



Been there, done that

→ ROGER BELL

CHIEF EXECUTIVE, VERO NEW ZEALAND

Roger Bell enjoys his workplace so much he's been there for 35 years. "I love the people in this company," he says. "I could never imagine a better place to work." Vero's a regular finalist in the Unlimited/JRA Best Places to Work, and excellence in the workplace is something of a passion for Bell. In 2004 Vero gained a Silver Level award from the New Zealand Business Excellence Foundation, based on the extensive Baldrige Criteria, and this year it's going for Gold. Christchurch raised, Bell has always worked in insurance and has held a range of roles in New Zealand and Australia. He did 30 trips to Australia last year alone as a member of the Promina and Suncorp boards and is also on the New Zealand Business Excellence Foundation, the Insurance Council board, and is a member of the Business Roundtable. A couple of years ago he also discovered the virtues of a life coach, who has encouraged him to embrace his passions for politics and cooking. "She's unleashed in me a tiger in the kitchen," he says.

What's been your biggest surprise?

There's a fabulous study of leadership, *Good to Great* by Jim Collins, which defined some characteristics that made great companies. The one I absolutely love is there's no single big breakthrough; it's about relentless improvement. What's exciting about that is if there was a big breakthrough it would imply a gimmick and it would imply it could be copied by your competitors if it were that simple. The bad news is it's hard work; but the good news is if you keep on at that relentless improvement and have frameworks to drive that, you get there and you elevate yourself to a level that is world class.

What's been your biggest mistake/ disappointment?

I guess a disappointment we had — and it's quite an interesting business learning — is don't assume when you think you've deployed stuff that you have. What we found — and I suspect it's a challenge with Kiwis — is with some of the things that people would define as 'soft', if some people didn't think they were commercially important not every person would deploy them as you would want. You might believe you've got company policies, and a clear understanding of what those policies are, but don't assume they are fully deployed in your company. You have to have mechanisms to audit and test that.

I guess the disappointment is that human

nature won't always deliver on everything you think it will.

What's the biggest lesson you've learnt?

We used our staff to put together our values and we underpinned our values with clearly defined behaviours. That has been a phenomenal driver of our success and staff engagement. It's holding the leadership team to those values, and holding the staff to those values and seeing people acknowledge that we're sincere about that. It underpins everything. If you take integrity: it affects the way we pay claims, but it's also about showing integrity to all your stakeholders — our suppliers, our business partners. It's not just 'I'll be honest'; it means 'I'll be honest in the broadest sense of the word'. To see the phenomenal way that drives engagement, which has enabled us to endure market conditions in tough times, has been a big lesson.

What's the best advice you've been given?

I think the best advice I get is from my direct reports. We do a six-monthly performance review of them and I include in that a review of me. What I feel from them is an authenticity; they give me a wonderful sense that they want me to achieve. They know I want to be a good leader and they encourage me by giving me good feedback.

Interview by Caitlin Sykes