**The Grocery Guy**

I am convinced that not many readers of this book will have had a long career in retail food, so why am I bothering to share this story? Because it’s not about the grocery business, it’s about running someone else’s business for a long time and deciding you are tired of that and want to create your own business. It’s about spending many years as an executive with privileges and status and lots of money and giving up most of it to try something different. It’s about thinking that you really know how to do something and finding out that maybe you don’t. It’s about leaving some place because the values of the organization conflict with your personal values. And it’s about realizing you are running a place where many people are unhappy and you can’t do a darn thing to change it.

It was 2006 and I still had openings for participants in my research study, so I was keeping my eyes and ears open to all possibilities. This particular possibility came to me through an article in the business section of my daily newspaper – ‘Fresh Beginning for Grocer’ was the title – that’s how I met Doug. I read his story and was intrigued, and when intrigue bites me in the backside I pick up the phone and start asking questions. It took some real arm twisting (no money exchanged hands) to get Doug to participate. Why? He just didn’t think he had a story – it wasn’t a big deal. But, sometime during our second interview as he was sharing pictures with me of a church and a neighbor’s house and his daughter’s storefront and a pair of Dockers, he began to realize it was a big deal. With tears in his eyes he said, “My goals have really changed. I used to have goals about the end of the quarter, or a title, or 3:00 on a Friday afternoon, so I could get out of the office and head to the cabin. Life has changed my perspective in that my goals are everyday. I just want to be here and have fun and do good work and be with my family and give some people a chance they never thought they’d have. That’s rewarding – it means something!”

Once a grocery guy, always a grocery guy – that’s what Doug believes. He was only 19 when he started bagging groceries at a local grocery store. 40 years later he had been a senior executive in five of the largest retail food organizations in the Midwest, and he was done with it. “I was mentored by a real gentleman who built a business around quality and treating people like family. That was the type of leader I learned to be. All of my years in leadership were spent trying to honor what I had been taught and being the gentleman of business that I had learned from. I was successful at that for a long time, but at some point --- gradually, I guess --- it changed. I remember one of my final days as a grocery store executive – it involved a fight, almost a fistacuffs, with the CEO. A woman had purchased a roast and the meat was bad. She had written us a letter and I was sending her a gift certificate for $25 in addition to a refund. The conversation went something like this:

C(CEO):Why you sending her a gift certificate?

D (doug) :What do you mean? She got a bad piece of meat.

C: Yeah, but you gave her a refund.

D: She’s entitled to that ‘cuz she had a bad piece of meat, but she also had a bad experience and I want her to come back. I’ve included a gift card making sure she comes back and she has a good experience.

C: Well, why was it for $25? Why wasn’t it for $10?

D: I probably had said to make it for $10 and Barbara, my assistant called me a cheap S.O.B. and told me she wouldn’t come back for only $10 – make it $25.

Profitability was increasing because I am a good operations guy and we were making changes that made us more efficient, which means we were making more money. I just couldn’t understand why we were arguing about $15.”

This **conflict of values** started to eat away at our grocery guy. “I started to butt heads a lot with the head guy and the straw that broke the back was an ethical decision. We were putting together a bonus program – to incent the employees to do a good job. If they did a really good job, they got x amount of dollars and the company got x amount of dollars. When it came time to pay the bonuses, he didn’t want to pay one of the employees. I asked why not? She does a great job and she’s earned it. His response was that he didn’t care, he didn’t like her. I asked him how he thought she was going to feel, and he asked me why I had to care so much about how people felt. In my mind, there is no response to that question... I left that meeting and called my wife ‘I’m gonna leave. I can’t do this.’” Unfortunately, Doug was under a contract that required him to stay for one more year, and he honored what he refers to as ‘a year of hell.’

What does a “grocery guy” do when he’s done being the HEAD grocery guy? He starts his own grocery store. It wasn’t like he set out to open his own store, but he wasn’t ready to retire yet and where was he going to work? True – he had significant leadership skills that would translate into success in many organizations that were not part of the retail food sector, but he was 55 and when he started to look around he heard always heard ‘you’re food guy’. He would argue that he was not managing food or electronics or clothing; he was managing people, processes – managing to a strategy. It didn’t make any difference what he said – they looked at his resume and saw 35 years of food. Not only that, but they saw one job for 28 years and then three jobs in the last five years. The job search wasn’t working for him, so one day he woke his wife and said “I’m going to go out and look at a closed grocery store site in Green Lake.” Things moved pretty quickly. He saw the store and liked it and after talking with the landlord a few times, they formed a partnership and then the real work started.

After 40 years in grocery stores and 33 of them in leadership positions, I assumed that he would have known how to open a new store. “Yes … and no. We had teams that did that kind of thing and now I was on my own. I needed to do it all … training, recruiting, fixtures, store design … no one else to rely on, but me and my partner, who didn’t know anything about this … and my wife.” My assumption was that a guy with his experience would understand cash flow – I was wrong. “I had no idea how to manage cash flow day-to-day. I might have been the president of a large company, but I had a CFO that was worrying about the money. Plus, when I became president of L’s, they were generating a ton of cash and I didn’t worry about money. I never dreamed that I would have to call up the bank and ask them how much money I had in my account. All of a sudden, I had to worry about if we had enough cash to cover payroll and pay bills. I remember one day getting a call from the delivery guy of a Kraft truck telling me he had a load for us, but if we didn’t pay our outstanding invoice, he wouldn’t be bringing us our order. I couldn’t believe I might not have enough money to pay that bill so that we could get our cheese delivered … and it was a whole lot more than cheese.” This money discussion made me wonder about what it was like to have this be about **his** money versus the company’s money … what was that like? “That has probably caused me more sleepless nights than anything – it’s mine and my wife’s money. It’s required more money than we ever anticipated and it’s affected our lifestyle. We are doing fine, but we may have to sell our lake home and we don’t shop the way we used to – we are careful now. Those aren’t bad things, but they are certainly different and have required a real adjustment.” Money wasn’t the only thing that weighed on his mind now – there were other things that he felt completely responsible for. “There were employees that came to join us – left good jobs, left their seniority, left their security. I need to make it work for them because they sacrificed a lot to join us. The key employees all work more than they need to – they work without being paid for it. It’s all a risk --- for all of us, but we agree that the rewards far outweigh the risks.”

**Worry** was a theme in our conversation … not enough worry to stop the dream, but worry. In my experience, leaders in transition all worry about something, regardless of their confidence in themselves or the situation. Worry is bonded to uncertainty and there is plenty of that during transition. The first picture that Doug shared with me was of his home. “During this entire thing, cash flow has been on my mind. Can we afford to keep two houses? I planned to put in a large amount of my own money and that amount ended up tripling over the last year. We’re fortunate in that we never worried about having food to eat or a car to drive or clothes to wear, but I must admit that in the back of my mind the house thing is always there.” This was balanced by his frequent references to the fact that he has been extremely fortunate with the amount of money he has been able to make. “At times, I would catch myself being a little whiney and then a shift of perspective would hit me as I looked at others around me. ‘Really? You are worried about maybe having to sell one of your houses? Many people in this country don’t even own one house, much less two.’ I think it’s because I had not worried about money in many, many years. We bought what we wanted, ate out wherever we wanted to, and for the first time in a long time (since we were first married – poor, but happy) we were watching our pennies … It’s been good though. We eat together at home more often. We have simplified our lives. That’s all good, so while the worry is there, it’s not a bad thing.” Interestingly enough, his other chief concern has been his wife. As a matter of fact, he stopped talking to her about the financial part of it. It makes her crazy. “It’s been a good weight loss plan, I guess – for her. When she is stressed, she doesn’t eat, so she has gotten smaller. When I am stressed, I eat, so I have gotten bigger. Good balance for each other, right? She has a sister that is a great place for me to talk finances though; she’s very level headed and doesn’t get all whipped up. It’s good for me because I am a talker and need a place to just talk about what I am thinking about with the money. It’s not worth it to watch my wife get stressed, so I just tell her it’s going to be fine and talk with her sister.” Apparently, they did not really need to worry. As of this writing, I just checked their website and they now have two locations and appear to have built a unique concept grocery store that is doing well. The last time I spoke to Grocery Guy, he thought they were going to break even that week and he was very excited. He actually said that he had a hard time sleeping the night before we spoke – partly because he was excited to talk about the experience again (I think he was just being kind) and partly because for the first time in eight months, they were going to break even – no money coming out of his own pocket. That is an intriguing idea that we could apply to all change … what does break even look like for your change? And how long are you expecting to give before you break even? He was very pleased because he said they were getting there much quicker than most new stores. Clearly he had managed his expectations and it helped his anxiety. I wonder how many of us increase our anxiety about the change because we have unrealistic expectations. No answers here – just questions for each of us to ponder.

Spending 28 years as a leader with one grocery chain definitely shaped Doug’s **leadership style**. “I am definitely the product of that environment. I am demanding, but fair. I try to make my employees feel special. I can’t sit across from someone and not see the person before I see the employee.” That way of leading, which was all he knew, didn’t fly in other companies, which is why he moved through four jobs in seven years – three jobs in five. One thing that certainly excited about him about opening his own store was that he could create the environment he wanted. Several vignettes help us see how he embraced this change, and how the choices worked out.

“A woman I know shops here – I think she grew up in the neighborhood. I noticed she was buying more groceries than usual and said it was because her cousin was now living with her. When I asked why her cousin was living there, cuz’ you talk about things like that in a small neighborhood grocery store, she told me she had just gotten out of prison. Before that she had been running a meth lab in her house. So, I asked if she needed a job – if so, send her in. So we hired her. She does a great job. My wife drives her home at night and picks her up in the morning. She is thrilled to death to have this job and be working here. It’s very rewarding to be able to do something like that to help someone. When I was President at B’s, we would have worried about the risk and ended up not doing it. Here – it’s a risk, but so what? I get to choose.” I was curious about the risk piece because it seemed to me that if you are a one store company that it’s more difficult to absorb the bad risk than at a big organization. “I didn’t feel that way because if she were to steal from me here, it’s me – it’s my store – my money. Not all of my choices have worked out. I have another woman I hired that lived in downtown Minneapolis and things started out pretty good, but then she started being tardy for work all the time. She told me it was because she drove a ratty old car that would break down all the time. So, I hooked her up with a good mechanic friend and it cost $700. She didn’t have the money, so I paid for it and told her she could pay me a little bit each paycheck. Well, she continued to be late for work and we had to terminate her – so I’m out $700, which I don’t regret at all. But, I wouldn’t have done that at B’s. We also have some meth addicts here, recently out of treatment and it’s working out well. I hear from employees that we have created a very nurturing environment. You know, giving people an opportunity is something they are forever grateful for. I don’t expect them to be indentured servants, but they work really hard and want to pay you back for giving them a chance.” It was interesting that Doug didn’t know that this piece was missing when he was working for other organizations in leadership roles – he didn’t spend time thinking about how he wished he could create a different environment or give more people a chance. This was something he learned was important to him once the chance presented itself. His personal values include doing the right thing and helping others – even at personal risk – and he is now able to fulfill those as a business owner.

As I listened to the grocery guy tell his story, I could see the personal pride in what he had built and the strong feelings he had toward those that took this leap of faith with him. He couldn’t wait to bring me out into the store and meet his wife, who cashiers and bags groceries and sweeps floors. “Being with my wife every day is terrific. She’s amazing. Now that we are in this together – creating this really cool thing, I can’t believe what she put up with all those years. I would work a 12-14 hour day and come home and not talk about my day at all. She had no idea what I was doing and yet I was tired of it – I had worked all day and the last thing I wanted to do was talk more about work. That’s really a rotten thing to do. Plus, I was going to dinner at 5 star restaurants and attending sporting events sitting in suites being chauffeured in a limo sometimes and I never gave a thought that she was home raising a lovely, responsible, kind daughter. I owe her a lot. Now we do this together and it’s terrific.”

He was excited about the grocery manager who helps him make decisions about advertising. “She had been in management for years at R’s, but had never really made a big decision – she just executed. Now, she has more decision making authority than she ever dreamed of. It’s exhilarating to watch her grow into this role when she has someone that believes in her and sees how smart she is.” Then there’s his produce manager who is still wowed by the fact that he gets to decide where and how to display the produce. At the other stores, there was a map for produce created at corporate and handed down. I love this sound byte …

PG (produce guy): Well, where should I put things?

D (doug): What do you think you should do?

PG: I don’t know.

D: What do you mean you don’t know?

PG: I’ve never had to do it before.

D: I know, but you’ve always had an opinion, right?

PG: Yeah

D: Well then, how would you like do it?

PG: What if I try this and it doesn’t work?

D: I don’t know – you change it.

The results of giving up ownership and letting go? A proud boss – a confident employee who feels empowered and is not fearful of making mistakes – and, a beautiful produce department. If this grocery store were closer to me (not a 45 minute drive), I would shop there all the time.

Speaking of **letting go**, I wondered what he needed to let go of as an executive with very large companies who was moving to a small, start-up operation. He mentioned power “I used to have power that went with having a title. When I gave up the title, I gave up the power. I remember that I could call Coca-Cola and ask to talk to anyone I wanted there and they would get them on the phone. Now, I call and people are like ‘Doug who?’ It’s kind of a head rush – definitely contributed to the massive ego that I built. People have asked me why I didn’t start my own business before and my answer is ‘I wasn’t mature enough – way too much ego to be in the place I am in.” For the most part, Doug didn’t miss anything. He must have been very ready to leave the old career or positions within the industry because he didn’t miss the large budgets, the status of leading a well-known store chain, the conferences, the travel … he did admit that it was nice to be picked up in a limo and stay at a Ritz-Carlton without spending a dime of his own money … but compared to the satisfaction he has in his new role, the loss was almost non-existent.

As I have learned through my study of job transitions, a critical piece – arguably, **the most critical piece is relationships.** There are the people that you are leaving, there is the issue of not burning bridges because you can never be sure that you won’t need them again in some way, there is the issue of new relationships, and the issue of relationships outside of work that play an important part as well. Our Grocery Guy built relationships very quickly. He formed a business partnership in less than 72 hours – one in which he was going to invest a very large amount of money, time and energy. During the very quick decision making process, several people pushed Doug to check out this guy, Tom. “My response was that I have listened to him to talk to his wife and kids on the telephone. I know how he treats them, and he always says I love you before saying good-bye. I know that and I know he has a lot of money. I’m good to go.” Doug believes he has good instincts when it comes to people (most of the time). Doug was familiar with people called retail councilors, who act as a liaison between the supplier organization and the store owner. He was familiar with this role, but his department managers were not and it was interesting to hear how his past experience allowed him to trust quickly, but his managers were very slow to trust. They moved forward in the relationship cautiously, but they did move – mostly because they trusted Doug and Doug trusted the retail councilors. During times of change, trust becomes a huge factor. Not only is trust a tricky thing to build, but it greatly affects the speed at which things can happen. The higher the level of trust, the faster things can happen. It was also helpful that he had treated suppliers in his past jobs with respect. –It worked to his benefit when he went out on his own ( a little tiny store that no one knew would be successful) and had to ask for their help – for their credit in many cases. He was certainly grateful that he treated people fairly and kindly – he always had. What about the media? I actually found Doug through a story in the newspaper – front page of the business section had a large picture and long story on his venture. He believes he got a great deal of positive media attention because he had always made it a point to be accessible to the media when he was with the big boy stores. It seems the lesson here is WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND. He even had a former partner from B’s (and Doug had replaced him as CEO) that came into the new store one day and told Doug that if he were ever looking for investors to give him a call. This was a guy that Doug did not always see eye-to-eye with, but Doug had paid great attention to relationships throughout his career and it came back to him in spades when he opened his own place.

One might wonder if **the speed of the transition has any effect on how successful or stressful it is …** at least I wondered that. It doesn’t seem to be a contributing factor – at least not a significant one. While our Grocery Guy will tell you that he never expected to leave B’s ( he really didn’t --- he envisioned that he would retire from the same grocery store he began working for as a bag boy), it didn’t work out that way. He actually thought that might be a key reason why he shuffled through organizations at a very rapid pace after he had worked for one store for 28 years. He had really settled in to a style, a particular culture, a mindset that ‘this is how you run the grocery business’ and that mindset was very difficult to shift. As a matter of fact, it never did shift. He was just very hopeful and kept looking for something that was like the store he grew up with – the store he loved. When he had finally tried all the stores, and he realized he wasn’t ready to sit home and play checkers, he knew that the only place to find comfort was in opening his own store. Rather ironic that he would do something he had never intended to do and didn’t know how to do … in the name of finding a comfortable place again where he could use his natural style and live his values. Once he had his mind made up, things moved quickly. There was no time for distractions – he had 6 months to gut a store, create a new one, hire a workforce, and figure out how to run an independent grocery store. Did he have second thoughts at all? This conversation is telling … it comes from my initial phone call with Doug when I was trying to convince him to be a part of my study. He was okay with the interview, although he really didn’t believe he had done anything particularly interesting. Where he got stuck was when I said I would be giving him a camera and asking him to take pictures that reminded him of what the transition was like. I will never forget his response. “Pictures of what? Like the inside of my shower wall? That was the place I looked every morning before going into work and thinking ‘what the hell have you done, Doug?’ Once I got to work, there was no time to think – just work.”

There are a few things that Doug believed helped him make a smooth transition into this new role. Part of it was moving through 3 jobs in 5 years. Part of it was seeing his daughter graduate from college and open her own store – get married. Part of it was having his father and mother die a little less than a year apart. He also lost a dear friend and neighbor to cancer. “All of that stuff changed my perspective. I mean - life changes. What guarantees do I have that I won’t die tomorrow? None. What do I have to lose? Not that much really.” He does wish that he wouldn’t have bought so much stuff. “The physical things I acquired aren’t very important. I wish I would have spent less on stuff and put more money into savings – to be better prepared financially than I was. In my head, I always thought I would make the big salary and get the big pension and the 401K – I should have thought more like my parents who lived through the depression – they didn’t take that stuff for granted.” He doesn’t consider himself to be a religious guy – never has, but he had a picture of his church and said that the church represented “giving me perspective and keeping me grounded and learning about the joy in serving others.” There was a key theme about **perspectives and values** throughout my interviews with Doug. This story exemplifies his values and his perspective on life. Seems like many of us have to lose someone important to us in order to truly grasp the fact that there is much over which we don’t have control and one of those things is ‘how long we have to live.’ “You know, I didn’t wait until retirement to buy a cabin like we had always planned to. It was Memorial Day weekend nine years ago when we were visiting a lake up north. It was raining out, so my daughter coaxed me into looking at a home that was for sale. So, we looked at the home – no big deal. When we got back to the house, we got a call from the office that a woman who worked for B’s had a car accident. She was out driving with her daughter on a country road. There was a turtle in the road, and she overcorrected her SUV to miss it and she rolled the car. Her 6 year old daughter was killed and Debbie was in the hospital with a broken back. I just couldn’t shake how suddenly her life had changed. The next day I called a real estate agent. On the way home I told my wife I was going to make an offer on that house. She said ‘why? I thought we were gonna wait until we retire.’ I said, You know what? We could die tomorrow. Why wait? It’s the best thing we have ever done because we come to the place with friends and family and we are away from everything and just are together. The nine years worth of time we have spent here have given us priceless time. If Debbie had not had that car accident, I still wouldn’t own the lake home.” This story isn’t about whether we can afford a lake home or cabin, it’s about the fact that we sometimes hold onto “truths” that don’t look so true when life hands us something unexpected. For Doug, this changed his life and he started being much more generous with his time and energy and money because he valued today in a new way.

Bridges (*Managing Life’s Transitions*, William Bridges) speaks of the fact that it is during times of transition that we learn the most IF we are open to the learning. One of my takeaways from the time I spent with the Grocery Guy was that he learned a great deal about himself during this transition from corporate executive to entrepreneur. While you, as a reader, may learn different lessons than Doug did, I want you to be aware that transition is a golden opportunity to learn. Perhaps you have already been through a transition – it’s not too late for you to ask yourself some key questions about that experience and the lessons you learned. Maybe you are in a transition now and are feeling a desire to rush through it and get settled into something more comfortable – SLOW DOWN, like the yellow caution light at the traffic signal. Don’t rush past the points of pain and discomfort and frustration and joy … poke them and see what is inside those emotions … they are little packages of learning and you should open them carefully and examine the contents.

You are likely not a grocery guy, but you may be someone that has spent your life working for others and you are deciding to work for yourself. I think that Doug’s learnings can help you learn something, too.

* “It’s very different being in the shoes where the money we spend is MY money. I would have been more prudent with my expenditures. I wasn’t careless, but I would have been more careful. There was a time at B’s when they were almost bankrupt and the owner was telling us how desperate things were … that he couldn’t afford to put in a sprinkler system (and he was living in a mansion). The analogy didn’t really work for us because we could only see that he had a lot more than we did. Now, I get it! Maybe someone buys $550 worth of toilet paper and cleaning supplies for the store, and we don’t actually have the $550 to pay for it. We bought it on credit, but are now paying the bank for every day that it sits on a palette collecting dust. Could we have waited a few more days or another week to buy it and save money, instead of spending money we don’t have? I never thought of that before and I would have been more prudent with my personal and professional finances.”
* It’s very okay to say I don’t know. There are many leaders that feel as if they have to have the answers – people expect them to know, so they make it up when they don’t know or they clam up and don’t say anything at all – both of those scenarios create mistrust with employees. Doug didn’t know how they should price things --- he knew they weren’t going to be like Cub, the low-price leader or Lund’s, the exclusively expensive pricing --- but he didn’t know what the what price should be on things. He didn’t know how to manage cash flow and was on the phone with his accountant nearly every day trying to figure out what to do and how to keep the store afloat. He knew they took credit cards, but he didn’t know how they were paid by VISA or Mastercard. All of this money kept showing up in the bank account and he couldn’t figure out where it came from. Guess what? It was credit card payments coming in. He didn’t know how to do anything on a computer. He seemed to get by just fine in executive roles without knowing how to do any of these things. I can’t resist sharing a funny story that helps us see what a switch it was from executive (having people to do everything for you) to business owner (I have to do everything). He was assigned a liaison when he first joined R’s and the liaison is in charge of the technology department. For several weeks, he asked his neighbor to print his emails and bring them to him. One day he gets a call from his liaison telling him there is an email he has to read. ‘You’ve got to check your email right now.’ ‘I don’t know how, John.’ He screamed an obscenity over the phone “how the \_\_\_\_ did you get hired?” Doug’s response ‘It’s not what you know, John, it’s who you know.’ While that is a funny story, it’s also kind of sad in the fact that an executive might be so sheltered that he can’t do anything for himself (exaggeration) or that he gets by because he knows the right people. The bottom line here is that our Grocery Guy was miles away from the actual operation of a grocery store and he had a lot to learn when he decided to open his own store. Due to his newly acquired lack of ego, he had no problem asking for help and admitting that he was clueless about many things. “It’s been humbling to say the least, and humility is not a bad thing, balanced with a proper dose of ego.”
* Life is way more important that a job. During the year that Doug was between jobs, his father became very ill and he was able to spend a great deal of time with him. His father was an alcoholic and after his mother died, the drinking got worse. There was only actually three or four days between the time his dad was put into a hospital and when he died. Doug had five siblings, but he was the only one not working and who had the money to take care of Dad. “It was a godsend to be able to be with my dad. Experiencing that made me realize that I didn’t care if I had to drive a VW instead of an Acura. That doesn’t define who I am. My values became really clear during this time off.” He also talked about the soccer games and concerts that he missed while he was traveling or working and his wife was accompanying his daughter to those events. He didn’t really see that at the time, but it’s clear to see now that he can’t get it back. “I was too focused on pulling the train into the station rather than the journey.”
* “We’re gonna be judged someday on something way more important than how much money we made.”
* “Don’t take the job too seriously. It’s what you go home to at the end of the day that is most important.”
* “Sometimes you have to do a bunch of stuff you don’t know how to do, but you figure it out and the more you do it, the more comfortable you get. It’s a waste of energy to worry about looking stupid or being afraid of screwing up. Put that energy into figuring it out.”
* He realized what makes him happy and it’s not stuff. “I used to wear expensive double breasted suits to work every day and now I put on my brown shirt like everybody else and if I can make a buck that day, I’m happy. I’m even happy when I don’t make a buck.”
* “It all rolls up to what do I want to do with my life?”