

# JUST FAMOUS ENOUGH NOT TO BE NOTICED

*As told by*  
**Michael Donovan**

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# 2000 - 2005 Phoenix Rising | Mentoring

*Benjamin Franklin said that society is divided into three classes; those that are immovable, those that are moveable and those that move.*

As I pulled myself together I found consulting work, speaking engagements, and workshop facilitating for clients like Credit Union Services Corporation Ltd (CUSCAL) through George Parkyn and Suzanne Brown the event organisers. I did team sessions in leadership for both CUSCAL and PriceWaterhouseCoopers.

Winning the Telstra / AFR Award for Best Western provided exposure which resulted in an offer to chair the first Asia-Pacific e-Learning Conference in 2000, in Singapore. I worked with the conference convener to assemble a global collection of speakers and presentations. The event was very successful.

My introduction to Arthur Rindfleisch of PWC came via Julie Ankers who ran the respected talent bureau *Entertrainers and*

*Speakers* in Sydney. I did a series of leadership after-work forums for executives of PWC covering subjects such as *Managing Partners; Business Development Impact at Board Level; Who would want to be led by you?* and *Social Skills for Business Development*. The 'led by you' topic was so popular I repeated it for Julie's clients around town as either a luncheon discussion or fire-side chat after hours.

Maintaining such engagements and reviewing business plans for other consultants was nice money. The work didn't physically tax me too greatly. Mentally I was able to push aside the depression more and more.

For some time, Carol had pointed out to me I regularly maintained close follow-up relations with many of my former staff, other industry executives and clients who not infrequently called for a bit of quick advice. She said I should charge for this coaching input as many had become more successful because of the conversations with me. Off-handedly I said I was more of a mentor to them.

I took Carol's suggestion seriously and formed International Mentor Professionals, shortened to *iMentor-pro*. Professional ethics and contractual obligations do not permit me to mention names of individuals who were clients. However, I successfully tendered for Preferred Supplier Status with the likes of the Australian Federal Police, Optus, Westpac, PWC, Brisbane City Council, Australian Public Service Commission and Vero Insurance among others.

My connection to Phil and Mark Kerry through Michael Light at Dunhill was to open a further opportunity. I facilitated two business strategy sessions to assist their thinking around where to take the business. Eventually, the Kerry brothers merged the business with UK based firm Robert Walters. Dunhill also invited me to present a series of lunchtime talks on thought-leadership for clients of the firm. These were all very well received.

As it turned out Robert Walters held a small investment in UK based business-mentoring firm Merryck & Co. owned and run by

David Merryck Carter. Merryck & Co. wanted to set up business in Australia. I met with Giles Daubney, COO of Robert Walters, in July 2001 and he encouraged Carter to connect with me.

I met with David Carter a few times and had several telephone conversations after he returned to the UK. I was offered the role of Country Manager to establish Merryck & Co in Australia. I 'parked' iMentor-pro.

Carter had an impressive mentor assistance library of tools and processes assembled from his own experiences and the best-practice of others. Pretty good stuff but it had to be Australianised. Using my teacher training and workshop facilitation backgrounds I edited and reformatted the induction materials into a new kit for Australia. I worked with Jane Hunt of the Merryck & Co UK office in reconverting the materials back into a UK kit. She and I eventually did a USA version when the company ventured States-side.

The firm dealt exclusively with the 'C' Suite – the CEO or Chairman and those around them in the immediate line of succession. Cleverly, David Carter had identified a niche in mentoring that of the *business-mentor*. Basically it is a peer-to-peer face-to-face intervention through interaction with a former successful business person. The engagement provided a forum where broader experiences and tacit knowledge could be exchanged between mentoree and mentor. The desired outcome was to drive business improvement and personal success. The interaction challenged, provided new insights and options which both supported and cultivated better thinking and improved decision-making by the leaders in the business, hence *business-mentoring*.

Carter's approach had worked well for Barbara Cassani of GO the low cost UK air carrier. In her book *GO an airline adventure* Barbara describes how Carter contributed to her successful MBO. Carter's colourful background included merchant banking. Barbara led the London Olympic Bid first stage to success. She is now a professional executive director.

Over the next two years, we gained a clutch of the top ASX 100 corporations as clients across banking, government, professional

services, finance, consumables, aviation, communications, insurance and transport. Apart from myself, I recruited and trained a handful of business-leaders as mentors including Phillip Morrice former UK's Director General for Trade and Investment Promotion in Australia; Neville Cox formerly of Westpac; technology company director Craig Welch; David Stephens formerly CEO of Boots; professional director Anna Booth; Michael Liley formerly of ANZ; John Hall of AICD; independent directors Dave Warneke and Neill Arthur; Ian Wightwick formerly CEO of *PaperLinx* and former government bureaucrats David Lawrence, Warren Hart and Bob Pentecost.

A great team but a challenge to feed them all. The package Merryck & Co offered was an annual contract of face-to-face engagement between mentor and mentoree plus an annual exclusive thought-leadership live-in with the likes of Jim Collins of *Built to Last* and *Good to Great* fame as an example. The cost in cash and dedicated time proved a bit too rich for the Oz market so progress in establishing the service was slow; big offer, small available pool.

Merryck & Co were frequently asked to work with executive talent below our threshold barrier of engaging only inside the 'C' suite catchment. The fledgling business needed cash-flow. I suggested we modify our offer by resizing it to an introductory level engagement. A *skinny* version if you like. I floated the idea with a few of the sponsoring clients. The offer would only apply to those in the succession line. I saw it as creating candidates to eventually feed our core offer. Carter steadfastly wouldn't allow them to be taken on. Knocking on the 'C' suite door wasn't good enough; you had to be inside already. Why couldn't we help them get there?

The commercial weakness in this thinking was that future clients, in the form of 'C' Suite hopefuls were left to others to develop instead of us assisting and directing the creation of new prospects to meet our firm's needs. We were not playing a role in assisting to lift talent up the final rung but expected those who succeeded on their own to want us.

As another alternative source of clients I was keen on forming so-called *coopertition* links with other coaching providers who, back then in an immature market, didn't understand mentoring or where it was positioned. Some of these groups were The Stephenson Partnership, Shirlaws, The Meikle Files and Stolmack Group. In exchange for them sending us 'C' Suite executives whose fit was better accommodated by our business-mentor methodology, we would refer coaching possibilities from the succession line to them. There was moderate interest from them but not from Carter.

One thing we did try to do was to offer services to the top level of *CEO Institute* syndicate members by way of a step-up program. This recognised a need by a few to seek out a next-level of intervention once all they could gain from the syndicate model was expended or they felt the need for a one-on-one peer-to-peer engagement. Ken Gunn and Tony Lund initially agreed but once we planned how to do it they decided to go it alone. It seemed to have taken them years instead of weeks to put an extension product in place.

Initially, Carter and I got on together OK with his twice yearly visits to Sydney and the mentoring Guild pulling some nice work with bankable corporate names. However, the size of the pond in Australia, the cost of the package of over one-hundred thousand dollars a year and time constraints on executives meant we faced diminishing returns. Again, the Australian mentor team worked out a variation of the model. It was put to David as a way to grow the business within the obvious constraints of the Australian market. The suggested changes were flatly refused. The USA office liked what we proposed as well and was disappointed not to have the flexibility of these alternatives either.

With the UK base well established and servicing Europe, Australia open and the US also starting through New York, Carter planned the first international client *Business Leadership Forum* live-in. Some twenty CEOs, Presidents, Founders and Country Managers across the likes of Tetra Pak, Reuters, Odin Group,

HSBC, Barclays, Foresight Group, Axon and CAS Inc. spent three days with researcher and author Jim Collins at the Hotel Boulderado, Colorado USA.

Collins is a fitness geek and had climbed the sheer cliffs near Boulder that morning before his lecture. That afternoon we had a workshop session at a home on the Front Range cliff edge. If you really want to experience vertigo then stand on a glass-bottom balcony overlooking the valley with a sheer drop of 1,655 metres.

Collins has a leadership laboratory based at the University of Colorado in Boulder, Colorado. Our subject was *An Exploration of Good to Great*. It was enlightening. For me it was special because much of what Collins communicated confirmed my approach to building better businesses.

My aggressive reforms were rejected at BW Australia for reasons Collins' research identified as classic change management traps but overall the roadmap I laid out for the company was sound. This was a true learning experience especially around the challenge of pitting new ideas against stubborn rejection. I was to use many of the lessons from Collins' research and the global examples of my fellow participants in framing challenges for my current and future clients. I also referenced ideas from the Collins seminar in two articles I wrote for LexisNexis Butterworths *Executive Excellence* magazine: *Gaining from Mentoring – Attract and Retain Top Talent* and *Why Have Mentors?*

As an outcome of the Robert Walter Dunhill merger Michael Light took a service product licence from the US based Miller Heiman sales trainers held by Robert Walters Dunhill and formed his own company *SkillsFarm*. Michael took advantage of my mentoring skills for a time in his new enterprise.

I became certified in both *Executive Impact* and *Strategic Selling*, the latter refreshing my earlier learning around the Psychology of Selling done back in the 70s. *Executive Impact* held the greater benefit around influencing decision-making of senior executives developed by Bob Miller and Harvard University.

To round off a suite of new skill-sets I completed accreditation in *Team Management Systems* (TMS).

Jumping ahead for a moment, during late 2005 *SkillsFarm* held a number of industry briefings. One particular breakfast was held on the same day an international heads of government and business meeting was hosted in Sydney. It was the 31st August. The only spare seat in the room was next to me. During the presentation a figure sat down and reviewed a page of notes then, *sotto voce*, asked what I did and why I was there? We quietly chatted for a time.

A surprise guest speaker was announced and former Mayor of New York City Rudy Giuliani excused himself to me and rose from the seat to give a 15 minute talk. Giuliani's investment company had acquired Miller Heiman. Giuliani had decided to promote his investment on the spur of the moment on his way to the airport. At the conclusion of his talk he sought me out and presented me with his speech notes as an *aide memoire* in my mentoring work. Here is what is on the paper:

*'Across all my fields of endeavour, I have noticed a few key elements in the behaviour and drive of leaders.*

*I'd like to share them with you:*

- ◆ *Leaders have strong beliefs. They hold them against all manner of attack and criticism.*
- ◆ *Leaders are optimists. They are optimistic in thinking and actions and 'visualise' success. Sometimes leaders do not win, not because of failure but because they run out of time. Optimists are resilient and start again.*
- ◆ *Leaders are courageous. They manage fear by balancing risk and uncertainty. The absence of fear is dangerous as proven by fire-fighters. They use fear to train, develop teamwork and to practice doing things better.*
- ◆ *Leaders relentlessly prepare. Know and understand what you are doing.*

- ◆ *Leaders understand teamwork. Teams balance strengths and weaknesses across their numbers and support each other's individual talents.*
- ◆ *Leaders understand the importance of communication. Effective communication is the key to moving ahead and taking people with you to do extraordinary things. Leaders are storytellers.*

*Do all of these things really well, then tell the story – and, make it personal.*

Some months following the Jim Collins experience I had further great exposure to extraordinary talent. Merryck & Co. assembled the global leadership and talent team at Carter's UK country home, a National Trust residence called 'The White House', not far from Stratford as I recall. The ability to talk, exchange experiences with fellow practising mentors and to seek advice was incredibly valuable. So much was given freely by a terrific group of international business executives with amazing backgrounds.

Based on the success of the first global thought-leadership event, Carter invited Ricardo Semler as a potential guest speaker, next time around. I have mentioned Ricardo earlier on as the author of *Maverick*. This second event was subsequently never held. However, I commenced email correspondence with Semler around co-operative structures and worker-management at his *Semco SA* in Brazil. This resulted in him sending me an early draft of his second book published under the title *The Seven-Day Weekend*. Ricardo asked for review and comments under strict confidentiality which I was honoured to provide. This early draft was titled *The Three Whys*.

Like me, Carter liked to eat well. One day he and I had a memorable very long lunch at Heston Blumethal's *The Fat Duck* in Berkshire. The garden is charming and the food experience pure theatre, even magical because the senses are assailed from so many angles.

I had regarded Carter as a bit of an odd coot right from the beginning. He had a way of engaging interest but could not maintain his own concentration well. Editing promo materials with him was painful until I worked out and he then admitted to being dyslexic. But this condition also partnered with creativity. David could take the ideas of others, adapt and improve them. In the 'hunt' for clients however, he displayed another trait which caused problems across the firm's network globally that of being a fierce predatory networker.

Now by the very nature of the business we dealt with the cream of the executive crop. But for David the mere sniff of someone further up the food chain became a '*had-to-connect*' for him. He claimed to know many famous names but you could never be sure if it was as brief as a glance across a room with the nod of the head, a courtesy handshake, a brief introduction or something more meaningful which had real genuine value above name-dropping.

I regard myself as a reasonable networker. I have always protected and guarded my database of contacts well in order to respect their privacy and value their acceptance of me if ever I needed to call. That approach has paid off in spades. I can confidently make calls and have them readily accepted. David quoted names but never had any contact details for them. He would ask for your file.

Carter had been married twice before and had a steady stream of female companionship in each international city where the firm had offices. Despite the charm, money and style, Carol thought him 'spooky'. Over time his style and inconsistencies in the storyline of how the global operation was going; feedback from some quarters (investors) over methods of capital raising to expand, and a lack of business-model flexibility to meet market feedback, saw a number of us depart from the Merryck faculty in 2004.

Over the following months revelations were to unfold about extraordinary goings-on in the business. From mid-2004 I received telephone calls from a number of people associated

with the international operations in the UK and USA raising their concerns and issuing warnings. Senior territory people like Ed Gurowitz had gone, Margaret Barrett had gone, Brad Rendle had gone, Yvonne Ivey had gone and Donna Chancellor had gone. The USA had even more push-back with the business model than Australia and was in a difficult position.

Looking back, I think Machiavelli himself was wise when he said, *“A Prince who is not himself wise cannot be well advised. Good advice, whomever it comes from depends on the shrewdness of the prince who seeks it and not on the shrewdness of the prince on good advice.”* In my opinion, Carter was no such wise prince.

The company position slandered some of these people badly after they left Merryck & Co. They fought back. Investors became upset and would eventually mount protracted legal moves to win back the business. Sir Paul Judge and others turned on Carter who exited the business in 2010. The rejuvenated company survives today.

The transition to Anthony Howard as the new Australian Country Manager wasn't smooth. The warnings from my peers were spot on. For almost six-months Carter waged a war of attrition from forensic audits to legal threats. My accountants stood by the integrity of the books. During one particular nasty audit interview I was able to table emails between Carter and me which directly contradicted his position as evidenced to the auditor. Even so, it went on and on.

Eventually in late January 2005, I decided on an initiative to try to end the sniping and picking which by then involved lawyers. Using my email records, diary notes and by calling a number of my fellow management victims, I assembled a picture of the chairman's style and questionable practices. It was not pretty, even alarming. I contacted David in Malta and had a very direct chat. He unsuccessfully sought domicile in that country to take advantage of their special tax regime. I walked him through the revelations. He was stubborn and it took a few months for the expose which I had assembled to sink in during which the intimidation

continued but did start to diminish. By mid-2005 however I didn't hear from him again, until years later when he asked to buy-back my shares. All was forgiven. Would I meet for lunch and a hand-over of the cheque? Fat chance!

In mid-2004, I had effectively gone back to operating as a one-man band. A few months later a number of the Merryck & Co. mentors asked if we could form a new service with me running the show. *iMentor-pro* suddenly had mouths to feed. Albeit their needs were more to occupy time and engage intellectually in business pursuits, not to pay the rent. Morrice, Liley, Cox, Lawrence, Warneke, Arthur, Stephens and Pentecost moved over effectively gutting the Merryck & Co. faculty. I had not asked them to do so, they just believed in a different model.

We had approaches from a couple of the executive coaching firms to link under the *coopertition* model and to vertically integrate services from executive levels below the 'C' Suite. The only offer I accepted was from ARGs Kylie Hammond. That was in 2006. This relationship was to last five years and result in my selling *iMentor-pro* to Kylie in 2011.

With an expanded talent pool, *iMentor-pro* released revised terms of trade, a new rate card and inclusions more closely meeting the needs of the market at the time. Our fee split was also more equitable to the mentor. One concept I borrowed from Merryck & Co and remodelled was a private Sanctuary between the mentoree and mentor to get the engagement rolling. Done over two days the interaction provides a foundation over which topics to be discussed could be mapped. A clever invention of Carter's.

When I set-up Merryck & Co I updated my own dBase with the best board, CEO and executive listings available. I then created an email quarterly four-page PDF information piece about thought-leadership. It was titled *Perceptions*. The newsletter was well received, promoted a lot of general media interest based on the topics in an issue, and apparently did as much for my personal reputation as it did to reinforce the Merryck & Co brand. The

publication was also sent to all Merryck & Co international offices and clients with location re-branding.

To support my research of subjects for this enewsletter, I scoured many international top sources for leadership opinion. I was careful to obtain permission to extract or reprint. Back then the library held some seven hundred references. I still build on this base and now have over two-thousand articles. This is freely shared with industry professionals, writers on leadership, the media and researchers tapping the resource.

I identified a need for better mentor training particularly in style and technique. Merryck & Co was quite process driven and very reliant on the adequacy of the person's natural ability or prior experience. It took me six months to write the first Australian business-mentoring manual. It is titled *The Art of the Business-Mentor*. It is in its 7th edition but distributed only to course participants. I revise and update the text as new techniques are identified. The publication is now a content rich reference manual of close to 100 pages.

When I sold my business I had trained some four hundred business executives as internally sourced corporate mentors. Some said I was potentially doing away with external mentors by this training and sharing of the skills base techniques developed over the years. In fact it expanded recognition of the value of good mentoring and grew the business. Malcolm Dunn of Australian Graduate School of Management saw potential and I did sessions for their clients as well as private service providers such as Wade Azmy's *CEO Strat*.

The business writing bug also hit an associate Jane Mara. I used the readership of *Perceptions* to solicit contributions for Jane's book *Intuition on Demand*. I have a paragraph or two in it myself.

Mentoring has many descriptions. One I like uses an observation by composer Claude Debussy. Describing great music as being made up of not only the notes, but importantly, "*The space between the notes*". Such an approach offers great mentoring conversations, among other techniques.

In August 2004, Carol and I decided to plan towards a transition to Noosa by mid-2005. Noosa is a famous prestige holiday resort town some 135 kms North of Brisbane, the Queensland capital.

We decided to rent out our home in North Sydney through an executive leasing agent. This earned us good rent and all maintenance costs covered for about seventy percent of the year. When it was not rented out I used the house for business trips as it was offered fully furnished. We proposed renting in Noosa for a couple of years to see if the fit was right.