

This crazy, wonderful place

There are times when I wish everyone in Atlantic Canada could share my job for a day. This is one of them.

I'm currently reviewing this year's Top 50 CEO award nominations. As an editor, I can't help but automatically note the grammatical errors, the awkward phrases, the abundant clichés and the choppy sentences. I acknowledge them – then dismiss them. They mean nothing. These forms are a triumph of substance over style: Each is a compelling, raw, direct portrayal of the silent struggles faced by the people who took the brunt of last year's economic fiasco.

We, all of us, were personally challenged to economize, to reduce discretionary spending, to stretch less to do more. It was hard, aching hard – especially for Atlantic Canada's business leaders.

As I review these nomination materials, many of them including the CEOs' private accounts of 2009's turmoil, I share in the anguish and agony that preceded their every cancelled contract, every postponed wage increase, every layoff. This is the land of the small-to-mid-sized firm, after all, and separation from cause and effect is impossible in such a close knit environment. Not only do these people often know their employees by name, they also know the families who depend on them for jobs and paycheques, for clothes, groceries, car loans, mortgage payments, heat, light, hockey camps, swimming lessons – all of the myriad expenses and expenditures that define our way of life.

But these are not sob stories: these are tales of triumph and perseverance, of turning adversity into opportunity, of innovation and adaptation. The news may have been rampant with stories of cold-hearted executives in other parts of the world, but responsibility weighs heavy here in Atlantic Canada.

I wish everyone could see what I'm seeing, read what I'm reading. I wish I could publish these forms in their entirety. I'd post them on our website, and share them with other media, and distribute copies on the street – but I can't. Their contents are confidential.

Not so long ago, I had the privilege of an extended conversation with (in my opinion) one of Atlantic Canada's most impressive corporate citizens. During

the course of an unbelievably candid morning, I learned of epic boardroom battles won and lost; I listened to tales of clashing egos and dashed hopes; I was taken on a thrilling mental tour of the backroom maneuverings behind some of the biggest and boldest business moves in Atlantic Canadian history.

I also had a rare opportunity to receive open, honest, forthright responses to a host of queries. *Who are our*


greatest deal makers? Danny Williams, Stan Marshall... Craig Dobbin in his day. *Biggest negotiating mistake you can make?* Greed. Both parties have to gain something; you may need to do business with the other person again. *Worst thing a CEO can do?* Not be the boss. Someone has to make the tough decisions. It's not a popularity contest. *Does higher education help or hinder success?* Depends on how you define success. The entrepreneurial spirit can't be taught. You either have the guts or you don't. I think some people get too caught up in their own importance after they get those initials after their name. They think they're too good to do a lot of the things that are required when you own and operate a business.

As befits a true conversation, Mr. Big rallied with a few questions of his own. The one which most stands out was when he asked me why I was living in Atlantic Canada. *Why hadn't I moved away?* He could have answered the question himself simply by looking in a mirror. I haven't left because I've never needed to do so.

Thanks to the entrepreneurial-minded individuals who populate our region, I have never wanted for meaningful employment. Since graduating from university,

I've had the best of all possible worlds: a diverse and rewarding career surrounded and supported by family and friends. Here, I belong to a community I wouldn't trade for any other on earth.

I'd love to tell you the identity of my interview subject, but I can't. Our meeting was strictly off the record. Some months earlier, when I'd spoken to him on another matter, I had invited him to stop by the office for a chat. He'd said he would the next time he was in town – but I'd thought he was just being polite. No, he said, he was a man of his word, and when he said he'd do something, he did it.

Leave Atlantic Canada? Not on your life. 



Dawn Chafe

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