

Building for the...

It was once said that the best stories are those that involve a person taking a knock and coming back. It is far more interesting and inspiring than those stories that only talk about a person's milestones and achievements. It makes everyone feel that they too have the chance to overcome the obstacles that life presents in their way. It was Thomas Holdcroft who stated; 'Life is a grindstone. Whether it grinds us down or polishes us up depends on us.'

One person who could probably relate to these words is Sean Valentine, Managing Director and Partner of Missing Ingredients whose career path has experienced the good and the bad.

He was a young high-flying executive whose career suddenly fell to earth and which he has rebuilt through the hard efforts of developing a fledgling business, which can today boast a turnover of £3.4m, and employs over 100 people. Sean's is a story that is worth considering.

Looking back...

Sean's early years were the same as that of many others. He was born and spent his formative years in Devon, moving to Brighton when he was just 8 years old where he schooled and studied for an HND at the Brighton College of Technology. In 1990, he moved to Leeds Metropolitan University, graduating in 1994 with a BSc (Hons) in Hospitality Management and Related Studies.

It is at this point that Sean's story really begins. In 1994, he joined Sodexho and his career really began to build a momentum as he gained rapid promotion through the ranks so that by 1997, he was appointed as Sales and Marketing Director for Ascot Hospitality (a contract managed by Sodexho Prestige). In 1999, he was promoted once again and appointed as Sodexho Prestige's UK Sales and Marketing Director, managing a sales team of 35. His

career was seemingly moving from strength to strength. He was the youngest executive on Sodexho's top 80 executive team and was being apparently nurtured for the future.

As so often happens, it is at such times that life decides to change a person's course and suddenly Sean's life was literally turned upside down by a series of events. Firstly, his wife's parents died in quick succession. It was a body blow as he had enjoyed a very close relationship with both - his father-in-law, in particular, was really like a second father. At the same time, he was headhunted to become the Sales and Marketing Director for another major player who, after an interview process, offered him the role. He resigned from Sodexho Prestige only to find that there was a change of heart and the new opportunity no longer existed. Suddenly, he was no longer the young high flying executive but out of work and vulnerable.

"It was a torrid time," commented Sean, "but one that I will probably look back at as the defining time in my career. There were a lot of emotions during the time and when such a thing happens, a lot of gossip takes place, which is often inaccurate and only adds to the drama of the situation. I had lost two people who were more than just close relatives - they were friends and confidants as well as suddenly losing my career and my wife had just given birth to our first daughter. It was tough. Was it fair? Not in my mind but it happens and one has to deal with the situation and rise above it - otherwise, it just drags you down. Am I disappointed about what happened? Not at all. It was a learning experience and it created a new opportunity in my life. I spent some quality time with my new daughter and cleared my mind to think about what next and what I really wanted to do.

I had a marvellous eight years with Sodexho during which I learnt a lot, worked with some wonderful people and travelled to France, and to the U.S."

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So what did he take from his time with Sodexho?

"A number of things. Firstly, their commitment to training. Sodexho used one trainer - a gentleman called Philip Cripps - and I still use the techniques that he taught me. Secondly, they sent me on a course in Boston (USA) which taught me to think in a more entrepreneurial fashion - to look at solutions that stood outside of the box and this was invaluable when it came to launching Missing Ingredients. It also taught me not to be afraid to model on the best and to be unafraid of doing so.

Make no mistake; Sodexho was a great company that gave me a great basis for my career. But life changes and it moves on. We are here for, on average 70 years, and we therefore need to focus on the positives in life and have no regrets."

The next step...

And move on Sean certainly did. In 2003, Sean founded a new company called 'Missing Ingredients' in partnership with The Crown Group. The company has grown well, has 20 contracts and caters for a number of key household names that include Pinewood and Shepperton Film Studios, Harvey Nichols, Polycom, Regus, I&DEA and Teddington Studios. They have recently been accredited with IIF.

Knowing Sean for the past seven years, it is interesting to observe how he has changed. There is a steely determination to him that probably existed before but is more evident today but maybe the greatest change is that he is so passionate about building a business that is more than just profitable but one, which has substance and meaning. He is aspiring to build a business that is multi-dimensional on what it delivers to both clients, and employees.

"It is very different building a small business to that of working within a larger player. When I was at Sodexho, I probably spent 50% of my time on internal issues and this is just a rule of life within a large corporate concern. With Missing Ingredients, I focus my energies on the client. It has crystallised my views as to what business is really about. It is simple - it is about great food and great service and yet it becomes more complex than this for a whole range of reasons. Our challenge is to rise above this and to set standards that we are proud of and that inspire us. The people around me give me inspiration. We have started developing a team that is all united in achieving the same things. Last year, we had less than 13% staff turnover. That is marvellous in an industry where the norm is closer to 50%.

Our business model required a lot of investment from the start to ensure that we had the infrastructure and people in place. Because our model is not funded by venture capitalists or banks but by private finance, the model is based on delivering a long-term return rather than short-term gain. 50% of our contracts are commercial and 50% are subsidized.

We spend a lot of time with our people, letting them know what we expect and how we are going to support them to be successful. We need to ensure that our employees do feel that they are being developed and trained because we need them to deliver a really high standard of service and food as that will be our best method of ensuring that we are all successful in the long run. This is no one man business. It is about a team of people who are committed to achieving the same goal in a market that is fiercely competitive. To achieve this, we have created a "Circle of Values" that is communicated to everyone. This outlines exactly what Missing Ingredients believes in to both the employee and the customer. So, this includes clearly stating our focus on food, on customer service, on quality service, on recognising achievements, on training, on professional integrity and on just making it happen. To compete in this

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market, we need to be prepared to go the extra mile each and every day...and we are.

The other thing that is so interesting is that client relationships are so different in a small company compared to a large one. Our relationships are far more trusting and working partnerships - they have to be; there is no room for error. If we make a mistake, we talk openly about it, as we can't hide it even if we wanted to. The finances have to be correct too. As 50% of our contracts are fully commercial, we have to ensure that we get it right."

Just as I had seen the changes in Sean, I wondered if he too had noticed how he had changed?

"Of course. I have probably learnt more in the last 3 years than I did in all of my career leading up to it. What you do not see is that I am very self-critical and I want to ensure that we provide our clients with the best that we can offer and as one builds with a smaller business, it is important to keep perspective and understand that it takes time.

The chances are that I wouldn't have ended up doing this if that offer had not been withdrawn, and maybe that is what was intended. I am a great believer in fate. This has been an experience that I would not have wanted to miss and is surely the ultimate challenge of any professional.