

The Five Cs of Leadership Demonstrated by Timeshare Trailblazers

The positive results of jumping to the front of a parade.

by Marge Lennon

Does anyone really know what makes a great leader? Everyone seems to have their own list of required qualifications. According to a Gallup study, 10% of the population are natural leaders, another 20% possess leadership traits and can be trained to become great leaders. Personally, I think that's a stretch and believe true leaders today are about as rare as unicorns. Instead, I prefer thoughts from American business writer John Naisbitt, who said "leadership involves finding a parade and getting in front of it."

This is precisely what happened in the early days of timesharing. While others were on the sidelines watching the parade pass by, these open-minded entrepreneurs saw the emerging timeshare parade and vaulted right to the front.

As a publicist for the timeshare industry from its infancy in 1978, I have had the opportunity to work with many pioneers and current practitioners, all of whom I'd describe as genuine leaders. From my perspective, they have been blessed with a dynamic blend of curiosity, courage, creativity, communication skills, and commitment ... my personal list of the Five Cs of leadership. With a

relentless drive to build something new, the fearless, high-energy entrepreneurs described here were fueled by an overwhelming desire to excel, almost always taking risks along the way, but ultimately transforming their initial idea into a wildly successful enterprise ... and for us, a totally new industry.

In recalling the early days of their businesses, most of the timeshare leaders admitted they were unencumbered by what they didn't know! They bravely forged ahead, believing there was no reason they could not accomplish their goals, fearlessly traversing where no one had gone before. Timeshare was entirely unknown, untested, and unproven. (Think electric vehicles 15 years ago.) They did not have a clue if it would work, a thought several personally shared. Here are a few of their stories.

CHRISTEL DEHAAN/RCI. One of our industry's most beloved and respected early leaders was Christel De Haan, who founded RCI as a vacation exchange company with her then

husband Jon in 1974. They initially created RCI to salvage failing resort and residential condominiums in Florida. The formation of RCI was one of the most important historical moments in the industry as it enhanced marketability of the then new timeshare product. Currently, RCI has more than 4,000 affiliated resorts in nearly 100 countries and provides services to 3.8 million members. In 1989, Christel bought out her former husband's interests in RCI for \$68 million and in 1996 sold the company for \$825 million.

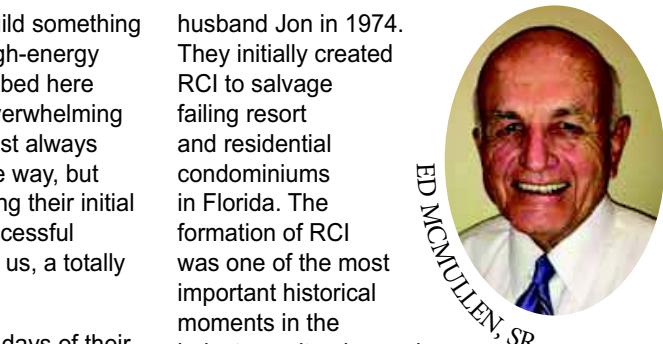
In 1978, **ED McMULLEN, SR.** and his partner Bob Miller were curious, courageous and creative as they envisioned building purpose-built timeshare resorts, as opposed to converting older condos. Their first property on Hilton Head, S.C. was purchased by Marriott in 1984, ultimately attracting

Disney in 1992 and Hilton in 1994.

"Without Marriott having taken the first step to get into the timeshare business, the industry would be very different today," says Miller, who was president of Marriott's timeshare division from 1984 until 1996. McMullen

passed away in 2020, but is fondly recognized as one of the most prolific visionaries in the industry remembered for his solid leadership skills during his long career and chairmanship of ARDA. Later, another proven leader, Marriott veteran Stephen Weisz helped guide the company to a new era with innovative points-based use products.

KEITH TROWBRIDGE. By 1974, Keith Trowbridge, Ph.D. had developed the first purpose-built timeshare resort in North America on exclusive Sanibel Island in Southwest Florida. Selling his Captran properties "by the slice," with a logo that resembled a pie-shaped slice of a pizza, he became one of the first major timeshare developers. By the time Keith had developed his third



property, timesharing was the “darling” of the media as reporters and fellow developers were beating down his doors to see how it was done. Always the visionary, he later franchised his resorts to Canada and the Caribbean, selling some of the early properties for less than \$2,000 a week. “From the beginning,” says Keith, “we approached it as a total concept – from sales, management, rentals and even resales.” Before the company closed in 1984 and its interests sold to Captran alumni Kenn Keim (now deceased) and RDI – later sold to Bluegreen – there were 35 resorts flying the Captran banner. Keith later led a search firm for the timeshare industry, constantly on the lookout professionals with leadership qualities in all areas of the business. Keith passed away in 2021.

KEMMONS WILSON. Kemmons Wilson, now deceased, founded Holiday Inns in 1952, with the first Inn opening in Memphis.

During his 27 years of leadership, his company amassed 1,759 Inns in 50 countries. Intrigued by the timesharing concept, in 1982 the legendary hotelier came out of retirement to build Orange Lake Country Club near Orlando. With as many as 12,000 people staying on the 1,400-acre property in any given week, today it is the largest single-site resort in the world. The company launched Holiday Inn Club Vacations in 2008, later growing to 28 resorts in their portfolio with a staff of 7,000 hospitality professionals. Unsurprisingly, the company’s guiding values, instilled by their



KEITH TROWBRIDGE

founder, include caring, courage, and creativity.

As an executive coach with over three decades of senior leadership roles in the timeshare industry and frequent contributor to *Resort Trades*, author Simon Crawford-Welch, PhD, RRP writes a weekly newsletter and has recently unveiled a new book, “The Wisdom of Pooh,” co-authored by another timeshare veteran Michal Finn, RRP, CGP.

Shares Simon, “Leadership in timesharing has transitioned from the high-energy creativity of early founders - who operated with little more than a dream and a willingness to take risks - to the calculated, systems-driven approach of today’s corporate executives. While early leaders succeeded through trial, error, and innovation, modern leaders must master the art of navigating public markets, ensuring compliance, and building shareholder value, all while staying true to the customer-centric roots of the industry.”

TOMORROW’S TIMESHARE.

We are unlikely to witness the same level of creativity and innovation that surfaced during the decades these and other mavericks were creating a totally new product. After 50 years on the market, the timeshare product has basically been defined. Today’s stats reveal 1,540 U.S. resorts and \$10.5 billion in sales, plus additional global markets. The cost of an average U.S. timeshare week is around \$24,000 – a far cry from those



KEMMONS WILSON

sold by Keith Trowbridge in the mid-80s for \$2,000.

As the industry has matured, the age and vacation preferences of buyers has changed. More complex point products have emerged, created to encourage additional purchases, as owner satisfaction rates remain high. Much like their trailblazing predecessors, today’s leaders are pivotal to the continued success and evolution of the timeshare industry.

While the environment has shifted from entrepreneurial freeform to a more structured corporate landscape, this brings exciting opportunities for innovation within well-defined frameworks.

Modern leaders have the unique ability to leverage decades of industry knowledge while incorporating cutting-edge strategies and totally new technologies to enhance customer experiences, streamline

operations, and foster sustainable growth.

As publicly-held companies now lead the way, there’s a renewed focus on balancing profitability with customer satisfaction, ethical business practices, and innovative solutions. With strong leadership grounded in vision, communication, and accountability, the industry is well-positioned to overcome its challenges and embrace new opportunities.

The future of timesharing offers boundless possibilities for growth and transformation. With the right leaders at the helm – combining the fearless spirit of the past with the strategic insight of the present – the industry can continue to thrive, satisfy customers, and carve out an enduring legacy in the global hospitality space.

From the author: Marge Lennon is also a timesharing “Old Timer,” having worked a publicist for the industry since 1978. She would love to tell your story! Contact her at +239-841-0553 or via e-mail: Marge@LennonCommunications.com.



SIMON CRAWFORD-WELCH, PhD, RRP

About Leadership

“Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

“The greatest leader is not necessarily the one who does the greatest things. He is the one that gets the people to do the greatest things.” – Ronald Regan

“The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.” – Eleanor Roosevelt

“Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others”. – Jack Welch

“Keep your eyes on the stars, and your feet on the ground.” – Theodore Roosevelt

“Outstanding leaders go out of their way to boost the self-esteem of their personnel. If people believe in themselves, it’s amazing what they can accomplish.” – Sam Walton

“Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers who can cut through argument, debate, and doubt to offer a solution everybody can understand.” – General Colin Powell