

Webster University 18th May 2019

Graduation Speech – Mark Garrett



Good afternoon everyone. A warm hello from me to Dr. Johannes Pollak and thanks to the entire faculty for inviting me here today. Good afternoon to the parents gathered here today and of course YOU - **The graduation class of 2019!** It's a great honour for me to be asked to speak today.

I love graduation ceremonies. I have attended some for my own sons – I have three sons (one actually attended Webster University) and a graduation ceremony is one of these joyous affairs in life where we get to thank the people around us for getting us where we are today.

And on that note I would like to thank you all for taking the time to listen to me on this very important day in your life. I won't take too much of your time.

You should, however, take the time to thank those people who made it possible for you to be here today - be it those supporting parents, that friend who told you to apply in the first place and whoever else helped you on your road which led you to receive this very prestigious degree from Webster University. Congratulations!

You are now at an important junction in life – an end and a beginning, the start of an exciting new journey that awaits, one that will be fraught with joy, sadness, successes and disappointments – basically whatever life throws at you. The good news is you are as well prepared as you can be as you have made it this far.

When I got the mail two months ago to be your speaker, I decided to prepare with the same intensity many of you have devoted to an important term paper. So late last night, I began...

I have been in business myself for the last 30+ years and I spent 11 of these years in Vienna as CEO of Borealis. I would like to share some of the things I have learnt over that time, with you today. These are not things I learnt at university!

I think that is appropriate because we are celebrating learning and your significant learning achievement today. My simple reminder to you is that learning is a life-long activity. I have about 25 key learnings – but don't worry, I will only take you through 10 here.

The first thing I learned in life is this:

1. If you don't know where you want to go, any road will take you there.

I started my life in Australia (Australia NOT Austria). At the time I had no idea where life would take me and that I would end up travelling and living all around the world and ultimately being responsible for thousands of people as the CEO of

Borealis and now Marquard and Bahls. I certainly didn't know that then, but what I did know was that I did not want to spend the rest of my life where I started. I knew I wanted to see and travel the world so when the unexpected opportunity came along to work for the Swiss company Ciba-Geigy I took it.

You don't have to know exactly where you will end up but you need to know what you want out of life or you will not know which opportunities to take and which to pass on – and there will be many. Take the time to think where you want to go. Jim Carrey famously wrote a \$10 million cheque to himself when he was just starting his career and 10 years later he paid it to himself.

My second insight for you is this;

2. Success comes before work only in the Dictionary

In all my life I have never met a successful person who did not work hard and I have met a lot of successful people. Regardless of how you define success, it may not be measured by money but by commitment and impact. For example the president of Greenpeace does not make a lot of money, but he shows commitment and has an impact – all of you probably breathe cleaner air because of that commitment and impact. It may not always look like there is a lot of hard work from the outside. Success may even look effortless to you. I assure you behind the scenes there has been sweat and blood and tears to get them where they are today.

In Binningen, the small town I live in, a colleague of mine had a young son who was very passionate about Tennis. We used to see him out on the Tennis courts in the middle of winter - winters are cold in Binningen. Come rain or shine this boy would be training his serve and his volleys and his game. Later as he became more successful he would be spotted running up and down Sand Dunes in Dubai as part of his training.

This once young boy, Roger Federer is now one of the most famous and acclaimed tennis players in the world. But many people just see his matches and it looks almost effortless the way he can beat an opponent. Not many people see, how many thousands of hours of training went into this success.

The next one is a very simple advice but also a very profound one as it's so often overlooked:

3. The fundamentals of economics never change. - As you progress into your careers there will be people along the way that try and convince you that the fundamentals of economics have changed and that we have entered a new era. If anyone ever tells you the fundamentals of economics have changed - run! It is usually the first sign of the onset of a crisis.

People thought the fundamentals of economics had changed many times in the history of humankind be it the Tulip fever in Amsterdam, before the dotcom bubble, the sub-prime mortgage crisis or a year ago when bitcoin prices reached \$20,000. The truth is, that if you are spending more than you are earning over time - you will eventually go bankrupt because the fundamentals of economics never change.

4. A rising tide raises all ships. A recession separates the men from the boys. Don't take credit for stuff that was going to happen anyway. The world moves in cycles and if we are lucky we manage to catch the upward swing of a cycle. This is especially true for credit cycles. If you have not heard of it take 30min out of your day and watch the YouTube video of Ray Dalio's speech on 'How the economic machine works'. But don't be foolish enough to mistake these cycles for your own success. Be aware you sometimes get lucky (and sometimes unlucky), just be realistic about which part of what happens is really due to your own achievements.

As you progress through your careers you will be presented with many opportunities and propositions. But remember this simple truth:

5. If it appears to be too good to be true - it usually is. We have seen many examples of this from Mortgage backed securities, the rise of Bitcoin, the incredible valuation of companies such Valeant, Tyco, Enron and recently Theranos (Elizabeth Holmes).

I experienced this first hand myself when I first encountered 1MDB - the Malaysia Sovereign Wealth Fund. At the time I was the CEO of Borealis and I witnessed the amazing opportunities that were being presented by the banks promising unlimited cash reserves of Malaysian money. We know now that the whole affair was a huge scam - read the Billion Dollar Whale if you want to find out how some of the worlds superpowers, investment banks, law firms and politicians were fooled by the, 'too good to be true promise'.

Therefore my next piece of advice to you is this;

6. If you do not understand it - don't do it. – Seriously - Don't invest in businesses you don't understand. Don't do things you do not understand, because there sure will be someone out there that does and they will do it better than you.

7. Ensure you are never the smartest person in the room. Life is about continuous learning. If you thought your days of studying and learning are over - think again. This is just the beginning. There may not be any more textbooks or exams but you will never stop learning. And if you do, you are doing something wrong. Make sure you surround yourself with smart people that challenge you, inspire you and broaden your horizon. The world is evolving every day and if you do not evolve with it, you will be left behind.

8. You can't learn if you don't admit mistakes - looking in the mirror and being honest are the basics for learning. It is inevitable that you will make wrong decisions in your life, including ones that harm others as well as yourself. They may be minor ones, or ones that have a more significant impact on the people you care about the most. Ironically, it's when you acknowledge your weakness by admitting to mistakes that you show your strongest side and you open up the potential and ability to learn.

9. You always need to get the basics done. Focus on the basics and get them right. - You can see this in the everyday life of politics. Politicians will

make the wildest promises of what they will do when they get into office. But the simple truth is this: The things a nation or a union of states needs to get right is

- I. Basic Education
- II. Basic healthcare
- III. Infrastructure
- IV. Rule of Law

None of the fancy stuff matters if the basics are not working. And this is true for any career you pursue. If you don't get the fundamentals right, the rest won't matter.

The toughest one comes last...

10. - Try really hard to hold yourself to higher standards than everyone else. Warren Buffet put it best when he said 'You can't make a good deal with a bad person' and this principle will follow you through life.

As the CEO of a company it is not good enough for me to behave as well as everyone else, I have to behave better and set myself higher standards. That might mean I politely excuse myself after the first few drinks at a fun party or that I have to apply extra scrutiny to what I say and do. But with a responsible position ultimately comes responsibility.

And this applies to you too - Webster graduates of 2019. With the education and outlook you have - you will ultimately touch other people's lives! Your intelligence, your capacity for hard work, and the education you have earned and received, give you unique status but also unique responsibilities. The way you decide to vote, the way you live, the way you consume and the way you do business, wherever you decide to live will have an impact that goes beyond your mere selves. That is your privilege and that is also your responsibility and your burden.

In a nutshell my advice to you is this: Work hard, treat people with respect no matter what they do or who they are - a little respect does not cost you anything, act with honesty and integrity in life and what comes back to you will never cease to amaze you!

Go out there and make a difference!

Thank you everyone!