



A Succession Plan for the 21st Century

by Will Marre

It all became clear for me while riding – way too fast - in a black Audi TT, heading south to Sky Harbor airport. At the wheel was Kim, 37 years old, President of a large education company. Kim was a classic American success story, at least by traditional standards. She had started with the company at age 20 as a receptionist. A single mom, she had worked her way up to VP of Marketing, and then as the company was floundering, she was named president. She enlisted the help of every employee even the lowest level employees and turned the company into a powerhouse in eighteen months. Without a single lay-off, she had steered the company from the brink of disaster to the point where it was growing like a hurricane in warming waters.

But as we darted around the blind side of an 18-wheeler, Kim shocked me by announcing that she was weighing an offer to become a regional director for a large national charity.

As her leadership advisor, I calmly asked if she had completely lost her mind.

No, she replied. Her Board was considering going public. Kim knew that this move would enrich the company's owners but bankrupt its soul. So she wanted out.

But come on - walking away after 17 years when "the big payday" was right around the corner? "It's not about money," she said. "I'm just afraid I won't be able to do what I really want to do if I stay with the company and spend all my waking hours talking to Wall Street Analysts." Kim wasn't posturing. She was really ready to walk away from it all – the money, the prestige - if there wasn't something more.

As we pulled into the airport parking area I turned to her. "If you didn't have to please the Board or the bankers - if you could do anything at all - what would be your dream?"

Without blinking she said, "I would change the world."

“Okay,” I said, “I give you permission. Live your dream. But live it *within your company*.” A look of surprise crossed her face. “Let everyone buy into your dream,” I told her. “You are in this leadership position for a reason. Step up to it. Sell your vision to your Board, your executives, your employees, and your customers. Go ahead, blow their minds!”

A few weeks later Kim did just that. In as memorable a speech as I’ve ever witnessed, she addressed the top 200 leaders in the organization. She shared her vision. From the heart. She spoke of how the company would become an ideal place to work, a revolutionary provider of educational services and a force for positive change in the world. Attending were several members of the Corporate Board of Directors. Not exactly touch-feely types. No matter; their hearts caught fire in the heat of her conviction.

Within a few months the Board added CEO to her President title. Today she is changing the world from within the company. Her mission is to take students who have been “left behind” and put them on a career track to earn \$50,000 to \$150,000 a year.

It isn’t a pipe dream, it’s real. She’s building an on-ramp to the American Dream for thousands of kids.

My epiphany with Kim came after decades of working with CEOs and senior executives. Most of my clients were like me – high-achieving Baby Boomers. In weekend workshops, we all talked about the value of family and community and finding meaning in our work, but come Monday morning it was back to the old grind: jockeying 60 to 70 hours a week to stay ahead of the wolf-pack.

Then a few years ago I began to acquire some younger clients. Thirty-something CEOs and senior managers. They were saying and doing things differently. Not all of them, but enough. They talked about the same values as my colleagues - “happiness,” “fulfillment,”

“independence” - but they were putting their money where their mouths were. Turning down promotions, relinquishing job titles. So that they could have a meaningful life. They didn’t just *want* to change the world, they *intended* it. Right now, *before* they got rich.

It seemed as if the children of Boomers were actually living the mission statements their parents had written but failed to live.

Part of *my* role in implementing Kim’s vision was to research the attitudes, hopes and dreams of the new generation of Americans - people aged 17 to 40, who make up the bulk of Kim’s employees and virtually all of her company’s students. With the help of DYG, social researcher Daniel Yankelovich’s company, what I discovered validated everything that I had been experiencing over the last four years. Gen21 - the 126 million Americans aged 15-40 - *simply doesn’t believe that our society works*. Their dreams are much closer to Thomas Jefferson’s than Donald Trump’s. “Gen21” is quietly hatching a new vision for career, lifestyle and community. Meanwhile, Boomers remain absorbed in the game we created, all but blind to this shifting vision.

But change is coming.

The Boomer generation has accomplished some great things. Advancements in technology and medicine. But we’ve also messed up. Big time. Let’s face it. We’ve built a society based on consumerism. To make money, now, we’ve shipped off more and more of our industrial production to countries with 50-cent-an-hour labor. Mostly, we’ve created a big-box economy. In a superficial way, it worked. We sell stuff to each other made somewhere else.

Our houses are twice as large as the ones we grew up in. We wear 20% of the clothes we own and use 50% of our furniture. We like stuff.

We work hard for our excess. We work more than anyone else in the developed world. Every year we log almost two months more than the average European. We even work more than the Japanese. And after work... most of us watch TV and shop. We're a nation of watchers and shoppers.

It wasn't until I started working with Kim that I saw it clearly. The new leaders are not "us in progress." They are not us at all. They no longer want to define personal worth as net worth. They don't want an economy built on consumption and a culture captivated by fame.

The new generation has developed a deep and abiding skepticism. We told them more stuff would make them happy and that quality time was time enough. What they saw was stress, anxiety and disloyalty.

They've been burned by virtually every promise their predecessors made. Presidents lied. Priests abused. Parents divorced. Corporations cheated.

The new generation is not about to lease its soul to the devil, hoping to get it back in the form of a 401K plan. A seismic shift in attitudes is happening *now*. Everywhere I speak to young Americans, the mood is the same. Passion for change. Hunger to create a national dialogue for a new future.

The leaders of tomorrow want it all and they intend to have it: a serious career, fair rewards, time for friends and family. They have seen the failure of materialism and are seeking a restoration of idealism. A rebirth of the American Dream without an obscenely priced admission ticket.

The 21st Century Generation doesn't accept things at face value. They don't have to. The internet has made the world transparent. Information is only a few clicks away. Access to truth, to new ideas, is the cornerstone on which Gen21 is building.

A rising flood of new ideas, values and energy is roaring down the canyons of our culture and will transform our world. We can either catch the wave or drown in our irrelevancy.

That's why I started the American Dream Project.

The American Dream Project is a non-profit, online think tank and community for change. Its aim is to engage leaders, educators, students and citizens in reinventing the American Dream for ourselves, our children, our workplace and our communities. It's a grass roots movement with very tall grass.

Can we do it? Can we create organizations that allow the new generation to live a life in which work, love and play are meaningfully integrated?

I believe we can. The American Dream Project is a succession plan for society. It will launch in January of 2005. The website has have 5 Centers:

1. myDream Life: How we live, where we live and why we live matters.
2. myCareer: For careers you both value and enjoy.
3. myEducation: Personal growth and reinvention.
4. myWorkplace: Meaning, money and tribal joy.
5. myLeadership: Leading the leaders of tomorrow.

If You Want to Get Involved...

Creating the world of the future will take radical courage, big ideas and the courage to face the limits of our current assumptions.

If you are ready for a revolution of ideas and a rebirth of the real American Dream, we invite you to join at AmericanDreamProject.org