

## **A Technical Whiz Becomes a Business Leader**

Donald W. Mitchell

Can you have a Cinderella story about a man? I think so if you see becoming a highly admired business leader as a big change for a technical whiz. I hope you'll agree after learning about Mr. Warren Seetahal, a native of Trinidad. But be warned that there aren't any glass slippers involved . . . just fiber optics.

Mr. Seetahal is the only child of a divorced couple who remained friendly after ending their marriage. Young Warren Seetahal fortunately found himself in the loving arms of his father and his father's parents, who were like fairy godparents for him until his teenage years. Some of his fondest memories were of his father walking young Warren to and from school where he did well.

After Mr. Seetahal became a teenager, his father remarried to a woman who became the "typical wicked stepmother." Here is how Mr. Seetahal described her:

"She never did like me and during times that my father did work late, she would lock me out of the house, turn the lights off while I was studying and all sorts of devious stuff."

Nevertheless, he still progressed well in school.

The equivalent of a magic coach arrived in the form of donated computer equipment from IBM. Mr. Seetahal's school was the first in Trinidad to be able to provide computer training to young people. He learned basic programming and did well in mathematics and physics. His computer teacher encouraged him to take on new challenges, and Mr. Seetahal was soon troubleshooting and fixing problems with the school's computer network.

A second divorce for his father threw Mr. Seetahal, and he was soon skipping more classes than he was attending. Music, table tennis, and chess playing were refuges at that time. Mr. Seetahal often performed in church by playing the organ and in night clubs by playing the piano, violin, bass, and electric guitar.

Despite not knowing much of the material covered in the classes he had skipped, Mr. Seetahal was able to pass his exams and enter a university in the West Indies where he followed a bachelor's program related to computer science that featured programming, as well as mathematics and physics to improve his analytical reasoning. One of his favorite part-time activities during his university studies was writing software for small businesses.

But music was his first love, and he looked forward to a career as a performer. That intention changed, however, when he became engaged to be married.

Only having programming skills that were not in high demand, Mr. Seetahal took an A+ course and quickly found a job as a computer network technician. He had now arrived at the ball. There his boss coaxed Mr. Seetahal into becoming certified as an MCP and then promoted him to the position of network engineer. He was soon solving problems on most of the complex computer networks in Trinidad. Through part-time study on his own, he became certified as one of the first MSCEs in Trinidad.

At 25, he was given charge of building an advanced network for a new company he joined with his prior boss's encouragement. With so much progress, the CEO decided it was a good time to upgrade the company's business processes: Mr. Seetahal became a key team member in those activities. Working with a consultant, Mr. Seetahal became expert in process analysis and improvement. Now, he was the star of the ball.

Mr. Seetahal was reluctant to work on process improvement, but the company's consultant was insistent. Soon, Mr. Seetahal decided to begin doing some business reading. From experience with his next job and this reading, Mr. Seetahal began to realize how he could stay involved with technical work and grow into management roles: He should rely on his staff to find and implement the technical solutions while he focused on getting good business results through applying technology.

After the initial excitement of meeting new technical challenges, each job heading IT for these companies soon bored him. Mr. Seetahal would then move on to the next job with another company while looking for more challenge. These different companies allowed him to learn about ISO certification and new technical environments. Finally, he found a worthy

challenge . . . developing the technical structure for a group of 21 companies in another country, St. Kitts. He felt like he needed a change of location and work to help recover from the break up of his marriage. The clock had struck twelve, and it was now time to leave the ball. While whipping the technical side into shape, Mr. Seetahal realized he would benefit from formalizing much of what he had been learning about management by working in the trenches of solving tough problems. This change allowed him to meet his future spouse and develop his business career in a most admirable way.

Being a busy leader, he looked for a school that would fit his “no nonsense” style where he could study part-time, and he selected Rushmore University for his MBA studies. He was particularly interested in the opportunity to chart his own course of studies to fit his career objectives . . . he now wanted to become a CEO who was capable of turning around troubled businesses. With this extended knowledge, Mr. Seetahal hoped to be able to find enough challenge in one organization to keep himself intrigued by his work. Would this be his trip to the ball?

Online business education turned out to be a nice surprise. Through close work with individual tutors, he soon gained an ability to marshal his thoughts in more effective ways and write about those ideas. Experience with the university’s editor also helped him to improve his writing. Studying with professors, many of whom had written the books he was reading for the courses, also proved to be a heady and good learning opportunity.

After earning his MBA, Mr. Seetahal received a very good raise and a promotion. Currently, he serves as the chief information and strategy officer for his company after having served earlier as the IT manager for five years. During his performance reviews, he has been encouraged to further develop his skills in order to become a CEO.

Now, isn’t that a Cinderella story? Unlike Cinderella, however, even fast career progress like Mr. Seetahal’s takes years rather occurring from a single night’s acquaintances.

What role did the online MBA play in this transition?

“Actually, I feel the MBA gave me a foundation that I was able to build on and learn new techniques on my own. I was able to understand and appreciate almost anything I read; as a result, I was able to apply several

ideas from other books and articles I read, that I would not have appreciated fully had I not completed an MBA.”

Currently, Mr. Seetahal is enrolled in a Ph.D. program majoring in finance and strategy at Rushmore University. Clearly, he has reached a whole new level of independent thinking and ability to learn for himself. He is now happily remarried with four children and four dogs residing in the Seetahal household.

What advice does he offer to other technical whizzes who have an ambition to do more?

“I think a good CEO should come from a technical background and should have served in a technical position for a few years. This can be IT, accounting, finance, engineering and so on. I think this is important because technical training and employment helps develop strong discipline for processes and procedures. I think that a good technical background (training and work experience) followed by formal management training and work experience would be fantastic. It worked for me! I also think that you should try to develop technical strengths in areas other than your main area; for example, if you have a strong engineering background, you should learn accounting, finance, law and technology. A lot of management training comes through experience. Also, I think that having a family is important. As a manager, I prefer to hire a person with a stable family life to fill a responsible position.”

What else can you do with your technical talent?

Copyright 2007 Donald W. Mitchell, All Rights Reserved

Donald W. Mitchell is a professor at Rushmore University. For more information about ways to engage in fruitful lifelong learning at Rushmore to increase your effectiveness, visit

<http://www.rushmore.edu> .