

Melvin Petty

If Not You, Then Who?

Ever since he was a kid, Melvin Petty felt compelled to step up. He always ended up the captain of the sports team, an academic leader, or a helping hand on his father's farm, organizing those around him and setting a standard of excellence. "I always thought I had good ideas for solving complex problems, and I was always willing to take charge if nobody else would, even if I was least prepared to do so," he remembers. "Everybody has a purpose, and it felt like mine was to lead and solve. A mentor once told me, 'If not you, then who?' That always stuck with me."

After college, stepping up meant looking at ways to make organizations more efficient by applying technology to emerging situations. With the core skills of an accountant and the transformational mentoring of two three-star generals, he excelled at helping businesses find ways to operate faster, stronger, and better. The most important act of leadership Melvin has ever taken, however, came not in the dynamic confines of his office, but in the hectic rush of a hospital room.

Melvin's beloved wife, Sandra, had just undergone a C-section delivery of their son, Travis Miles. In those first minutes of life, which should have been full of joy, it became quickly apparent that the baby was afflicted with Potter's Syndrome. Travis had been born without kidneys, and his lungs would not develop. "Sandra was heavily sedated from the surgery, so I had to make what seemed like a whole lifetime of decisions for our son," Melvin says. "He lived only an hour—an hour that will always stay with me."

In the act of stepping up in that singular moment of crisis and making the most of what little time he had with his son, Melvin's fundamental value system and outlook on life were changed forever. "I had taken life for granted, assuming we would have a healthy

baby," he says. "It dawned on me that every moment is precious, and that realization changed my DNA. I know what darkness is like and how quickly it can come, so I treasure the good times dearly and am happy the vast majority of the time. In my relationships with my family, my staff, and those around me, I place an incredibly high priority on connecting."

Years later, reflecting back on the course of their own lives, Melvin and Sandra identified a general pattern of living, learning, leading, and serving. They wanted to build a company whose culture mirrored this evolution of life. Today, that goal has been realized in Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) International, a health, science, and technology services company dedicated to enhancing performance and predictability in the face of complex problems.

When Melvin and Sandra decided to launch the company from the basement of their home in 2006, their engaged, thoughtful daughters, Erika and Rachel, properly vetted the idea. After confirming that they'd still have health insurance and the same quality of life, the girls were onboard. Melvin was in the process of phasing out of his role as the President of a Defense government consulting firm, and his non-compete agreement barred him from the weapons systems and logistics business he knew so well, so the Petty's explored new markets. "When you're a CEO, it doesn't matter what industry you're working in, because your day is the same: you're always looking for new business," Melvin explains. "Where you spend your time is where you'll get your returns, and healthcare was a big market I had been monitoring closely. The industry was transforming at the time, and the opportunities were vast."

Seizing the day, Melvin and Sandra launched ERP as a military healthcare consulting



firm in October and landed their first consulting contract in January. They lived off their savings for that first year, with Sandra shaping the culture and administration of the business while Melvin was out working on operations and development. In 2007, they landed their first sizeable contract to set up an enterprise content, document, and web services management system for the new Fort Belvoir Community Hospital facility. It was ERP's first big win, and Melvin was able to leverage that momentum to develop relationships with prospective customers in the healthcare community. Those relationships garnered more opportunities, and before they knew it, they had seven healthcare contracts, ultimately serving civilian health entities as well as military. "As a student of small business, I know success comes from focusing on a specific niche," Melvin explains. "That's why healthcare has always been our story and specialty." Today, ERP is a sprawling small business with operations in 42 states, supporting 140 military facilities worldwide and almost every federal agency via its Federal Occupational Health practice.

By its third year, ERP had grown to 40 people, and today, it's established a strong presence in big markets like the National Capitol area, Florida, Texas, Colorado, and California. With an aggressive value proposition and a 95 percent customer satisfaction rating, ERP utilizes its prowess in intellectual resources to help its clients modernize and enhance their services as the industry shifts to performance-based care. With a focus on integration and interoperability, it also houses a large IT practice managing client applications, electronic health records, and business analytics. It manages systems, pharmacies, and departments within hospitals, supporting around fifty facilities across the U.S. "There's really nothing in healthcare we don't do," Melvin affirms. "Our expertise blends the functional knowledge of consultants with IT and the diverse professional skill sets of our clinical staffing division. And in this work, we're better than anyone else you could bring to the table to solve any problem. We're the best." As testament, ERP has been named the fifth fastest-growing firm in the region by *Washington Technology*, and it remains one of the fastest-growing firms nationwide as well.

The mindset Melvin employs at ERP mirrors the approach he observed in his own

father while growing up in Danville, a small textile town in southern Virginia. The youngest of eight siblings, Melvin looked up to his father, a tobacco farmer and textile worker who modeled an incredible work ethic balanced with a policy of always putting family first. "Whatever you want to do, be the best," he would tell his young son growing up. He valued honesty and integrity, raising Melvin to believe that his word was his bond.

Melvin's mother was best known for her love of people and her deep desire to help anyone she could. The company of others gave her tremendous joy, and Melvin inherited that affinity. "As I entered the business world later on, I was comfortable with networking because of her," he reflects. "She taught me how to engage with people in a real, genuine way."

Melvin was as much as fifteen years younger than his siblings, and he grew very close to his father when everyone else went off to college. "I loved hanging out with him—the laughs, the stories," Melvin recalls. He was also close with all his brothers and sisters, who looked out for him and guided him as he grew up. "My sisters were the ones to push my educational and academic focus," he says. "My parents always wanted their children to be educated. I was a stellar student and ended up graduating twentieth out of my class of around 200 kids, going on to be a lifelong learner. I have my sisters to thank for that."

Melvin also loved sports, including basketball, football, and track. Taken together, his interests and obligations made for a very busy coming of age. "As a rural kid, I'd get up, take care of my chores, head off to school, go to practice, get home at seven, do my homework, and pass out," he recounts. "If we had a game, it was much later. In the summers, there was a lot of farm work to consume your time. I worked a few odd jobs in high school maintaining parks and roads, and one summer I started my own landscaping business, but there wasn't a lot of extra time."

The son of Wendell Scott, a popular black racecar driver, was one of Melvin's coaches in high school, and he taught the young man that he'd have to work twice as hard and be twice good as everyone else in order to succeed. "His teachings paralleled my father's example, and I learned to work hard and prepare myself to be ready for the opportunities that would come my way in life,"

says Melvin. In his worldview, luck is when preparation meets opportunity.

His greatest opportunity came at the age of nineteen when he met Sandra, the woman who would steal his heart and become his lifelong partner. “We’ve been married 31 years now, and she’s made me a better person,” he avows. “Through life, we’ve been each other’s biggest supporters. She’s really focused me on being in the present and experiencing all the joys happening today, instead of living for the next success. She’s brought that balance to me.”

While Melvin attended Norfolk State and then transferred to James Madison University to play football, Sandra went to Averett College, a private school in Danville. There, he followed a premed track until he realized he wouldn’t be able to finish within four years—a deal breaker, considering his grants and loans would be cut off, and he was responsible for putting himself through school. “I decided I wanted to pursue an area of study that would be helpful if I started my own business, so I settled on accounting,” he says. “I always knew I’d start my own company, I just didn’t know what it would be.”

Sandra decided to move to Baltimore, so Melvin moved to Washington with some friends when he graduated in 1984. The two got married and set to work building a life for themselves. Without computers or the internet, applying to jobs was an incredibly cumbersome process back then, and Melvin can still remember standing on the corner of 14th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue with a hundred copies of his resume, handing them out to passersby and telling them he was looking for a job. He was hired as a temporary file clerk at the General Accounting Office, where he worked for nine months until he was hired as a staff accountant with Labat Anderson, a small environmental consulting firm.

Several years later, Melvin went to work for Freddie Mac in accounting and secondary mortgages, earning his CPA soon thereafter. After three years in that capacity, he returned to a direct marketing company as an accounting manager. The firm was acquired by a government consulting company looking to grow and go public, which quickly devolved into a disaster. “The company was bleeding money due to poor operations,” Melvin recalls. “When the comptroller for the parent company couldn’t wire over the money for payroll because they didn’t have any, I decided to

leave.”

Melvin then went to work as an accounting manager with Federal Document Retrieval, a small company of \$8 to \$10 million. It was a very successful lifestyle business that fostered a culture of open communication. The owner ultimately sold that company to Disclosure, a research products developer that specialized in the digitization of hard copy documents, and Melvin became the assistant controller responsible for all the financial reporting for his division. Disclosure was then bought by Primark, which went on to do fifteen acquisitions over the next year as it went global. Finally, in 1995, Primark was bought by Thompson Financial Services, and Melvin decided to move into government consulting by joining a small company focused primarily on defense information systems for weapons, logistics, and transportation.

As the company’s CFO, head strategist, and then President, Melvin embarked on a ten-year tenure that grew the company from 10 to 250 people. This was no small feat, considering it was among the worst times ever to get into the government consulting marketplace. The government shut down late that year, and several months later, a severe blizzard caused it to shut down again. The turmoil cost the company its only contract, a \$250,000 hit. Fortunately, they had ample cash on hand, and the investments they made through that tough period made them one of the fastest growing companies in the nation for four of the next ten years.

“We hired good people, developed good people, and prepared them for the next opportunity,” Melvin recounts. “It was a fantastic experience that prepared me for the next opportunity. I came into that organization with a lot of skills, but it provided invaluable leadership opportunities as I learned what it meant to be the one responsible for building a team and its culture. Drawing on the influence of my mentors, the help of an executive coach, the tools of YPO, and the richness of the life exposure I was getting, I built leadership philosophies centered around connecting, engaging, and paying it forward.”

Now, Melvin leads ERP according to the principles of Jack Welch’s Four E’s—energy, edge, getting others energized, and execution. “The foundation of leadership is the ability to inspire and mobilize others through the power of your vision, ideas, and concepts,” he says. “Integrity is

also a vital component of the leadership equation. And I believe leadership is taking care of the people you're responsible for, just as mentors took care of me while I was learning how to lead. My life has been changed by a lot of wonderful people who took the time to be there, so now I make a point to be there for others that need help." Outside of the office, this includes support for charities like Adoptions Together, an organization dedicated to finding families for children with disabilities and troubled pasts.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Melvin underscores the importance of hard work and establishing a high bar. "Strive for excellence, but make sure you're enjoying life," he says. "Understand where you are, where you want to go, and what's required to achieve your dreams. Things won't go exactly as planned along the way, but you can still reach your destination if you stay mindful of the steps you take."

Beyond that, Melvin encourages young people to step up into the roles they feel are right for them. Success takes hard work on a daily basis,

but in the end, it's worth it. "Leave it all on the battlefield, and then you can feel good about the outcome, whatever happens," he says. "Everyone has a purpose in life, and the only way to find it is to step up. Because if not you, then who?"

© February 2016 Gordon J. Bernhardt. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

– By **Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®**

About Gordon J. Bernhardt

President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).

The logo for Bernhardt Wealth Management features the name "BERNHARDT" in a large, serif font, with "WEALTH MANAGEMENT" in a smaller, sans-serif font below it. The text is centered within a decorative, textured rectangular background.

BERNHARDT
WEALTH MANAGEMENT