

From Serial to Social Entrepreneur

Peter Thomas **employs a lifetime of business skills** to make a difference for others.

by Lisette Hilton

When Peter Thomas turned his full-time attention from making profits to making a difference for others, he found his entrepreneurial skills and innate, enthusiastic can-do attitude were like gold in getting things done through charitable ventures as well.

“As I got into it, I realized there were so many good-hearted people,” Thomas says, “but a lot of them were not armed with the skills that they require—whether that be funding, sponsorships, organizational skills.”

As founder and chairman of Century 21 Real Estate Canada Ltd., he developed the largest real estate network in Canada. At the time he sold the company in 1987, it had achieved \$9 billion in annual sales through 450 franchises with more than 8,000 sales representatives. In 1984, Thomas founded Samoth Capital Corporation, a North American real estate investment and management services company (now known as Sterling Centrecorp Inc.), serving as chairman and CEO until 2001. Thomas has led numerous other ventures, including development of the Four Seasons Resort and Hotel in 2000 in Scottsdale, Ariz., through his U.S. real estate company, Thomas Pride International.

In addition to supporting favorite causes such as education and mental health, Thomas devotes time to inspiring and sharing wisdom with other entrepreneurs, including students just launching their own business ventures. In his view, he’s passing the torch to the very people most capable of the greatest accomplishments in business and altruistic endeavors.



Changing Lanes

Peter Thomas realized that his business acumen would translate well into the nonprofit sector.

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A self-made success and one of Canada’s leading business people, Thomas was the son of a single mother who struggled as a nanny to support her family in war-torn London and later after immigrating to northern Alberta. When Thomas was 16, he enlisted in the Canadian Army and spent the next seven years in the service. Upon his discharge, he was eager to make his mark in business.

“I’ve been very lucky,” Thomas says. “I’ve always been able to attract, retain and motivate people who I think are better

than I am. I give all the success to the ability to create motivated, passionate teams.

“Successful people have a good attitude; they are ‘motivatable.’ You don’t have to wake them up in the morning,” he says. “They know what the word commitment means. When they commit to something, they do it.”

In addition to his business triumphs, Thomas staged a spectacular comeback after a business partner went bankrupt. His net worth plummeted from about \$150 million to being \$70 million in the red. “It took five years to work my way out of that, and I did not go bankrupt,” says Thomas, now 70. After emerging from debt, building empire after empire, he earned the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award for the Pacific Region in 1998.

Thomas credits his comeback to clearly defined values. He realized other aspects of his life were intact—his family, health, friends and community. “If you have to lose one of the important things in

GIVING BACK

Peter Thomas’ causes, activities and honors include:

- ▶ Todd Thomas Institute for Values-Based Leadership at Royal Roads University: Founder and chairman.
- ▶ Life Pilot: Founder and chairman
- ▶ Entrepreneur’s Organization: Chairman Emeritus, International Advisory Committee; honored with annual Peter H. Thomas Award of Merit, chairman of 2008 Judges Nominating Committee, Global Student Entrepreneur Awards.
- ▶ Thomas Foundation: Chairman of privately endowed foundation focusing on children, mental health and education.
- ▶ The Todd Thomas Foundation: Chairman of foundation focusing on mental health charities.
- ▶ Collegiate Entrepreneurs’ Organization: Vice chairman; Lifetime Achievement Award; CEO Hall of Fame.

life, I’d rather it be money. You can always get that back,” he says.

Thomas’s life as a serial entrepreneur took an abrupt turn in 2000 when he lost his only son, Todd, who suffered from a series of mental disorders and committed suicide at 36. “When I lost Todd, I was in a cloud [for] about two years. The only thing I could do was think of how I could honor and celebrate his life, so I became involved in a lot of charity work,” Thomas says.

In 2000, he funded the Todd Thomas Foundation, focused on mental health charities. But he didn’t stop there; he took his method of values-based goal setting to the masses through LifePilot, a British Columbia-based not-for-profit organization he founded that provides programs aimed at empowering people to live in alignment with their values. To date, LifePilot has inspired more than 5,000 graduates, including business leaders, students, families, prison inmates and soon military members and veterans. Thomas also created the Todd Thomas Institute for Values-Based Leadership through a gift in 2006 to the Royal Roads University Foundation in Victoria, B.C.

Thomas also stepped up his work through the Entrepreneurs’ Organization, of which he was a founding member and now chairman emeritus, and with the Collegiate Entrepreneurs’ Organization, which encourages college students to be entrepreneurial.

Thomas approaches these social ventures by relying on a get-it-done entrepreneurial mindset. “Entrepreneurs can see through the complexities and through the chaos and difficulties and see it all as doable. They may start off and they don’t know where the financing is coming from; they don’t know where they’ll get the staff. There are no answers but they have an almost maniacal belief that they can do it.”

Thomas also impresses upon young entrepreneurs the importance of giving back and values-based leadership. “When you’re blessed with skills that are needed to become successful, along with that comes responsibility to help,” he says. “I don’t feel it’s an obligation; it’s an honor. One person can make a difference.” **S**

PETER THOMAS’S RULES FOR SUCCESS

1. KISS: Keep it simple simple.
2. Ignore people who say “It can’t be done.”
3. Work smart, not hard.
4. Become a student of your chosen career.
5. Don’t be an innovator; study what works and do it better.
6. Emulate the best in your field, but with your own spin.
7. Write down everything, track goals, follow through daily.
8. Stay focused.
9. Act enthusiastic and you will be enthusiastic.
10. Be persistent.
11. Practice delegation every day (empower others).
12. Avoid extensive meetings.
13. Make decisions quickly—don’t be afraid to make mistakes.
14. Make the most of your day—get up early.
15. Have at least five mentors.
16. Visualize—“Begin with the end in mind,” as Stephen Covey says.
17. Add fun to all your activities.