

Jarlath Keating

Reject Mediocrity, Embrace Change, Take Chances

When Jarlath Keating was a schoolboy in England, he was called into the school nurse for his annual check-up. The nurse was friendly and chatty, and she jokingly noticed that young Jarlath was average in weight and height and said, "Here's Mr. Average." "She wasn't being negative," recalls Jarlath. "But even then, it grated on me that she would describe me as average. All these years later, I still remember being described as average and remember thinking, 'I don't want to be average.' I know she was just making conversation, but it did not sit well with me."

The anecdote is telling. Since those childhood days, Jarlath has always committed himself to achievement and excellence in all his endeavors. He holds two black belts in two very different martial arts—one in a Japanese Okinawan form of karate and the other in Muay Thai kickboxing. He considers these belts to be one of his prized possessions, as they represent decades of blood, sweat and tears spent studying martial arts.

His first belt, in karate, was earned in 2009. To commemorate the achievement, he had a special belt made from silk in Japan, which has the name of the school where Jarlath studied, as well as his name, embroidered into the fabric. He received the second belt in 2017 after nearly a decade spent studying Muay Thai. He was already in his late 40s by then. "The first and second belt represent different things to me, but ultimately they both represent the lifestyle, the discipline, the physical exertion required, the dedication required, and the commitment you make to your school and your fellow practitioners," observes Jarlath.

As impressive as these achievements may be, Jarlath continues to set new goals for himself. He's now studying Jiu Jitsu for the first time, and he holds an intermediate white belt—the belt for

new practitioners. "I've changed disciplines three or four times, and every time, you go back to the beginning which is a white belt," he describes. "At the school I attend, there are back-to-back Muay Thai and Jiu Jitsu classes so I come off the mat wearing a black belt and return to the mat in my white belt. That's a reflection of my willingness to reinvent myself. And I hope younger people see that and realize, there's no shame in starting at the beginning; we all start at the beginning."

Jarlath's attitude has served him well in the professional world. Today, he is the President and CEO of Advanced BioScience Laboratories (ABL), a 60-year-old biotech company with 300 employees across the US and Europe. He was hired in 2018 as Chief Commercial Officer, with an eye to a multi-year transition into the CEO role. Instead, the transition period lasted a mere 11 weeks. "I didn't have experience running a company before, but they told me, 'You're the guy,'" reflects Jarlath. "I had to

make the decision to take the plunge. Two and a half years later, the company is in much better shape than it was when I inherited it, largely due to the team I was able to bring around me. But of course, as head of the company, you have to drive it, and we've been very successful."

Established in 1961, ABL started out as a research organization, working with the US government on infectious diseases and serum-based technologies. Today, it has two major branches. One side of the business still focuses on government contracting, the long-term platform of the firm. In the 1980s and 1990s, ABL was heavily involved with early research on the HIV/AIDS epidemic, work it continues to this day.

The other branch is newer. Over the last decade, ABL has expanded into an international company, one that provides services to the private sector of the marketplace. "There was a recognition



that having only one customer, even the US government, obviously has risks associated with it," explains Jarlath. "The company wanted to diversify so we started to offer services to the wider biotech market, services like contract development and manufacturing services. So if a company wants to develop and then ultimately manufacture a vaccine or some other sort of biological therapy, we have the infrastructure, the equipment and the know-how to do that."

Business has steadily grown. In the US, their operations are now split about 50/50 between government contracting and commercial work. Meanwhile, in 2014, ABL expanded into Europe, acquiring a couple of small companies in France. Overall, private revenue now outstrips government contracting revenue, with 70% of the business coming from private firms. In recent months, ABL announced that it will be acquiring a new, much larger facility in France to produce commercial scale viral vectors and vaccines. "As the CEO, I've been heavily focused on this strategy, to accelerate the transition into the larger biopharma/biotech market and grow that part of the business disproportionately to the government side," notes Jarlath. ABL expects to add another 200 employees over the next two years.

Jarlath didn't grow up with a silver spoon; he was raised lower middle class in Bebbington, a town south of Liverpool in the UK. At the age of six, the family relocated to Leicester for his father's job. His mother is from Ireland and worked as a nurse; his father worked on the corporate side of a bookstore called WH Smith. Jarlath was the third of four children, and with both parents working, the kids learned early on to fend for themselves. "By the age of 15, I could cook a full Sunday dinner," he laughs. "We were the typical latch-key kids of the 80s; we were independent. Back then, we were just out riding bikes, playing football at the local parks all day, and around the house we all had to pitch in."

Every summer, the family would spend six weeks in his mother's childhood home in a beautiful part of rural Ireland. They were idyllic days, roaming free and catching fish. When Jarlath was around 12 years old, he earned his first dollar selling the fish he caught with his cousin. "We used to catch a fair amount of mackerel and pollock," Jarlath remembers. "There was a campsite nearby where we'd sell them. We'd charge an Irish pound for the fish, and more if they

wanted it gutted and clean. I think my entrepreneurial mindset probably started there!"

Jarlath is close with both of his parents and considers them to have been great role models for him with their tireless commitment to the family. "My dad is one of those gentlemen who believes in being fair, in not taking advantage of a situation," he relates. "He instilled those qualities of honesty, fairness, and commitment. And my mother gave me her rural Irish work ethic. It was always pull yourself up by your bootstraps. She experienced an economically disadvantaged Ireland in the 1950s and 60s when you had to pull yourself up or struggle. She moved to the UK at the age of 19, studied nursing and became highly successful."

Jarlath's father was a great lover of sports and had been a semi-professional rugby player in his own time. Jarlath and his brothers were playing rugby by the age of six. He enjoyed rugby, but by the time he hit 15 or 16 he decided it wasn't the sport for him. It was then that Jarlath began to express an interest in martial arts, fascinated by popular Kung Fu movies. Jarlath's father was unhappy with the decision at first, but as the boy's commitment became obvious, he accepted the decision as the right one.

In other cases, he was not so quick to support a decision to quit. After high school, Jarlath headed off to Teesside University in Middlesbrough, an industrial, part of the UK. The school was a mid-tier one. "I was interested in biology and science, and Teesside had this program in biotechnology, so I chose it," explains Jarlath. "I didn't enjoy it. I didn't enjoy the environment I was in. I didn't gel with the city, the campus or the courses. The first year was miserable. At the end of it, I went home and told my dad that I wanted to quit. That I wanted to change programs and study sports science. My dad's advice was to stick it out and give it another year. I listened to him and stuck it out. And when I look back it's clear that I wouldn't be in the situation I am today if I had gone in a different direction."

Although Jarlath never particularly warmed to Teesside, he had a life-changing experience between his second and final year at the school; he was sent to gain industry experience at Novartis, a biotech firm in Vienna, Austria. "I was 20 years old and couldn't speak German, but I took the chance to live and work in a foreign country," describes Jarlath. "It was a massive

wake-up call for me. In my first two years at Teesside, I had not taken it seriously. I wasn't failing, but I certainly wasn't excelling. Having that year in Austria and living on my own with adult responsibilities made me realize that if I didn't get my act together, I wouldn't get a degree or a good job. So when I returned to Teesside, I buckled down and graduated with a second class honors degree."

After college, Jarlath was able to land his first job thanks to his year of industry experience with Novartis. He took a job as a lab tech with the Scientific Civil Service at the University of Sussex. The job was entry level, a stepping stone into the industry, and Jarlath had a great time living in the beach town of Brighton. The only downside was the low wages; within a year or two, he knew he had to take his next career step forward.

He landed at a Swiss-owned firm called Lonza, working on the manufacturing floor as an operator in a biologics manufacturing facility. He had to leave the beach town for Slough, but he knew it was the right decision. As different as the town was to Brighton, it was close to London. That year, he spent New Year's Eve partying with friends in Glasgow, Scotland, and decided to begin job hunting in the area. "I was starting to look for something outside of benchtop science that was still related to my studies," remembers Jarlath. "There just happened to be this job opportunity in Glasgow for a technical marketing specialist at a biotech consumables supplier. The job was to support the company's products from a technical perspective, but from the marketing perspective, so that allowed me to start interfacing with customers."

Quickly, Jarlath realized he liked interfacing with customers, and wanted to learn more about the sales side of the business. After a year and a half in the technical specialist role, he was able to move into a Distributor Sales Manager position at the same firm, Life Technologies. "Talk about a pivotal moment in my career," Jarlath smiles. "Now I was not just in a sales environment, but in an international sales environment. I was going to Ireland, Iceland, Norway, Finland, and Israel; places where our distributors were located. I floated on the Dead Sea. I walked in the Jordanian mountains. I went to the north of Norway and saw the Northern lights in January just 150 miles south of the Arctic Circle. I was so lucky, and I look back on that time in my career very fondly."

Also during this time, Jarlath met his future wife, Hazel, who he describes as a 'born and bred Scottish lass.' Suddenly, it looked like his planned two-year sojourn to Scotland might last a little longer. But in 2000, he was suddenly laid off from the job he was thriving in. It was a shock, and another important lesson. "I was 29 years old. I had been doing well as a salesperson and probably was a little bit arrogant," admits Jarlath. "But when my entire department was cut, it was a gut punch for a young person with a lot of pride. I was a little angry and couldn't believe they had audacity to let me go. The good news was that I never let that show because several years later, I ended up working with many of those same people again. It goes to show you, never burn your bridges."

Before long, Jarlath landed on his feet as UK Sales Manager for a company called Q1 Biotech. In the new role, he was selling testing services to biotech and biopharma companies. However, Q1 was a small, fairly academic operation, and he knew there wasn't much growth potential at the organization. About 18 months later, Jarlath was approached by a company called HyClone, a much larger, international firm. They were owned by a Swedish corporation, and had their US headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah.

For four years, Jarlath was the European Business Development Manager for HyClone. He once again was able to travel all over Europe, and additionally often travelled to the US. He visited the American HQ in Utah and motorcycled around Golden Spike National Park, the Wyoming Salt Flats and other parts of the glorious West.

It was then that Life Technologies re-entered the scene, albeit under a different name (Invitrogen). Q1 Biotech had merged with a company called BioReliance in 2003, which in turn had been acquired by Invitrogen in 2004. All three were now one company. "Some of the management from Life Technologies/Invitrogen were managing the BioReliance division and needed a sales manager for Europe. So they called me in 2006 and asked me if I'd like to come back," says Jarlath. "There wasn't a managerial path for me at HyClone, so I decided to make the jump."

Invitrogen's acquisition of BioReliance did not turn out to be a successful one; just a few years later, they decided to divest it and sold it to a private equity firm in New York for less than half of what they'd paid for it. "That was my first

experience with private equity, and my first experience with the creation and destruction of value,” reflects Jarlath. “Now, suddenly, the concept of value destruction was apparent to me, and I started to get interested in the business side of things.”

In 2008, BioReliance offered Jarlath an interesting opportunity. They wanted him to move to the US to run the US sales division as part of a three-year inter-company transfer. Initially, he turned the offer down; he was informed that his wife, Hazel, would not be able to work in the US according to the conditions of his visa which would mean Hazel would need to give up her career. However, a chance encounter with a former coworker made him aware of changes to the visa rules which meant Hazel would be able to work. The couple changed their minds, and at the beginning of 2009, pulled up stakes, rented out their house in Scotland and relocated to America.

Until that time, Hazel’s career had been just as high-flying as Jarlath’s, and she planned to continue working. However, after taking a summer off, she discovered she was pregnant, and decided to become a stay-at-home mom to the couple’s daughter. “She’s always had my back,” Jarlath says of Hazel. “I don’t think she necessarily misses her career. But it was a sacrifice she was prepared to make for the family. She’s been very important to my ability to do what I do while maintaining the stability at home.”

In 2011, BioReliance was purchased by a company called Sigma Aldrich, and Jarlath got his chance to learn more about the business world. “I had to make a decision—do I stay or do I go?” he recalls. “I decided to stay, and I was fortunate that I was able to get on the management ladder pretty quicky. Even though BioReliance was a pretty stand-alone entity within the Sigma network, there was a great management track at Sigma, and I began to get real experience in corporate management. Rather than just seeing across the sales lane, I could now see across multiple lanes. I started to broaden my experience not just for sales, but into other areas, and build my leadership skill

set.”

Ultimately, Sigma was bought by Merck KgA in yet another acquisition, and Jarlath stayed with the firm until being hired on as Chief Commercial Officer at ABL.

As a leader, Jarlath stresses the importance of understanding systems, not subjects. “If you’re aspiring to be a senior manager in the C-suite or VP-level, you’ve got to be systems-aware. It is not good enough to be a subject matter expert and just stay there,” he observes. “I’ve seen it too often, where you’re sitting in a meeting and someone describes themselves as ‘just a sales guy’ or ‘just a quality guy.’ If you’re the head of quality, you don’t get to abdicate responsibility for manufacturing. If you’re the head of sales, you can’t abdicate responsibility for quality. You have to own the whole thing and be aware of the whole ecosystem.”

To young adults entering the working world today, Jarlath reminds them again never to burn bridges. “You can’t ghost companies for jobs,” he points out. “If you commit to something, you have to follow through on it. Think about the consequences of your actions, not just in the short-term, but in the mid-term and in the long-term.”

© October 2021 Gordon J. Bernhardt. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

– By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CFP®, AIF®

About Gordon J. Bernhardt
President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon’s Blog](#).