Joe Ugrin
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Hometown: Miles City, Mont.
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Professional and community activities: Des Moines Obedience and Training Club, Iowa Circus Arts, Young Professionals Connection

Best advice I ever received: One of my high school teachers gave me a little card that said “Goal - What have you done today to reach it?” I still have the card, and I still try to do small positive things every day. That approach has paid dividends for me over the course of my life and career.

What are some of your philosophies and principles toward work and life? These are my personal core values and are on the wall in my office. Integrity: The commitment to do what you say you are going to do. Balance: Something to do, someone to love, something to believe in. Gratitude: Nothing is accomplished alone. Attitude: The one thing you truly control. Learning: Aspects of work and life are not forever. If we are not learning, we won’t be able to deal with change.

What message do you have for high school or college kids about a career as a CPA? I tell kids that new CPAs have more opportunities than ever and the sky’s the limit. There are so many paths they can take, but regardless of what they choose, becoming a CPA is an important step that sends a signal.

How has your experience and CPA background helped you prepare for the COVID-19 situation thrust upon the university? The pandemic has created both a sudden disruption that requires immediate action, and an incredible amount of uncertainty about the future that requires calm and strategic thinking.

I was working as the financial manager for a multi-faceted manufacturer. We designed, built and sold our own smart grid products to utilities, we sold engineering services, and we consumed the excess capacity in our manufacturing facilities through contract work. In the early 2000s, sales of contract manufacturing to one company had grown to 40% of our revenues. A Korean firm purchased that company and we learned that all production was moving overseas within 30 days.

The loss of 40% of our business required immediate action. I vividly recall coming to an emergency management meeting armed with my laptop and financial models. There was a lot at stake, and it was probably the most impactful day of my career. We reviewed the models and umpteen scenarios. The reality was that we had about 60 days of capital if we did not act. Tough choices had to be made, but we didn’t intend to wither away. Most had an equity stake in the company and all of us had an emotional connection and pride in the firm. As a result, we didn’t just make cuts and fall victim to knee-jerk reactions. We were strategic and preserved the most important intellectual resources. Ultimately, the company survived and grew more than fifteen-fold since that day.

I suspect many business leaders are facing the same decisions we faced back then. My advice is to look at your vision statement and hang onto what you can so you can make a comeback. As for the public university, there is great uncertainty. Students are the lifeblood of the institution and we do not know how many we will have come fall. But faculty and staff are the heart, and the job of administrators like me is to provide them with the support they need to do their jobs better than ever before.

What do I hope happens after the pandemic is over? I am hopeful for a strong university of course. I think we are learning a great deal about when traditional, distance and blended learning work best. But more than that, I’m hopeful that people will have a newfound appreciation for personal interaction and find time to put down the phone, close the laptop and talk face-to-face.

Joe and his wife Carrie reside in Cedar Falls with sons Jerin and Culin and two beagles, Winston and Charlie.