

Memories of Bill Norris

By Norb Berg

Bill Norris was my boss, my mentor, and my friend.

For many years I met with him every morning at 9:00 am in his office. I walked in with a notebook and a pen and came out with notes and a stack that represented everything he could get off his desk or off his mind-for me to do or to pass on to others. Usually, it included the crisis of the day from somewhere in the world.

He had a good sense of humor, and I shared a lot of jokes with him. Once I told him, "Bill, people ask me what it's like to meet with you every morning and I tell them it's like having an accident every morning at the same corner." He enjoyed that. He also laughed when I told him if anyone accuses me of being Bill Norris' yes man, I always replied that it was not true- that when Bill Norris says no, I say no. He enjoyed that also.

Bill had an undeserved reputation for being tough to work for. That just wasn't true. I used to tell people that all you had to do is find out exactly what he wants done and do it. His tolerance for error was zero-and I mean error that was the result of sloppiness, carelessness, lack of effort. On the other hand, he was very tolerant of entrepreneurial failure and of technical failure. He had been involved all his military and business life with efforts that were technically difficult, efforts that involved trying to bend or skirt or fool the laws of physics. He was almost too understanding of all the perils and pitfalls that cutting edge efforts involved.

In the early years of the company, Bill traveled frequently by train. He made it very clear to me that he intensely disliked being in the end car of a train. He said, "You can't read, you can't sleep, you can't eat, you can't do anything in the end car of a train." That was a simple mandate and I handled it with our travel people. As I said, just find out what he wants done and do it.

Well, one day he left Minneapolis for New York with a sleeping car reservation, properly residing somewhere in the middle of the train. During the night the train stopped in Chicago, dropped off several of the end cars loaded with sleeping passengers, and continued to New York. Guess who was now in the end car of the train, unable to read, unable to sleep, unable to eat, unable to shave. He called me from New York to remind me of his very strong preferences. It never happened again. Sometimes careers hang on a single, fragile thread.

He never got angry with me, and I can remember twice when he reproached me. Once, he held up something I had written for him and asked, "You aren't hellishly proud of this, are you?" I told him, "Well, I was up until right now." That was the extent of his

reproach. Another time, I made some kind of mistake, and he pointed it out to me. I went back to my office, called the Mpls public library to make sure of the statistic I was about to use, and then returned to his office and told him. "Hey, Bill I just checked, and Babe Ruth struck out 1330 times and I just blew one." I made no impression. He merely replied, "I pay you to hit homeruns, not strike out."

Needless to say, all of us major leaguers who worked for him were never deluged with compliments. But he did give me a big one when it counted. My mother and father were visiting, and I took them to Bills office and introduced them. My mother loved to describe the incident. Bill said, "You have a good son." My mother, probably unaccustomed to such input, came right back with, "You have a beautiful building here." Bill replied, "Your son means more to me than this building." And in telling the story, my mother always added, "and it was a big building." Thanks for the compliment, Bill.

Yes, we weren't deluged with compliments, but he treated his people like they were major league players. That man knew how to delegate. I went for a walk with him one noon and told him we needed to have a new headquarters building on the site we were on. He asked how big. I told him 600,000 square feet. He asked what it would cost. I gave him an approximate figure. He said, "O.K., but let's make it the last building on this site. I don't want this site to look like an ant hill."

His management style was such that I only discussed the building once with him during its construction. Because I knew he thought carpets were elegant and opulent, I went to his office and told him that we were going to carpet the building because all our studies showed that it was the cheapest way to go-especially because of keeping the tile floors clean. He told me in no uncertain terms that I was not going to carpet that building. Period. I went back to my office, waited a little and returned to his office. I said, "Bill, you never made me do something so stupid in my life. Not carpeting that building would be stupid." He said, "Alright, go ahead and carpet it. I suppose you will be putting gold fixtures in all the lavatories too."

Again, as an example of his management style, we didn't talk about the building again until the Friday evening before our Monday morning move-in. Pat Conway and I took him over to his new office, which was totally furnished without any consultation with him. He walked over to the window and said, "Nice view", looked around and said, "This will be fine, show me where I park."

Bill Norris was my mentor. He also did a very good job of being mentor to his successor, my colleague and friend, Bob Price. Bob had the unenviable task of following a legend, like Phil Bengtson faced when he followed Vince Lombardi at Green Bay.

Who could dream of having a better mentor? The lessons we both learned were countless. I have chosen one example to share with you. Bill and I often traveled together. On this particular trip, we had been picked up by a limousine at the airport. When we reached our destination, the driver opened the door for Bill and then came around to open the door on my side. I didn't wait for the driver but opened the door myself and stepped

out. As we were walking away, Bill said to me, "Norb, you've got to let that driver open the door for you." I told Bill that I always felt a little uncomfortable having people wait on me. Bill said to me, "You have to let him feel good about how he does his job." How do you ever forget a lesson in sensitivity like that?

Speaking of mentoring, I smile when I remember him saying to me as we were about to enter a meeting- "One of us has got to get mad in this meeting. Who is it going to be, you or me?"

Some observations, recollections, and memories...From my mental scrapbook of Bill Norris memories, I'd like to share a few of my favorites.

I asked him once what the most serious trouble was he got into as kid on the farm. He said it was when he unintentionally caught the neighbor's cat in one of his traps. He said he never would have been caught if he hadn't skinned it out and stretched it like he did with his other catches.

After his dad died, he managed to keep his cattle alive in the dust bowl days of the early thirties by feeding them Russian thistles. That innovative action resulted in the Russian thistle becoming the Control Data symbol of innovation. But the time came when he simply had to get rid of the cattle. He herded them to town, loaded them into cattle cars and accompanied them to the Omaha stockyards. When the buyer there told him what he'd pay Bill for the cattle. He couldn't believe it and said he wouldn't sell for that low price. The buyer told him-and Bill remembered the exact words- "Well, sonny, why don't you just load up your cattle and take them back to your farm." Bill told me he walked over to the split rail corral fence, climbed to the top rung and just sat there for a long time and thought about it. He concluded he had no option but to sell, but he also concluded that he would never again be in a job or business where his success was dependent on the weather.

Over the years, I have often pictured that dusty young cowboy sitting on that corral fence, boots, jeans, and a straw hat, chewing on a stem of grass, with the weight of the world on his stooped shoulders.

When General Douglas McArthur retired in 1952, the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York gave him and Mrs. McArthur a suite there for life. McArthur was hired by Sperry Rand to be Chairman of their board. Bill Norris was running Remington Rand Univac or Sperry Rand Univac. Bill would go on to New York, stay at the Waldorf, then ride with General McArthur in his limousine to the Sperry Board meetings in Long Island.

Bill really enjoyed those rides with McArthur. Among other things McArthur told him was, "Truman had no choice but to fire me. He was the boss, and I disobeyed his orders." McArthur also shared with Bill that his big sports hero was Vern Gagne, the World Heavyweight wrestling Champion from Minnesota. McArthur thought Gagne was the greatest and even corresponded with him. Bill bumped into Gagne once and told him of McArthur's admiration. Wouldn't it have been interesting to be a fly on the window inside that limousine. McArthur and Norris-what a combination.

Bill had meetings and lunches with a long list of senators, congressmen, cabinet members, governors, church leaders, and CEOs. I did sit in on many of those sessions. He never believed in just a social lunch; time was too valuable. At some point he would dig out of his pocket some carefully prepared notes and make a pitch on urban redevelopment, technical cooperation, rural ventures, corporate ethics and unwanted takeovers, computer-based education, export regulations, job creation and other subjects. Hubert Humphrey listened to him carefully about job creation. Many congressmen and senators listened as he advocated legislation to allow technology cooperation between competitors without running afoul of anti-trust laws. Many such ventures eventually resulted, beginning with MCC in the computer industry.

As he invited them to get involved, he preached a lot about job creation, rural and urban development to church leaders like Bishop George Speltz and Bishop John McGrath of the Catholic Rural Life Congress, Dr. George Schultz, Treasurer of the American Lutheran Church, and Dr. David Prues President of that church. In a follow-up letter to Bill, Dr. Prues wrote, "The combination of gifts you bring to our society is unique and remarkable. I thank God for the ways you use them." Bill met with Dr. Howard Shomer of the United Church of Christ and Dr. Tom Monson, the number two person in the Mormon Church. Archbishop John Roach wrote this in a letter to Bill: "My business, in part, is to keep people's consciences alert. You have done that in a remarkable way. I have no ideas what the day-to-day judgement of your peers is of you, but you have forced the business community and other communities to take a second look at some assumptions, and that's a powerful combination in our society."

I remember the luncheon with Reverend Jesse Jackson. I had toured him through some of our inner-city plants before the luncheon. He said, "Mr. Norris, I had given up on corporate America until I visited your operations and met you. Bill urged Jesse Jackson to get his PUSH organization involved in remedial computer-based education for African American youth.

I also remember meeting with Dr. Leon Sullivan, discussing Control Data's use of computer-based education to train Black teachers in South Africa.

When we were eating in Henry Ford's office in Detroit, I watched with some pride as Mr. Ford diligently took notes as Bill covered some of his favorite causes and philosophies.

Locally, Bill, Ken Dayton and Bobby Piper worked hard to put together the Minnesota Seed Capital Fund to facilitate small business start-up and job creation. Bill also respected and worked with John Whitehead of Goldman Sachs on job creation and other issues.

After visiting with Bill, Chief Justice Warren Burger often referred to Control Data as he spoke around the world about prison reform and skills training in preparation for re-entry into society. He once said in a letter to Bill, "I look back with considerable satisfaction on our common interest in the problem of corrections in the American penal system. You

contributed a great deal to that." Senator Charles Percy mentioned in a letter to Bill that Chief Justice Burger called Bill Norris one of the true geniuses he has ever known.

Peter Drucker congratulated Bill over lunch for his perception of societal needs as business opportunities. Drucker gave Bill and me an autographed copy of the only novel he ever wrote. Drucker himself described his novel as a bomb.

Governor Rudy Perpich, who had worked at Control Data between terms, once said at one of our lunches, "Bill, just give me some ideas that will help this state. I can get anything done that makes sense."

Eddie Albert, Ralph Nader, and later John Denver came by to hear his thinking about rural development and other Norris initiatives. Wassily Leontief, the Nobel Prize winner, in a memorable letter wrote, "Yesterday's meeting in your boardroom will be as brightly engraved in my memory as the early morning seven years ago when the voice on the other end of the telephone line told me that I had been awarded the Nobel Prize."

The highest tribute Bill Norris paid was to refer to a man or woman as a significant person. He didn't use that term very often. I remember the first time I ever heard him refer to a person that way was about Jim Rowe. Jim was a Washington Attorney, a Commercial Credit Board member and longtime advisor to Bill, Bob Price, me, and others in Control Data. He had been a law clerk to Oliver Wendell Holmes. As a young lawyer in his 20's he had helped draft some of FDR's New Deal legislation. Blessed with an uncommon gift of common sense, he exemplified Bill Norris's description of a significant person.

Bill Norris the Visionary:

I believe it was the philosopher Schopenhauer who said, "There are three stages of an idea-first it is ridiculed, then it is opposed, then it is obvious."

Certainly, some of Bill Norris' ideas-especially computer-based education and societal needs as business opportunities-suffered their fair share of ridicule and opposition before they became obvious.

In the 1970's, Time Magazine quoted Bill as saying that corporations could effectively and profitably run prisons. This was the ling before Corrections Corporation of America and other companies began doing that.

Sometime, also in the 70s, Bill and I met with the Chicago Crime Commission at their request, after they had zeroed in on improving education as the key to reducing crime in Chicago. Bill proposed that Control Data take over a Chicago public school, and using the computer-based education, run the school on the existing per pupil budget with a guarantee that the students would pass the Illinois placement exams. They were intrigued. But that was a little too radical and before for-profit entities were operating and running public schools in places like Minneapolis.

Some media experts-or geniuses- Sid Hartman would call them, had a field day ridiculing Commercial Credit/Control Data's technology funds' very minor investments in wind energy in the 1970's. Years later when those same newspapers lauded Excel Energy for its wind energy initiatives, I clipped the editorials out of the papers and sent them to Bill with some gloating cover note, I'm sure. He never gloated. I did. From time to time in recent years I also sent him clippings about corporations running public schools, prisons, and other examples of profitable businesses meeting societal needs. I smiled most recently in January 2006, John Deere announced the creation of a business unit to provide project development, debt financing and other services to those interested in harvesting the wind.

One local media person who consistently worked to understand Bill's vision and where Bill was coming from was Leonard Inskip. Let me close with some comments about Bill Norris and compassion.

Bill recognized a compassionate God. How do I know that? One day we were talking about a common acquaintance who had been enduring a Job-like chain of personal misfortunes. Amid this he did something not morally acceptable. Bill said to me, "You know, Norb, you'd think that God would look at all he's through and just look the other way."

His compassion first touched me personally in 1962. I was 30 years old, making about \$1,000 a month, had a pregnant wife and three kids. I came down with Tuberculosis as did one of my infant sons, Mitch. I went off from Control Data for an indefinite stay-that turned out to be five months in the Veterans Hospital and a month at home. When I left, Bill called Jim Harris, my then boss, into the office and said, "Make sure Berg continues to get his paycheck." The company had no benefit program to cover me at that time. I did get my check every month and it saved me from financial ruin. Jim Worthy, in his book about Bill, cited the incident and the roughly \$6,000 in salary commission I received, as one of the best financial investments Bill ever made. I don't know about that, but I do know that I have never forgotten what that gesture meant to me and my family. I have tried to reciprocate with total loyalty.

One last thought on compassion. Control Data had so called ghetto or inner-city plants in St. Paul, Minneapolis, Washington D.C. and San Antonio. We needed good employees and the residents there-mostly minority members-needed jobs. One day Bill asked us to see if we could find a burned-out mining town in Appalachia for our next assembly operations. Pat Conway and his very competent staff zeroed in on Campton, Kentucky, in the part of the country with the second lowest per capita income in the USA. Sometime after that plant was in operation, Bill got a very memorable two sentence letter from a female employee there. Over the years he received a lot of nice letters, but this one stands out in my memory. The letter was signed by the employee and simply said, "Dear Mr. Norris, Thank you for the Campton plant. I always knew I could if I just had the chance."

That's a good note to close on.

Bill, you made a difference in the lives of a multitude of under-privileged and under-served people. They knew you were a significant person. On behalf of each and every one of them I say, "Thank you, Mr. Norris, we always knew we could if we just had a chance."