

# "Experts"

*Brian Keelan - May 2021*

Back in 1970 – I had just graduated from Western with a Bachelor of Arts degree majoring in Economics – which really means that while I was there, I took five courses in Economics and didn't fail any of them... although I did get a few C's. I got straight A's in the three philosophy courses I took though. One in particular where I solved the problem of the measurement of infinity for the professor and my fellow classmates. The question of the day was, "How many angels can stand on the head of a pin?"

My answer: "All of them."

After graduating, I was hired by a stockbroker in Toronto. I never got to sell any stocks. I was just in the training program – which meant taking courses on how to be a stockbroker while I served as the personal shitbird for the executives who claimed that was where I would learn the stuff I really needed to know. For instance, they taught me how to set the point spread and handle the subsequent bets on NFL and NHL games. I also learned how to play 7-card stud poker and made more money there than I lost in the stock market.

I worked in this marvelous newly erected "skyscraper" called the TD Centre – 56 stories (731 feet tall) – which made it the tallest building in Canada. It had 34 elevators which I calculated to be more elevators than we had in the whole City of Sarnia. Today, Toronto has twelve buildings taller than the TD tower so it's just another building in a city with more than 70 skyscrapers. But back then, it was unique and therefore, cool – or at least I thought it was.

But in the fall of 1970, we had the October Crisis and Justin's dad – Pierre – invoked the War Measures act. In the economic aftermath of that, the financial institutions and law offices that occupied the TD Centre were slashing expenses – which meant getting rid of people.... lots of people. The company I worked for was handing out pink slips left and right and so it came to be that one morning I found myself in the research department all by myself: everyone else had been "attritted." I answered the phone and a broker from Montreal asked me for information on some company. I told him, "Let me see what I can do for you."

I called a guy from school who was working over at another broker, but when I got through to their research department, Angelo – the guy who answered the phone – told me that the guy I was looking for had been "attritted" three days earlier. It turned out that I had played poker with Angi a few weeks before, so I asked him if he'd ever heard of the company. He said he hadn't, but they still had a few people in their research department, so he'd call me back with it and twenty minutes later he did. I passed the information on to the guy in Montreal and wished him – and especially his client – good luck.

By now it was almost 10:30 a.m. and I walked down the hall to the comptroller's office. He was a nice older fellow and we got along well but he always seemed to me like he was overwhelmed by all the goings on in the company. There were rumors and gossip everywhere as head after head rolled off the corporate chopping block and this man was the lord high executioner. When I asked him how far down the shitlist my name was, he told me with a weary smile, "There are still quite a few ahead of you... including me. We're concentrating mainly on the high-priced help and you're the most valuable guy we have... in your price range."

I was working at the starting-level wage of about \$12,000 a year and in those days, the average salary in the NHL was \$18,000... Canadian! I had been thinking about going back to school for an MBA and that night I called my Uncle Jack – the world's most dangerous salesman – to discuss doing so. When I had filled him in on my situation and what I was thinking about doing, he suggested that I might consider looking for a sales job at IBM or Xerox: "Two years spent there will teach you more about being a salesman than any university ever could plus you'll be making good money while you learn, and you'll be a much more marketable commodity with that kind of experience than with an MBA." Then he added, "That is, if you make it through their sales-training school."

The next morning, when I came into work, there was a sales meeting in progress: the sales manager was trying to get the sales team motivated to sell the remaining treasury shares of a stock they had underwritten in order to generate some desperately needed cash to help keep the lights on. He said, "Look, I know it's crap, but we need to get rid of it so just get whatever you can for it."

I figured, “This is not going to end well for anybody,” so I went down to the comptroller’s office and resigned. Half an hour later I was in the basement of the TD Centre boarding the northbound subway. I got off at Rosedale and walked up to 1047 Yonge – IBM. I went into the lobby and asked the receptionist if they were hiring. A few minutes later a smiling older man in a three-piece suit came out. He introduced himself as Jack and invited me into his office.

When I got home that night and my wife asked me how my day went, I told her I was now working for IBM, making more money than I was getting from the brokerage firm and that in five weeks I would be leaving to spend a month in their sales-training school. She seemed happy about that.

The next day at IBM, I was led down to a classroom in the basement. There were three other guys in there with me along with a large stack of books and manuals. Our task was to learn everything in those books in the next five weeks. We were told there would be a test when we got to sales-training school. One of the recruits was an older guy named Ivan who had just finished a stint in Vietnam with the US Marines. He told us he had a fifth-degree black belt in karate and that he had left the marines because he didn’t enjoy killing people as much as he thought he would. That’s where I learned the term “shitbird.” He called me the “high-priced shitbird,” because I got paid \$25 a week more than he did. That was because I had a university degree, and he didn’t. I told him that since he had actually killed people, he could have the extra \$25 a week I was getting.

Fortunately, he laughed and said, it was okay and that I’d need the extra money to buy cigarettes. Then he told me something I’ve never forgotten, “You know Brian, there is only one good thing that can happen to you as a result of your smoking and that is that nothing at all will happen to you... because if anything ever does happen to you as a result of your smoking, I can guarantee that you are not going to like it one little bit.” It was thirty years before I figured out how to do that and those words were in my mind for most of the well over two hundred thousand cigarettes I smoked during that time.

Over the ensuing weeks, as new bodies were added to the sales-recruit room, we would spend the bulk of our day going through all the product manuals and then testing each other as to our product knowledge. But the best time of the day was around 4 p.m. when the sales guys who worked out of 1047 Yonge came in to finish their day. They were a very impressive group: great guys and good salesmen to boot... really good. We would ask them questions about what they had sold and what they thought about how to sell the various products we were learning about. They told us to focus on the new stuff since those products were developing rapidly and besides all the cool new stuff coming down the pipeline, half the stuff in the manuals we were studying was out of date. The only way we’d ever see it was when it got traded in.

One guy that I never forgot to this day was a man named Roger – known throughout the company as, “The Grey Fox.” He was tall and handsome with a magnificent head of grey hair. Everyone treated him with great respect because they all thought they’d be working for him someday. He loved to be asked questions by “his rookies,” and every day when he came in, we’d gather round and listen to – as he called them – his war stories. He talked about how it was never going to be about the products we were selling. It was all about our ability to discover our client’s problems and use our skills to help our client solve them.

That’s when he gave us one of the best pieces of advice I ever got, “They’ll never remember what you tell them or show them. They’ll only remember how you made them feel. That’s the skill you need to learn and develop.” Then he added, “You know what the definition of an expert is don’t you?”

Always eager, Ivan said, “Sure, that’s someone who knows absolutely everything about their products.”

The Grey Fox smiled at him and said, “Well, that’s what your competitors think, and it’s good if you really understand how your competition goes at this and then you go a different way. I believe that a real expert is merely an ordinary guy from out of town.”

We all laughed because that was funny. But then, the Grey Fox explained to us how to go about getting your client to see you as an expert. “You don’t want to tell him you’re an expert and then proceed to dazzle him with your dancing and baffle him with your bull-shit. You want him to determine for himself that you are an expert and to do that, you need to listen to him, not tell him how friggin’ wonderful you and all these products you sell are. How do you think he’ll feel after you do something like that? Like he wants to buy something from you? Hell, he sees people like that every day.”

“What he does not see are people who talk to him, ask him questions, and make a real effort to understand him, his situation and his issues. You do that and you will be remembered. Who do you think your client will call when he has a question? You or the guy who overwhelmed him with all this me and my wonderful products crap.”

That was the best sales lesson ever.

Ivan and I survived the IBM four-week sales-training course but I don't think any of the “survivors” of that course stayed at IBM very long. Certainly – no more than 10 years. I lasted four and sadly, I don't know what ultimately happened to Ivan or “The Grey Fox.” But I've never forgotten the things I learned there and the people I worked with those days in the basement of 1047 Yonge. I never did get my MBA but IBM was the last job I ever had working for anybody but myself and – of course – my clients.

And that – give or take a couple of lies – is basically the way I remember it... or at least, the way I want to remember it.