

Speech by Sir Richard Branson to The Centre for the Mind University of Sydney, 10 December, 2003

Thank you Allan for those kind words and thank you all for coming along today.

I appreciate that at this time of year there are probably a number of Christmas events that hold a great deal more appeal than hearing me talk about my life as an entrepreneur and businessman.

I would particularly like to thank Professor Snyder, Robyn Williams and Professor Brown for the invitation today.

I have been lucky enough to receive a number of awards in my lifetime. It is safe to say that as a 16-year student who needed to borrow £4 off my mother to launch my first business venture such awards seemed highly unlikely.

But, then again, at 16 it also seemed highly unlikely that I would have the opportunity to rub shoulders with a band as great as The Rolling Stones or even fly around the world in my own jumbo – or nearly around the world in my own hot air balloon for that matter.

I guess it is somewhat ironic that, as someone who never went to university and who even struggled at high school, I find myself being presented with this award in the grounds of The University of Sydney. My business or management education has come from trying and succeeding – and even from trying and failing.

It is also very humbling to read that Nelson Mandela is the Millennium Fellow for the Centre. Nelson Mandela has achieved so much for the people of South Africa and is such a wonderful ambassador for his continent that to receive an award from an organisation with which he is associated is a true honour.

It wasn't until I read that the Centre for the Mind exists to "shatter mindsets and stage-manage spectacular initiatives" that I understood why I am being presented with this award at all.

After all, the Virgin Group of companies exist to "shatter mindsets" about how customer service should be delivered and how products need to match consumer demands.

And whether I am driving a tank up to a Coke sign in Times Square, or flying solo around the world in a contraption floating 60,000 ft above the earth's surface because of hot air, I guess that I am always trying to be 'spectacular'.

So now I understand why I am here.

I appreciate that you may prefer to ask me questions, so I will keep my speech to a minimum and keep some time up my sleeve at the end.

Alan has asked me to provide you with my thoughts on how creativity has been important in the growth and success of Virgin and has also, somewhat unkindly, asked me to share my views on 'What makes a Champion'.

I have always admired champions – whether in the field of sport, science, business or the arts – who **attempt the impossible**.

We have all heard countless examples of champions who recount stories of being told by the establishment or by so-called experts in their field that something can't be done.

I am sure that Sir Edmund Hillary heard many times, "that mountain can't be climbed".

Or when Tiger Woods is told, "no male golfer can win a grand slam" I am absolutely sure that motivates him to work even harder.

And when Virgin was told that it couldn't create and operate a profitable trans-Atlantic airline from scratch, it motivated me to get the airline up and running in just six months – and we haven't looked back since.

Today, Virgin Atlantic is the second largest long-haul international airline operating services out of London, flying to 21 destinations all over the world from Shanghai to the Caribbean and soon Sydney.

Being unafraid of failure is, I believe, one the most important qualities of a champion.

My interest in life comes from setting myself huge, apparently unachievable challenges and trying to rise above them – an interest that was, perhaps, fuelled by my grandmother telling me at the age of 99: “You’ve got one go in life, so make the most of it”.

Whether I succeed or fail in meeting the challenge is immaterial – it is the effort and the opportunity that drives me. I truly believe that through effort and I guess to some extent risk, success is waiting around the corner regardless.

However, while champions aren’t afraid of failure, they are truly made when they learn the art of **turning failure into success**.

The only time I could ever be compared to Johnny Wilkinson is when we were both four and I hazard a guess that neither of us could kick a football. He is a champion now because he learnt how to do it.

Innate talent and skill are certainly important. As is hard work and perseverance.

In addition to that, my recipe for success has always been to **understand my limitations** and to surround myself with talented and brilliant people that can pick up where I leave off. And, most importantly, to **have fun on the journey**.

One definition of a champion, as far as I am concerned, is somebody who can empower people’s ideas in order to fuel success.

It is no secret that I have always attributed the success of the Virgin Group and its brands to the people that work for our company. I have always had a policy of hiring good motivators over good business-people. I always look for executives that put their people first and themselves last.

So, in many ways I believe **champions are self-less**.

They also are quick to put their faith in others. When a flight attendant approached me several years ago with an idea to start a wedding business, I told her to go and do it and even wore a wedding dress to help her promote it.

When Brett Godfrey approached us with a business plan for a low cost Australian airline, written on the back of a beer coaster, Virgin provided the finance and the optimism and sent him to Brisbane to get on with the job.

Human intellectual brilliance comes in many forms and a champion knows a brilliant idea immediately – whether it is theirs or someone else's.

The mind which can develop life-saving vaccines is very different from the mind which structures complex financial transactions, yet they are equally complex and amazing in their own right.

I have always been fascinated by intellectual brilliance in others - whether it be a concert pianist like Roger Woodward or a military strategist like General Peter Cosgrove or a medical miracle worker like the late Dr Victor Chang, or even the mental toughness and adaptability of a Steve Waugh.

Brilliant minds exist to take us forward as a society - they are a leading indicator of our progress as human beings.

My own formula for success is actually **not** to rely on any brilliance in my own mind, or at least not to **solely** rely on it. I have decided all the way through my life to surround myself with people I know have that something special within, and to harness that brilliance for my own benefit and experience.

My business team has always been the best and brightest I could find anywhere in the world, and my role has simply been to assist them to achieve their potential.

Brett Godfrey is a great example of that philosophy. Here was a success story waiting to happen - a brilliant business mind with a specific interest in customer service. All he needed was support and financing. That's where we came in.

And that has been the case with many other special minds I have been lucky enough to know. Even the Sex Pistols were brilliant minds in their own way - people underestimate their ability to communicate a social message through their music. Virgin saw that they had something special and decided to back them, and they went on to change the way we looked at rock music.

So a life of being surrounded by brilliant and creative minds is something that has been good to me. I recommend it as an approach to business, and life in general, because it works.

If I could leave you all with one message today it is that Australia must examine ways to support brilliance and bring it to the fore - particularly in the realm of business and commerce.

Australia is a country which plays well above its weight in producing brilliant minds. From the superb research skills of Sir Howard Florey to the creative genius of Baz Luhrmann, Australia has stunned the world with its contributions to all fields of endeavour.

The great challenge that I can now see for Australia is to harness that brilliance as a force for good in business.

Can Australia encourage its young people towards a new spirit of entrepreneurialism and the embracing of risk to create economic benefit for the future?

Can we teach Aussie kids that Brett Godfrey is a good role model - a man who has, through a simple set of very brilliant ideas first sketched on the back of some beer coasters, created thousands of jobs for his fellow Australians, and an investment vehicle to create wealth for many hundreds of thousands of his countrymen.

Can we create an educational and cultural environment where young Australians understand that it's OK to take a risk and invest in their own enterprise and vision?

Can we assist them to create the jobs and wealth of tomorrow?

It's a subject that occupies my mind, and I hope that I can use my ongoing investment in and love affair with Australia as a way of encouraging that new entrepreneurial spirit.

Before I finish and take any questions you may have, I wanted to touch on the issue of creativity, especially the role that creativity has had in building the Virgin Group into the success it is today.

I mentioned Baz Luhrmann before, and I truly do marvel at the creative genius he possesses to turn the conventional Romeo and Juliet of William Shakespeare into the Romeo and Juliet of Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes.

While establishing Virgin Records, we witnessed first hand the creativity of Mike Oldfield and Peter Gabriel, and the unconventional Rolling Stones and The Sex Pistols.

It was during this time that we realised the important counter balance between CREATIVITY and CONVENTION.

In developing the Virgin business our enemy has always been convention.

At Virgin we firmly believe that convention is the enemy of progress. It stifles creativity and innovation. It hinders success and destroys a sense of adventure.

However, when it comes to other businesses, we have found that people usually bow to convention over creativity.

How many businesses do you know that would empower every individual in the organisation to implement change?

At Virgin, we encourage and reward creativity in our employees and, as I have already said, we have enjoyed the success of empowering other people's good ideas. We want – and we have – employees who can pick up the phone and call us with their ideas, dreams and problems.

How many would grow a brand organically, with the cost, time, risk and creativity that involves, when a quicker option is to buy an established business?

Business convention dictates that it is less risky and more prudent to acquire successful brands than build your own. I have always found that it is more fun, and ultimately more successful, to build a brand and business from scratch and tailor it to your needs and the demands of your customers.

How many businesses do you know that would put having fun ahead of customer or shareholder satisfaction in a list of their business priorities?

Convention dictates that a company should look after its shareholders first, its customers second and its employees last. At Virgin we do the opposite. It seems common sense to me that if you start with a happy and motivated workforce, you're much more likely to have happy customers – which, of course, leads to larger profits and happy shareholders.

If a company believes in itself and is having fun, the net result is customers who enjoy the product. For any of you who have flown Virgin Blue – and I hope you all have – the first thing that would have struck you is that our flight attendants actually look like they enjoy their job and are having fun. I am not sure the same can be said of our competitor.

And finally, how many businesses do you know that specialised in music would back a creative – and some said crazy – decision to start an airline in competition to British Airways?

It really was the belief in a creative, left field idea that was the making of Virgin.

I would like to thank you all once again for joining me here today. As I said at the outset, it is an absolute honour to receive this award and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.