday. I took up the appointment in July 1998 following a short period for due diligence.

The Motel Federation of Australia, founded in 1957, had held the local Australian territory franchise for this international brand

since 1975. For those of you who might be interested there was both a Best Western and a Best Eastern originally formed in 1946 in the USA. Only the western business survived. During my time, the international chain was the largest hotel and motel group globally based on number of rooms. That claim may no longer be true as I note property numbers have dropped due to enforcement of global quality standards. As part of new QA the chain has segmented the brand into three levels– Best Western, Best Western Premier and Best Western Plus – a project I worked on at its genesis.

Closing the door on consulting and advisory work meant wrapping up the last few *Nature Inherited* projects and handing other small items over to Terry Watson. I managed to meet client expectations to deliver on outstanding work for Verity Gannon at OTOA by a handover to Albert Stafford and Matt Dobbin. One final project to which I had to say ‘no’ was in Samoa. I did keep a commitment to facilitate a planning session for the Australian Amusement Leisure and Recreation Association which went very well but had to say no to more involvement with the Manly based International Hotel School.

My career move dispossessed Paula of a job so I assisted her and Nicole Sheridan to work together on an association’s database. Paula worked with Nicole for many years and provided further PA temp services to me under a new venture in 2001.

During June 1998 I met with the then incoming Best Western Australia Chair Rob Anderson, the outgoing chair Mal McMaster, several key directors, namely Phil Hateley, David Stewart, Laurie O’Meara, Terry Martin and Howard Batt plus retiring CEO Paul Higgins. To a man everyone was focussed on solving daily tactical issues in the absence of any defining mid to long term strategy for the business as a whole. It took some doing but they agreed to allow breathing space to assess the business and look at developing such a plan.

Supporting the strategic vision was a detailed Business Plan to reorganise systems or, in some cases, create systems which

had never existed like a basic HR manual for instance. Both major plans stood the test of time even apparently under my successor Rodger Powell who, he claimed, adapted and followed through with them until revised in 2003 by the talented marketing executive Jane Roennfeldt whose partner Peter Roennfeldt, then with QANTAS, had assisted me in State Transit's efforts to with the World Public Transport Congress of UITP.

I was to renew contact with Peter and Jane on a Seabourn cruise from Dover to Montreal via the Arctic Circle in 2014. Peter and I reminisced over long coffees. Peter recalls the industry saw me as a businessman and not a 'good old boy doing lunch' as was common and expected. I was respected for my approach and achievements at BWA.

A particular challenge at BWA was the need to deal with several power-bases between board directors, state governors, management and staff. Successive CEOs, and there was a line of us had tried, with varying degrees of success and failure, but had not been able to make much headway. Naively I thought I could. It worked at first.

To firstly satisfy, then moderate and finally more positively redirect the hands-on engrained practices of the directors, I set up a number of board sub-committees. Each had their own written charters outlining only board-approved advisory tasks, limiting resources, detailing processes and protocols to be followed and importantly removing power to direct staff other than approved by the board. A staff re-organisation was then used to fracture established channels of subversive communication.

Operationally an antique cobbled together Accounting & Audit system was fix target # 1 and IT was # 2. Quality Assurance, Branding and Marketing followed.

I had to put IT in the first wave of change because BW International were about to roll out a new reservation system. Arizona based IT guru Mike Ford and his able side-kick Mike Dunn appreciated my tech understanding and comprehension of the complexity of the roll-out task. Mike Dunn came to Australia

during the NOVA introduction and stayed three-months while we got up to speed with the roll-out and training. His assistance and friendship was greatly appreciated by all of us. Carol and I spent time with Mike in the States years later.

Best Western is a collective of motel and hotel owners who elect to market and identify under the global brand. Over two decades certain practices had become entrenched. In many respects it was a series of different clubby relationships benefiting a few off the backs of the many. Focussing and directing the masses was a constant communication and negotiating challenge.

Two years later I was to be called 'the bastard we needed to have'. To his credit Rodger Powell achieved the biggest changes in total system overhaul and corporate restructure but it took five years to modernise the business. The process consumed two more CEOs.

The board had to be pushed and cajoled into agreeing to the scope and rate of change to be undertaken in implementing the plan. I had sufficient support from a number of directors to not tolerate delay or inaction once the business had a board approved plan of real substance. It was pleasing to occasionally see directors refer to the plan in meetings and ask if decisions being made by the meeting delivered on the key elements of the plan. If not, then why not?

I had created a document which frequently used graphics to encapsulate what the text covered, so quick reference was easier and quicker to comprehend. Discussions in committee and at the board started to be peppered with the terminology and language of the plan which saw comprehension and alignment improve.

Marketing under David McDonald and finance under Michael Machado would bear the brunt of change. David was relatively new to the company having been appointed six months prior to my joining. Michael was a long serving executive whose comfort zone was to change markedly. My very capable PA was Debbie Ringrose. Highly intelligent and a wonderful gate-keeper. Her soon to be husband Grant Lewis rose to senior ranks in Sanitarium.

The first five months of implementation was frenetic but loaded with successes. Not only were a raft of much needed policy and procedures put in place, or replaced but contractual arrangements with members, providers and suppliers were overhauled to meet current legal minimum standards. OH&S, Trade Practices, audit protocols and alignment with the business plan. Everyone did a terrific job.

Satisfaction and reward also came through a number of detectable changes from the industry. Member participation in marketing and sales campaigns grew. QANTAS was courted as were rental car companies which were all important for a predominantly regional accommodation chain. Early options for greater use of the *Fly Buys* rewards system opened up as well.

We were able to get lots of positive new media and were seen as a re-emerging force in the sector. You know when this happens when the government tourism agencies ask to participate or invite participation in key industry activity.

At the governance level the board was itself challenged because while many had internal BWA board experience they had little understanding of proper directorial obligation. I created two reference aids being a basic Directors Kit and a special Chair or President's Handbook. I got permission from AICD to use limited material from the director's course. A director's training day was held for all board members and senior staff.

The form in which proposals and reports were put to the board changed; the executive team attended board meetings to report directly on their portfolio responsibilities; the manner of board debate and decision-making changed. I was to use this kit's format and much of the content over and over in years to come with others who needed it.

As elements of the business plan took shape and gained traction I foresaw various departments would need further reshaping to sustain the effect. That meant breaking up even more cosy relationships and destabilising empires. McDonald and Machado were not happy passengers on this ride. A lot of horse-trading was



needed to effect structural change and I did not get all I wanted or thought necessary. There were inevitable trade-offs.

BWA strengthened its European presence by appointing a very capable sales and marketing representative based in London, Australian Karen McMichael. This role underpinned new relationships with Tourism Australia and the UK and European BW family. Karen did a fine job.

Simultaneously, various waves of change commenced at home. My role encompassed international duties like being member of a number of global board sub-committees, namely Technology, Quality Assurance, Branding and Marketing. BW International, headquartered in Phoenix, Arizona USA was also implementing wholesale change to improve the global brand. This gave me some encouragement what we were starting in Australia would dove-tail into an even larger and globally driven set of improvements. In turn this would underpin our own efforts in Australia and reinforce relevance and necessity.

BW International was investing heavily in a state-of-the-art reservations system called NOVA included GPS – a world first. A roll-out plan, forecast to be delivered over five years risked, in my opinion, being by-passed by the natural attrition effect of emerging new technology. Our Australian plan had identified this risk. The roll-out of the leading-edge reservations software NOVA had to happen faster. This offered a game-changing opportunity to include our own Australian change program in effect leapfrogging us ahead of our local competition.

I asked for and got approval to use BW Australia as the global roll-out test territory. Ford and Dunn helped me produce a tender specification for hardware and pre-loaded software supply. This was won by DELL Computers who appointed Martin Barnes as client liaison. Whenever iron-man champion Martin visited the office we got less than best effort from our female staff! Martin proved terrific at the liaison role.

Working with the membership liaison team, I devised a train-the-trainer education roll-out compressing two years into ten

months. Simultaneously we overhauled and upgraded each of the call centres in New Zealand and Australia to become the expert level user support for NOVA.

In many properties I identified a weakness in simple book-keeping process and systems. As the DELL computer came with all software pre-installed covering NOVA, internet, telecommunications inc. WinFax etc., I did a deal with MAUS Business Systems to provide a basic accounting/financial package and training support. Within just eight months each motel and hotel property was pre-loaded with the new system plus an on-line educational and a pre-booked set of face-to-face train-the-trainer personal learning sessions followed up with screen-to-screen training modules.

Some properties with relatively new computers and brands other than DELL were still able to get the new services through CDs which auto set-up the non-standard host computer exactly like the pre-installed DELL but on a partitioned section of their main drive thus avoiding erasure of currently installed software and files. We tried to think of every issue and provide solutions. We did pretty well overall. Best laid plans did hiccup with some DELL production capacity issues and their timetable for deliveries across Australia.

In partnership with Dell Computers and Telstra, our communications network provider, we overhauled the communications network of BWA. I personally telephoned every member to encourage and support the take up towards gaining real competitive advantage. Close to eighty percent of properties came on-line with the new system two-months later, well ahead of schedule. The Australian methodology was adopted by BW International globally. I can reveal here that I was courted by their head Mike Ford to take up a position within BWI Technology Division based on Australia's project management outcome, and potentially to eventually replace him. I did not see my future in IT nor was I qualified even though Mike said the role was more project management, that being a strength of mine.

When I look back at what was achieved, I now recognise we were participating in a generational-use transition. Many members could barely use the old system yet here we were introducing full graphic display and interactive software. To over 50 of our members the upgrade was just too much. What I do recall is their kids took to the new system with enthusiasm. We trained many youngsters to run NOVA and fill in as their elders slowly took it up. Changes to the global call-centre network, under Suzi Macdonald based in Dublin, were also initiated. Eventually, Sydney was upgraded to service New Zealand.

Another initiative was the development of a national purchasing consortium across the Australian chain. I appointed Lorraine Diffy to run the business. Lorraine went on to manage the Star Rating Scheme for AAA Tourism under which BWA had so many QA challenged properties. As a wholly owned subsidiary of BWA, *e-best.com.au* aimed to consolidate as many supplier contracts and services as we could to provide bulk-buying benefits to BWA members. *e-best.com.au* dealt with a prequalified panel of providers offering worthwhile discounts. It struggled to gain real traction, apart from master contracts like communications, branded BW lines of consumables and give-aways, vehicles, electricity and the like. Local regional supply purchasing loyalty was very strong. DELL offered a very advantageous purchase plan for additional computers for staff but take up was low. Ford Australia offered fleet discounts for personal vehicle purchases.

It was McDonald who commenced our relationship with *FlyBuys* and *Qantas*. At one point I half-jokingly proposed some thirty thousand dormant corporate card holders on the database be offered to our competitors. Each cost six dollar a year to manage. Passing a non-productive cost to others seemed like a reasonable tactic to play out. Some directors looked like they needed oxygen during this discussion. Under Michael's management the corporate card system was overhauled and returned to profit.

Under the spectre of the Y2K bug we applied numerous fixes and upgraded systems across the business. Unsure of what might

happen, we drew a significant amount of cash for the payroll for the week of the possible Y2K effect. It wasn't needed. We used Y2K to commence rationalisation and upgrades across some nineteen interlaced old management systems. Yes, the board had the discussion about whether Y2K was even real. Based on a risk assessment from our insurers and known fixes we had to do anyway we proceeded with a minimal investment which worked.

A serious risk to the franchise licence and customer perceptions was our poor quality assurance. Every year the QA standard was refined and those not able or willing to meet it had to consider leaving the brand. How the Australian territory managed this and delivered improvements in QA, across the membership, also impacted on the ten year review of the brand licence. In 1999 only forty-nine percent of our rooms met the global standard. Discussions about the need to fix this by forcing upgrades or expulsion from membership caused many a board meeting to deteriorate badly. In my opinion, this was aggravated by poor chairmanship and divided loyalties matched to strong sectoral interests on the board. My consistent and more aggressive push for change was being met with increasing push-back.

To push the agenda for compliance I had support from the global head of QA Joe Striss who came to Australia and initiated an independent assessment of properties through Marion Churn of Ernst and Young. There is a rule of thumb in branding that if more than twenty percent of a brand's content isn't of the required minimum standard then the rest of the brand is similarly tainted. The lesser level of standard becomes the overall standard. Facing this challenge and proposing a large number of properties should be removed from membership put me in the firing line. The board had been protecting friends who ran dump establishments for far too long. Our failure rate was double the accepted minimum number and brand reputation suffered accordingly.

Another weakness lay in the sale or transfer of a property to new owners who may decline to continue with membership of

the brand. Naturally we would reinforce the equity in the brand through recognition, services and the reservations system but even so some decided to go it alone. To their shock, a good proportion rejoined when we turned off NOVA and bagged their signs for removal. Anyway, some key properties didn't return and so holes in the network occurred. I proposed to the board BWA should consider either investing in a controlling interest or outright ownership of a number of key strategic properties essential to maintaining a strong brand presence in geographically key areas.

The proposal got lukewarm consideration locally as a self-preservation strategy. There was better interest from BW International through Senior VP for Global Strategy, Anupam Narayan. Whether the idea was developed further I am unaware. Some BW territories in Europe had similar strategies which worked well for them.

Internationally many BW properties were historic buildings with high star ratings guaranteeing higher room rates. BWI pushed for a global standard set at four stars. Australia would be decimated. The difficulty of standardising a QA grading system across a global business based on historic certification at one end down to a motel in regional Australia at the other gave force to the aforementioned three-level brand splitting some years later.

Once achieved, this split provided the NOVA reservations system with a segmented inventory meeting specific standards of inclusions, services and add-ons. All of this was put in place after my term but had its start in the international brand, reservations and quality assurance committee on which I sat.

When the crunch came BWA dropped a significant number of members. I am guessing here but about sixty out of close to three hundred properties seem to have left the brand; pretty close to what my plan had forecast. The chain lost its status as the biggest by room numbers in Australia but came out a healthier and better organisation.

Our partner to deliver our eCommerce elements was Telstra whose account executive Moe Ali opened the way for BW Australia to develop, test and improve a number of initiatives which offered

the members leading-edge communications and business advantages. BWA also gained access to Telstra's Call Centre Consulting Group to draw upon and apply expertise and leading-edge techniques from a wide range of call operations.

What our team did not know was, as a result of our innovation and effort, Telstra put BWA in the running for an award. Best Western Australia was the National Winner of the 1999 Award Telstra/Australian Financial Review Best Use of eCommerce in Achieving Business Goals.

Another interesting experiment on which we partnered with Telstra was an initiative called *The Concierge Card*. Basically a super version of the *PhoneAway Card*. Utilising our respective call centres, the Telstra services database, GPS and new magnetic strip technology every delegate and partner plus all children at the Sydney Best Western International Conference and Board Meeting in 2000 were provided with their own personal concierge card.

A call to a single number from any phone, private or public, would get priority service from taxi, hire cars, restaurant bookings, flower orders, location information etc. etc. Of course all expenses were backed by the user's own corporate or private credit card. With the support of the local President of the prestigious global concierge network *Les Clefs d'Or* we even provided this special card to a number of concierges in the main delegate hotels for them to trial.

The service was even used to locate and return two lost children, buy some of Australia's most expensive wines and pay for... well, enough said! The trial worked well and I believe Telstra offered the product to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Family as part of their major sponsorship. I was given a collectable card in a presentation case as a thank you and recognition for assistance in developing and testing the product.

The Best Western International annual world conferences and sub-committee meetings enabled me to see many wonderful places around the globe. It was equally wonderful to have Carol accompany me on occasion. One of the most memorable, which

she unfortunately did miss out on, was a function during the opening week of the *Bellagio*, Las Vegas. 'Big' takes on a whole new meaning in the USA. BW International had nearly three thousand delegates at a cocktail party on a single balcony of the Bellagio overlooking the internal courtyard.

Close behind that experience was the conference in Lisbon, Portugal where the aquarium is one of the best I have ever seen among quite a few. Another was a meeting in Normandy, France. I didn't want to visit the site of the Allied Forces invasion in WWII. Instead I was part of a second group for a visit to one of the top orchards and distilleries making the glorious apple liqueur *Calvados*. While the others returned to the hotel after a fine dinner and tasting, I sat longer with the distiller tasting vintages going back to 1947, my birth year. Dawn approached and as the frost descended and pickers emerged to harvest for processing, we walked the rows with dawn's glow giving the scene a movie set quality. My host delivered me back to the hotel and insisted on gifting me three old vintages of *Calvados* in appreciation of my interest and company.

During all this period of change to the Australian franchise the company entertained some thoughts of acquiring properties from the Sundowner, Flag and Choice brands. The aim was to gain market share and increase geographic spread. While initially endorsed by the board as a quietly, quietly testing of the waters, it turned sour due to factional interests. When some thirty Flag properties severed ties with that brand we considered them for membership but their low star ratings and poor QA standards stopped it happening.

The tentative Sundowner merger discussions with Peter Charody, Mal Curtis-Smith and Bill Paveltick went on for five months and certainly went further than those with Flag or Choice. In the end none of the discussions gave BWA any advantage and were let slip away over time. A good friend, Marketing Director, Wayne Weilgus of BW International became Senior VP Marketing at Choice in September 2000.

I have the knack of identifying trends. However, I have also discovered generally the trend is far too early to be widely accepted by others and implemented. So it was with the early growth in demand for pets to be allowed in motel rooms. The Hotel and Motel Association of Australia HMAA were opposed, yet early research and overseas trends indicated the market of grey-nomads and others with pets would gradually build into an opportunity. I proposed BWA lead the way.

The Dog Act had been repealed and replaced by the Companion Animal Act but Colleen Gilbert of HMAA informed me they were thinking of putting up a regulation to restrict dogs in accommodation. I pointed out much of the phobia around pet cleanliness was myth and the size and value of the travel-with-pet-market was an opportunity. I was right but at the time I was laughed out of the room.

In the same vein of looking over the horizon at future long-term competitive positioning, I put a discussion paper to the board in March 1999 to start them thinking about changing the structure of the Motel Federation of Australia from a co-operative to a company with shares. Alongside this proposition was the strategic property ownership proposal. The third was creating new management systems which would migrate us more fully into the emerging eCommerce space as we had clearly defined Business-to-Business and Business-to-Consumer segments. The opportunity analysis clearly showed benefits from reduced costs, improved services to members, providers and suppliers. These would move us well ahead of competitors as the preferred motel brand of which to be a member. Finally, I suggested opening up the board to a broader set of experiential skill-sets by creating two places for truly independent directors.

Rodger Powell was to achieve much of this, but at the time the initiatives took the board way out of their comfort zone. I had delivered what they had asked for but they lost the courage to push through to the next stages.



The President of each BW territory is ex-officio on the BWI International Executive Committee. Robert Anderson returned from the September 1999 IEC meeting with compliments from others on the BWA Strategic Plan. He and I were invited to review the international equivalent which we did for global CEO and President Jim Evans.

Robert and I had spoken about lifting the standard of BWA directorship. On my recommendation he would propose directors do the AICD Directors Course. I had set aside the resources to repay the fees but only once the course was completed. It was voluntary. I cannot recall what the take up was but too few registered interest.

To promote the idea of independent directors I arranged for friend and respected tourism leader Chris Brown, chief of TTF to address a board meeting. Robert Anderson and I both worked on briefing notes for Chris to use. Chris was brilliant. However, his message fell on deaf ears.

The role of CEO occasionally took on a surreal presence. On the evening of 27 December 1998, I took a late night call at home from a most distraught member who owned the Best Western Coachman's Rest Motor Inn, Eden NSW. This was the night disaster overtook the fleet in the 54th Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race. The motel was providing rooms to the recovery teams and survivors of the race. This had unintentionally upset a guest and family to the point where the fellow's lawyer on holidays in the UK had called and was threatening massive lawsuits against the motel if accommodation was not forthcoming as booked.

Over the next 24 hours it unfolded the family was driving from Sydney to Melbourne and planned accommodation overnight in Eden. BW booking conditions stipulate that if not confirmed by pre-paid deposit or taken up by 6pm, a reservation lapses. They had neither made a deposit nor arrived by 6pm. They called and advised a delay and nominated 8pm. This became 10pm and still no-show. The disaster, involving the sinking of five yachts, the loss of six lives and the crippling of other vessels was unfolding with

huge resulting media coverage. All available spare rooms were taken to accommodate the survivors.

The family arrived in two mini-vans with more people than the two room request would accommodate, they comprised a Rabbi and his extended family seeking special needs to observe their faith. There was no room at the Inn. No pun intended. While the human tragedy unfolding was becoming obvious the group considered their reservation was valid and demanded rooms which simply were not now available. Both families spent the night camping in their vans.

The emotionally charged argument, between owners and guests, escalated to involve the lawyer holidaying in London. I decided to stand between the lawyer and our member. So started a series of 'going nowhere' calls with David Weinberger of McCabes Lawyers over several days which built in implied threat level. My best mediator diplomacy and reason were not working. I decided the media card should be played and outlined our detailed course of action and the high-ground position BWA would take to defend its brand and its member who by now was a minor local hero. Sensibly, the calls stopped and no more was heard about the issue.

In mid 1999, I received an excellent performance review from the board and BWA President Robert Anderson. I had applied stretch targets to the KPIs for both McDonald and Machado. They were not happy but scraped in none the less. I had created a general education fund in the budget and encouraged all senior staff to improve through taking appropriate courses. I had to push to encourage enrolments. I should acknowledge McDonald had just completed a degree in marketing.

The staff Christmas party of 1998 had been a dull affair. Organised more to suit the executives, it disenfranchised our shift workers in the call centre and some office staff. For 1999 McDonald suggested we ask the staff what they wanted to do. They came back with a plan to cover all work by splitting the festivities over several shifts. We bussed groups from our Clarence

Street, Sydney offices to Woolloomooloo Wharf and the famous *Harry-de-Wheels Pie Cart*. Shifts were exchanged so friends could be with friends. Christmas that year was pies and peas, sausage rolls, modest drink and lots of party-hat fun.

By mid-2000 the push-back from some quarters, mainly the members at risk of expulsion from the brand, gained more force at board level. McDonald and Machado saw these factions as the new power base and moved to court them. I was tired and missed the indicators. When I did realise the shift in support I moved to neutralise it. But, I was unsuccessful in gaining support from the president and key players primarily due to the action of one director, David Stewart. As with other CEOs before me the factions were on the move.

I have no problem with a director challenging management, that is their role, done appropriately it's good. I urged the chair to pull both the board and this director into line. I gave Anderson a legal opinion from our lawyer, George Pappas, of Mallesons. I included references and items about director fiduciary responsibility and referenced our own Code of Board Conduct.

To give him his due, Robert strongly pointed out the damage being done to individuals and the risk of legal implications, how actions were undermining the authority of management, how the lack of self discipline by the board was a serious on-going weakness, how staff confidence in management was being eroded over trivial matters, rumour and innuendo and how letting this continue reflected poorly on the reputation of the organisation's board.

This was water off a duck's back to David Stewart even despite the efforts of Phil Hateley and Howard Batt to support the President in bringing some order to the building chaos. I joined a CEO Institute syndicate in order to have peer review of my challenges towards overcoming them or at least reducing their effect on me and the business.

In February 2000, an apology specific to me and McDonald was sought by Robert Anderson and proffered from Stewart for simply outrageous claims by him about us. Stewart offered a draft

document in response for review but McDonald and I found it not quite genuine enough. We asked for a single sentence to be modified. Stewart took our request as a rebuttal and war was declared. There is not much more I am permitted to write about the outcome and frankly would prefer not to relive it.

The episode took a heavy toll on me emotionally and on Carol. I felt physically sick, tired and too easily brought to angry outbursts. These outbursts happened at home unfortunately for Carol. I was not a nice person to be living with during this time.

The next board meeting did not go well. My position became untenable. I had gone from apparently being *'the best CEO in memory'* to not being wanted in order to create peace. The board asked me to resign. I refused. They shoved. I shoved back through Freeman Turner Solicitors.

To my surprise and the directors' chagrin, my PA Debbie asked to address the board. She was Board Secretary so saw and heard almost everything but properly and professionally kept herself in check, delivering minutes and notes expertly. I was not in the room but had it reported first-hand this 22-year-old tore the board to pieces, pointing out their failures and delivered some home truths. Give them their due, they respected her for her honesty and over time many of them admitted failings of courage and conviction around many issues. I got a number of apologies in due course. Go Deb!

Frank Kandelas was again appointed to search for a replacement. He had to use me to detail the position description as he couldn't get clear instructions from the President. I also prepared transition briefs for the incoming new chief whom Frank openly told me was Rodger Powell. Anderson would not discuss either the process or nominee's name and forbade me to provide a face-to-face brief to the successful appointee. His call.

Within a fortnight of taking the chair Rodger called me and I went through the briefs over the phone. I don't think Robert Anderson ever knew I provided whatever was needed to smooth the transition with Frank for Rodger.

McDonald wanted the CEO role and resigned when he didn't get it. I heard he used his maritime Captain's Licence to operate a service on Sydney Harbour. Machado left BWA during Powell's term. It was not a happy parting.

A week before I exited BWA I provided the President with a document he didn't want to receive. It was a brief on the potential legal implications of not taking action against a rogue director. Mallesons saw it as a serious on-going issue and a persistent legal problem which needed addressing as soon as possible by the President as leader of the board. The brief pointed out the board needed to act. I provided the paper as much to make a point as to also somewhat protect my reputation in the circumstances.

I believe David Stewart was eventually removed from the board and membership some years later after further acrimony.

But on the bright side, the board started to change under a new CEO and I suspect better chairmanship from Robert, lessons being learned. These are assumptions on my part but based on a good source. The board opened up to independent directorships and strengthened governance. But the changes didn't stick and the pull of the boys-club won out. When Rodger moved on a few years later the chair also became CEO adopting the American corporate model.

My equivalent in New Zealand, the very capable Lindsay Sandes also fell prey to their own version of powerful influences but went on to do good things for other organisations which respected and appreciated his talents. Lindsay once colourfully described his efforts against inertia as "trying to move a soft, wet turd with a toothpick". Lindsay had the satisfaction of a nice settlement and has done terrifically well as a resort broker. Well done!

BW Australia went through six CEOs in around eleven years. Rodger too eventually joined the heap but having lasted twice as long as me. He called for advice in August 2004 regarding the position he found himself in with the board. Rodger successfully

completed huge changes. I take some personal satisfaction from two things. Firstly, about every six months he asked to have lunch to chew over challenges and seek guidance. This was given freely. Secondly, he informed me he was quietly continuing the roll-out of much of my plan. A new plan was done in 2003.

I took a break with Carol in Hawaii which coincided with the Sydney 2000 Olympics. As a major sponsor of the Sydney Olympics 2000, Telstra provided me, along with many other corporates, with complimentary tickets to the best of the best Olympic events. As I was stepping down as CEO of BW Australia I didn't feel comfortable in retaining the tickets if I wasn't in my corporate role. I returned them. Moe Ali told me later I was the only executive to do so among a number whose situation had changed prior to the Games occurring. Ethically I just felt I could not justify keeping them. Was I silly or right?

Curiously the break was not rejuvenating. I struggled to complete a consultancy job for Jackie Foggitt, CEO of Cunard Cruise Line. Dunhill invited me to take up accreditation under their Miller Heiman licensed *Executive Impact* program and to then lecture about the process. My concentration was hard to focus. However I got through the course successfully.

I went to Chandler Macleod and asked to be assessed for best role fit. The results indicated consulting or advisory work was most likely to provide the diversity of interests I needed intellectually and would best play to my skill-sets. I liked working with people; my general attributes were better than my competitive group; my analytical abilities were apparently exceptional and for reasoning sets I was in the top twenty-five percentage of the top two percent.

I believe I am naturally curious, almost to the point of obsession and love the challenge of sorting out a single goal from a complex volume of information or options; am a good listener and try to ask open ended questions which support investigation and combine with creativity and innovation in providing solution options. While collaborative and collegiate I didn't encourage teams which

are too closely knit as I see them as counter-productive to the dynamics of creative solutions. Group think tends to dominate.

The appraisal also revealed some serious draw-backs which I have had to modify. I had a tendency to be caustic in some responses to those whom I didn't respect or whom I felt were not fully engaged. I agree. This, along with a cynical sense of black humour, coupled with barbed retorts which are meant to convey a point, had to be managed better. Despite a pretty good report card I had things to correct which undoubtedly had contributed to some significant errors of judgment on my behalf. I needed to learn and change. In 2013, the condition now has a clinical name – *empathy deficit disorder*. So it looks likely I did have baggage to sort out from my childhood.

The effort I had put into BWA and the stress filled outcome resulted in me suffering a significant depressive episode in early 2000.

I accept my portion of responsibility for creating the circumstances which allowed this to happen. I had ignored the signs of sleep disorder, lethargy, some sense of hopelessness, poor appetite as indicators of reactive depression. If I had just realised this and as a consequence changed my response to various situations I might have achieved different results, been happier and achieved a more productive and longer term as BWA CEO. I missed the mark. A supportive board member sent me this quote which, coincidentally, I had used in the front of my NPWS report:

*"It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all who profit by the old order and only lukewarm defenders in all those who profit by the new."*

**Niccolo Dei Machiavelli ~ The Prince**

I had dinner with director Phil Hateley about a year or so afterwards and he provided some insight into how people reacted to

my style. Despite one of my many failings being I work at speed expecting others to keep up, I do think things through and game plan alternatives as a team player. My personality can dominate. But as Phil plainly put it my capacities simply intimidated people who were taken a long way out of their comfort zone. I had left my constituency behind. A serious mistake for a CEO.

Phil acknowledged I had opened the door to real change but for Rodger to progress the agenda albeit at a slower pace. It was salutary feedback.

The mental challenges of the slide into depression took nearly two years to overcome. I struggled with purpose, drive and focus. The 'black-dog' emerged and I was not pleasant to live with. I am sorry, dear Carol. Thank you for your support and love.

Friends were supportive and I started to repair. I think I also benefited from not denying depression was happening to me. I realised I was not invulnerable. One has a disarmingly potent sense of powerlessness in its grasp. The pills didn't seem to work so I stopped taking them but the many professional sessions did work. My own dislike of my situation eventually encouraged me to climb out of the hole. That and an almost pathological fear of failure. However, I have always regarded fear as a choice one can take or not and I was not about to agree to its grip.

Unbeknown to me at this time, this bad experience would hold me in good stead to assist some others who might trip over similar rocks. In hindsight some of the experiences of my childhood both aided and abetted my successes and failures. I learned early on to be self-reliant but see the power of collegiality in achieving difficult objectives. My sense of moral and ethical fairness, while a weakness in some eyes, is a source of considerable pride. I was not trapped by religion in any respect.

Unlike preceding chapters and the ones to follow, this chapter resisted telling. Remembering brought up residual painful emotions. It is surprising how you think you are over an issue or event then the spook rises and gives you a cold shudder.