

Bill Horton, CFO at Sherman and Howard LLC, transparent and authentic

Bill Horton is a man who knows himself very well. He is quick to tell you a time when his ego got in the way, or when he successfully maneuvered a company away from bankruptcy. He shares his life like an open book, full of stories and lessons hard-learned in both his professional and personal life. Now, Horton works as a consultant, currently sitting as the CFO at Sherman & Howard.

Horton is a Colorado native who grew up primarily in the Denver area. He attended Arapahoe High School, and played football and rugby. He says he chose rugby because he wanted to play a sport in the spring, but was not fast enough for track and lacked baseball skills. "I enjoyed it and I have all my teeth. I did get my ear torn off," Horton recalled with a laugh. He says that is a story for another day.

Horton attended the University of Colorado Boulder and graduated with a Bachelor's of Science in Accounting and Finance. Recalling his graduation celebration, he said "My dad got up and tapped the glass and said, 'Bill, I'm really proud of you for graduating today, you got a job in front of you, and everything else,' and he goes, 'I just want you to know there is always room for you to come visit us at our house, but there's no room at the table.'" Horton laughed at this memory and expressed gratitude for his parents who were a great support to him throughout his young adult life.

After college, Horton went to work for the company today known as KPMG. In three and a half years he began doing managerial work, and after four and a half years he was officially promoted to manager. Then at six and a half years, due to the economic downturn, Horton felt like he was taking steps backward. He says that he looked around at the company and saw no path forward.

It was then that Horton made the move to Kansas City to work for Ernst & Young. He stayed there four years and remembers really enjoying public accounting. From there he joined Black and Veatch, a company looking to combine engineering and construction work. He enjoyed the work immensely, saying he was very lucky. "I got to travel all over the world, set up operations, and try to price and structure the projects to allow us to get paid and to minimize our tax liability." He stayed with the company for nine years before making a change after a new CFO took charge at Black and Veatch.

At this point it was 2001, and Horton decided he wanted to do something else. An opportunity to work on a project in Boston came up, and he dove in. He says it was an exceptional experience for a tax person. His days were filled with dealing with lawyers and investment bankers, and working with the board, he had to let people go, and work late into the night on other office stuff. He says that this experience really rounded out his training.

After a couple years, he decided he wanted to move back to Colorado to be closer to his aging parents. He wanted to work as a consultant, so he joined Tatum, a national partnership for CFO's. He enjoyed the community Tatum provided him, with an online network across the country to answer questions or offer ideas and leads for jobs.

As he began consultant work, he realized he had settled into a position that suited him. He says that working at a company that is doing okay and bumping along is just not for him. He would rather be digging the company out of a ditch. "I just enjoy this, it fits my personality pretty well," Horton said, "I have a strong personality. I'm probably not as malleable and as agreeable as some of the guys who just want to have a job and be happy and keep their bosses happy. I want to do the right thing." And the right thing isn't always the easy thing to tell the boss.

Horton explains that he must handle his position carefully because as he steps in to work with a new company, the one in charge is likely feeling threatened or upset. "The way to make that work," Horton explained, "is you walk in, day one, and you just say 'Hey, I know you didn't want me, the board did. Here's what we're going to do, I'm here to make you look good. I want a good referral, I want to get paid, I want to have you get all the credit and be successful and I'll go on my way, and you can say nice things about me.'"

As Interim CFO at Sherman and Howard, Horton says his goal is simple: "I want to leave this better than I found it."

"Just do it right"

"No matter what job you start out with, just do it right," Horton said, offering advice to young college graduates. He elaborates saying it is important to show a good work ethic, learn to communicate well, and hang out with the people you view as "winners".

He also says that all young people need a mentor, and as he continues this thought, Horton's voice catches. He is a recovering alcoholic, he explains, with 17 years of sobriety. "It completely changed my life," Horton said

referring to his decision to quit drinking. He says that his addiction got in the way of his career: "Even though I was smart and I was advancing, I was not achieving my potential."

Horton thinks that he could have used a mentor to help him make better decisions at that time in his life. Although the change had to be his decision. "You have to do it for yourself, and you have to realize you can't do it by yourself," Horton said. He says that even so, a mentor can help you when hard decisions come up in your professional and personal life.

His sobriety also ties into his most rewarding accomplishment: growing up and getting to be an adult. He chuckles when he says that he has accepted the fact that it happened 20 years later than it should have, because it is what has allowed him to live up to his full potential.

The big difference

Horton's work speaks for itself when it comes to fulfilling his potential as a leader. When asked for his opinion on what makes a good leader, Horton's response is simple: Be a leader, not a manager. According to Horton, there is an obvious difference: "Managers tell people what to do, leaders show people what to do," Horton said.

When it comes to successes and failures, Horton says that the most successful people he knows all have a characteristic in common: they know how to overcome adversity. Everyone knows how to handle success, he points out, but the people who take responsibility for their role when things go bad, they are the most successful.

Another key to Horton's success is maintaining his professional network. He says after he left Black and Veatch, he fell out of contact with many of his colleagues, and only when he decided to move into consultant work did he fully realize his mistake. Now he makes a point of keeping in touch with individuals in his professional network a few times a week, and makes a point to go out to coffee with one every week as well.

Showing up every day

Horton says that he wakes up ready to go each day because he feels like he got a second chance. He says that in his first 40 years he was inconsistent. He says now he has learned to implement consistency in his work habits, and now he gets to enjoy his second chance at life.

Horton also shares that he has a motto when it comes to work that he has picked up in the last few years of being a consultant: "My motto is: No idiots, no assholes," Horton says, "And it has really worked. I want to have fun. I want to work with people that want to be successful."

On the bookshelf

Horton shares that his three favorite books are *The Big Book for Alcoholics Anonymous*, *Everything I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* by Robert Fulghum, and finally *The Cowboy Way: Seasons of a Montana Ranch* by David McCumber.

Life outside of the office

Horton lists his dad and his boss at Black and Veatch as the two most influential people in his life.

He also shares some of the organizations he is a part of, including Alcoholics Anonymous, a few networking organizations, as well as being on the board of a charity called the Reentry Initiative.

When he is not at work, Horton shares that he is an avid road cyclist. He says he enjoys the thrill of going fast. "It's been sort of part of my growing up process too," Horton said. "I haven't done things I wasn't good at, if I wasn't good at it I would stop." He says his ego wouldn't let him be average. Now he has pushed past and enjoys his time cycling. He also enjoys golfing, and spending quality time with his dog.