

# **SCU Graduation Occasional Address**

**Mr David Smithers, AM**

9.00 am Saturday, 28 November 2015

Whitebrook Theatre, Lismore Campus

Chancellor, Mr Nick Burton Taylor, Mrs Burton Taylor, Vice Chancellor Professor Peter Lee and Mrs Lee, Ladies and Gentlemen and, most importantly, Graduates.

Good morning everyone and congratulations to all the Graduates here today!  
Well done!!

I have two ambitions this morning. The first is to provide some insights into the challenges that lie ahead for you - insights I would have welcomed at my graduation in 1965.

The second ambition is to so present my remarks that some of them will be remembered. In saying this I note that of the 15 colleagues I recently canvassed as to their recollection of their graduation addresses, none could remember a single word!

It goes without saying that I am hoping for a superior outcome!

When I qualified as a Chartered Accountant 50 years ago I was, as are you today, filled with youthful enthusiasm. I just wanted to go out and earn some decent money, just as I suspect do you, and I thought I was definitely the most talented professional in Australia, perhaps as you also do. I gave no deep thought whatsoever as to what it really was that I had achieved. I was naïve and superficial- so very superficial.

Fifty years on I now know what my graduation really gave me. As with you, it gave me the **right to be taken seriously**. This today is your right- your hard earned right. The right to be respected for your knowledge, to be employed or promoted because of your qualifications, to be able to teach and to command attention when you speak. Your challenge now is to maintain that right into the future.

Let me share with you what seemed to work for me during the 50 years I have spent facing that same challenge.

### **“What you are” versus “Who you are”**

The **“what you are”** has been demonstrated today very clearly. You are intelligent people who know your topic and have well satisfied your examiners. You are Graduates!

To reach this stage of your life and career however you have also been developing the **“who you are”**, perhaps not consciously or deliberately but it has been happening. The **“who you are”** is simply another way of describing your **reputation**.

Without doubt the creation and maintenance of a good reputation is fundamental to the challenge of continuing to be taken seriously.

I am sure you have all demonstrated over recent years that you are disciplined, passionate, and accountable and are people of integrity. These and other important values will have underpinned your reputation to this point.

This is excellent of itself but please, as of today, rest not only on your past achievements, not even your graduation. Accelerate in earnest the vital task of continuing to build on and to defend your own very special and good reputations.

Expressed simply your reputation will reflect your choice of values. It will take a lifetime to build; it can be destroyed in seconds; it can make you and it can break you.

Need I say more about the importance, and indeed the fragility, of reputation than to mention Volkswagen.

I rest my case.

### **Be Yourself; Back Yourself;**

**Being yourself** and **backing yourself** in my experience will always enhance your right to be taken seriously. Another word to describe these characteristics is “**confidence**”.

Being yourself is being true to your values, it is being prepared to be different; it is telling the truth even when it is not in your favour; it is a fundamental element of your personal integrity.

Being yourself also means being honest with yourself. I have met people who confess to pursuing a career for reasons other than their unbridled love and passion for that career. Their career choice was perhaps to enable them to succeed their parents in the family business, perhaps it was high perceived financial rewards or maybe a family tradition. Whatever it was, without love and passion for their career the decisions were wrong.

Be honest with yourself. Pursue only the career that you truly love.

**Backing yourself** is the natural extension of being yourself. Backing yourself reflects an ability to recognise and grasp opportunities when they arise. To achieve this will require you to remain alert, flexible, to preserve your options and to have a basic plan- a plan that will enable you to identify the opportunities which fit it and to run with them!

Remember also- and this is certainly my experience- that the most exciting opportunities frequently arise from the most unexpected sources and in circumstances over which you have little or no control. Be prepared!

### **The Company you Keep and Continuous Improvement**

We all have a basic responsibility to continually improve- to stay abreast of contemporary thinking in our chosen field. However, I found three other means by which I could continuously improve.

Taking care with the company you keep is an important practice which will underpin your ongoing right to be taken seriously, particularly, but not solely, because of its impact on this responsibility to continuously improve.

As a young man I was relatively fussy about the company I kept. This fussiness was then more instinctive than taught and no mention of it was made during my studies. It was not until some years following graduation that I realised the positive impact these people, the company I was keeping, were having on my career.

I found that the company I kept seemed to fall into the following basic categories:

Firstly there were the people I generally respected and who appeared to share my values and have similar goals and ambitions; often they were smarter than me and I was able to learn from them. I certainly listened a lot and in that way learned a lot. Constantly surround yourself with clever people!

Secondly there were my special mentors; people whom I was fortunate to meet as my career unfolded. They took an interest in me, gave encouragement, shared experiences and from time to time lightly touched my tiller. The wisdom they shared with me could never have been taught nor was their value to me ever foreshadowed during my student days. The hugely positive role they played in my career can neither be measured nor repaid. Your mentors can be like mine-an indispensable ally in your career planning and execution.

Finally there were my competitors. You may think it is strange to use competitors to continually improve. However I tried to spend as much time as was practical with my competitors, learning about them and from them. As a student I was never taught that competitors could be such a source of encouragement for me to continuously improve. Whether we have a competitive personality or not, a good competitor will stimulate us to bigger and better performances. Be alive to this phenomenon and embrace it.

## **Giving Back**

I am talking here about giving back to people not as fortunate as you or me, about teaching those with a thirst for your knowledge, about your involvement in charitable works or acting as a mentor yourselves.

If your experience parallels mine, the rewards from giving back will exceed your highest expectations. They are equivalent to the thrill of a major business success. They will compliment your career and, importantly, enhance your reputation.

However you choose to give back I do urge you to choose a cause about which you are passionate and give back to it with gusto - you will never regret it and your reputation will be the better for it.

## **Honour your “Pit Crew”**

Successful people usually have a Pit Crew. So what do I mean by a Pit Crew?

Pit Crews create the framework, the back up to support race drivers pursuing their goals.

In our context Pit Crews perform exactly the same role. They help others achieve their goals. They take many shapes and sizes. They include Parents, Partners, Wives, Husbands, Siblings, Family and close friends. They soften our lows; they temper our highs. They congratulate and encourage us and they are our most honest critics. They are loyal beyond reasonable expectation and they help us focus on the things that really **are** important.

I suspect there are many Pit Crews here today beaming with pride at the achievements of their 'drivers'. My Pit Crew- or the leader of it - is also here. She is my wife of 45 years. She is the one who tells me, when I fail , that I was not really as bad as I thought I was; equally, when I succeed she is quick to tell me that I was not really as good as I thought I was. And she was right. Should I miss a parent teacher interview because of a business meeting, she was also the one who would remind me of the things which really **are** important.

Honour your Pit Crew!

## **Conclusion**

Today I have described some of the more important principles and practices which seem to have worked well for me over the last 50 years in **my** quest to continue to be taken seriously. They were not explained at my graduation; they were not described in any text books ; they were not taught to me as a student ,they don't have any particular order or score and they cannot be "Googled".

Maintaining and growing a sound reputation and developing the "who" you are is as crucial as honouring your Pit Crew.

Giving something back is just as rewarding as a career of continuous improvement amongst other like-minded and clever people.

Working at what you truly love, being yourself, backing yourself and succeeding is one of the most rewarding experiences of a working life.

I will leave them for you to ponder. You can score them, agree with them, disagree with them or even try them if you wish. I simply hope that as your

careers unfold, just one or two of my experiences may help you in some small way in **your** quest to remain a person who is taken seriously.

Perhaps also if this occurs, when you are asked in 50 years time what it was that I had said, there may be a fighting chance that you will remember a word or two,

Congratulations again on achieving your degrees; I trust that you never once regret your hard work to this point and go on to achieve great success in the pursuit of your dreams.

Good fortune Graduates; good fortune to you all!