

Only 10% Talking and Prompt Replies: Words of Advice from Tim Gentry, Former VP of Finance at Zayo Group

Tim Gentry describes himself as a jack of all trades, master of none, which is how he came to be the VP of Finance at the Zayo Group before his retirement last year. He advises that young professionals should be willing to take on every kind of task they can so as to endear themselves to executives. Even before becoming a CPA when he worked in the restaurant business, Gentry was focused on doing his best. "I wanted to strive to be the best I could be at what I did," Gentry said.

As a child, Gentry spent his days hunting and fishing around his hometown, St. Joseph, Missouri. He grew up on a farm, and remembers being involved in local activities, including the church and his local Boy Scout troop. Later in high school he participated in speech and debate as well as the cross country and wrestling teams.

It was his career that eventually brought him to Colorado. He was working as the Assistant Controller for an electric and gas utility company in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Through his many projects at the company, the CFO of an unregulated subsidiary of the utility (Expanets) asked him to join the company which was being relocated from New Jersey to Colorado to build a "world class" tax function for the acquisition-built company. "I kind of jumped at the opportunity to come to Denver and get out of South Dakota," Gentry said, "and came here to build up that tax group."

Gentry developed the tax group at Expanets, Inc. and eventually became the Controller. Expanets did not survive the financial downturn post-9/11 and Gentry went on to ICG Communications as the VP-Taxation. As time passed at ICG he took on the role of Controller which included accounting, treasury, regulatory reporting, insurance & risk management as well as continuing to oversee the tax function (hence the jack of all trades). Six months after ICG was sold, he and seven others were asked to help create the Zayo Group.

At Zayo, he served as the Controller from 2007 through early 2014. As they began to prepare for a public offering, Gentry voiced his desire to continue doing what he enjoyed, which included the operational accounting and the day-to-day management of the people in that department. This meant he did not want to stay on as a Controller once the company went public, so Zayo hired a new controller and Gentry transitioned into the CFO of the largest segment within Zayo. As the company continued to grow, Gentry's skill became best used in the role of VP of Finance.

"Eight people and no revenues"

Gentry shares that one of the biggest rewards during his time at Zayo was the pleasure of creating the company itself. "To build a company from nothing, I mean literally nothing. Eight people and no revenues, sitting around an office we were borrowing, to the day that I left--we had a company that was employing 3800 people across 12 countries, doing north of two and a half billion," Gentry said. He shares that it felt good to know that he had played a part in a company that had created so many jobs, and on a more personal note, a company where both of his sons currently work.

Take it on and figure it out

When asked what advice Gentry would give to college graduates aspiring to be part of an executive management team, Gentry responds that they should be ready to take on everything they can. "Be willing to learn a lot of tasks," Gentry said. He adds that this will endear the aspiring graduate to the executives, especially at smaller start-ups. "If you enjoy learning new stuff," Gentry said, "the quickest path to getting yourself known, I guess, and becoming valuable people, is just take on anything. Be willing to take on anything and figure it out."

"10% Talking"

Gentry says being a good leader means not making assumptions that you know best. He says that you should listen to the people working for you because they are the ones in the trenches every day. "And don't just assume because you think you know that, or you've learned something somewhere,

that you know the best way to do it." Gentry said. "You should spend 90% of your time listening and 10 % talking," he added.

Pesky Pet Peeves

According to Gentry, you're never too busy to respond to an email in a timely manner. He chuckles as he says his family might call it a fault, but he calls it a pet peeve. He is irritated when people say they are too busy to return an email or phone call for up to or even more than a week. "It takes five seconds, right, even if you can't address it right then. 'Hey, got your email, you know, I'm swamped right now but, I'll get to it here in the next week or so.'" Gentry said. "Nobody's that busy" he concluded.

One of Gentry's Favorite Books

Running with the Buffaloes by Chris Lear

Three Influential People in Gentry's Life

1. Gentry's 3rd or 4th grade teacher who took him under her wing and helped him work with his introverted and shy nature.
2. Gentry's high school teacher and Speech and Debate coach, who encouraged him to practice public speaking and gain confidence in his skills despite his introverted personality.
3. An early boss at a restaurant where Gentry worked who modeled many of the leadership traits that Gentry would go on to use later in his career.