

“Trust Me, I’m a Penn State Alum”

Presented by Naren Gursahaney ('83 M E)

Penn State College of Engineering Commencement

May 3, 2013

Thank you, Dean Wormley. Before I begin my remarks, I want to start by personally congratulating you on 21 years of outstanding leadership as Dean of the College of Engineering at Penn State. Through my activities with some of the engineering advisory boards, I have had the opportunity to see first-hand the role you have played in strengthening the academic programs across the college, and bringing in some incredible talent. One of the characteristics of a great leader is the ability to recruit and develop top talent, and the team you have assembled in the College of Engineering will serve us very well as we move forward. You and Shirley will definitely be missed, but your legacy will live on.

Esteemed faculty, proud family members and friends – congratulations to all of you – but congratulations especially to the graduates of the class of 2013. I’m honored to be with you today for your commencement from one of the finest universities in the world.

Thirty years ago, I sat where you sit now, as a 21-year-old graduate of the College of Engineering at Penn State, looking ahead excitedly – and with some apprehension – to my first real job, and all the opportunities that lay ahead.

I stand here today as a proud Penn State alum and the recently appointed Chief Executive Officer of The ADT Corporation. I was promoted to CEO in October of last year, and in my first year as a CEO of a Fortune 500 company, I’ve gotten A LOT of advice ... from my mentors, our board of directors, other CEOs, ADT employees, my parents, my wife, of course, and even my kids! Everyone seems to have an opinion on how I should approach managing ADT in my first year as CEO.

So I was thrilled when Dean Wormley called me and asked me to be a speaker here today because finally – FINALLY! – I’d be giving advice instead of getting it.

And as I was thinking about today, it occurred to me that while all of you graduates are just beginning your careers, we’re actually in a similar situation – me, as a new CEO working to build a great public company, and you, as a new college graduate looking to build a successful and rewarding career. We’ve all reached the end of a long journey designed to prepare us for the opportunities and challenges ahead, and now the real work begins. We have a lot of choices in front of us, and ultimately, we’re the ones who have to live with the consequences of our decisions. And just as I have the Board of Directors looking over my shoulder and guiding my decision-making, I’m sure your parents are similarly watching your every career move, and while they aren’t in charge, they don’t hesitate to provide counsel and advice, whether you want it or not. My paycheck may be a little bigger than yours, but other than that, we really are in a similar kind of position.

I want you to think of yourselves as the newly appointed Chief Executive Officer of your lives while I share with you a few pieces of advice to help you think about being newly in charge, and how to navigate the risks and take advantages of the many opportunities that lay before you.

I'm going to start by telling you a short story about a 21-year-old know-it-all – that's me – who had a perfect plan: work for two years, go to business school, and then get a good job that utilized my engineering and general management skills. So I graduated from Penn State and had been working at Westinghouse for two years when in the spring of 1985, I was accepted to the MBA program at the University of Michigan – hold your boos. I had already gone apartment hunting in Ann Arbor, and was excited to be going to graduate school in the fall – all according to my plan.

Around that time, my boss at Westinghouse took me by surprise and asked me if I would take a job as the quality manager for a portion of the F-16 radar project. The job would be a stretch role for someone with just two years of work experience ... and there was a catch, it was in Israel. I was flattered he asked me, but immediately replied, "Wow, thanks, but I've already decided I'm going to business school this fall."

A few weeks later, I went out for drinks with a colleague, Denny Gonder, who had just come back to the U.S. after a three-year assignment with Westinghouse in Germany. We were catching up and I mentioned the job opportunity in Israel. He was genuinely shocked that I turned it down. Denny told me, "You have no idea how big an opportunity this is, do you? Let me explain something to you – you are completely unqualified for the job, and you were not their first choice. Don't you see that they are taking a chance on you?! Kids your age don't get opportunities like this. You have to do it."

Well, I may have been a know-it-all, but I was also coachable. Even though business school had been part of my plan – and even though my dad was strongly advising me to pass on the role in Israel and go to business school as planned – I did it. I took the job. Now, you have to understand that this was pre-internet, pre-email, I didn't know anyone who lived in Israel, I didn't speak Hebrew, and there was a war happening about 100 miles away from Tel Aviv, where I would be based.

Those two years in Israel ended up being some of the most important of my career. I learned how to be a leader. I learned how to manage a global team. And I learned that if I wanted to do meaningful and exciting things, I had to be willing to go outside of my comfort zone.

I came back to the U.S. and decided to target some more competitive business schools based on my more experienced background, and got into UVA's Darden School of Business, and had already laid the foundation for the future of my career as a global business leader.

So here is my first management lesson for you as CEO of your life. Manage your career, because no one else will do it for you. Have a plan, but don't be so rigid with your plan that you let great opportunities pass you by.

OK, second story. And don't worry – there are only three pieces of advice. One thing I've learned as CEO is that when your speech is what stands between your audience and a night of celebrations, keep it short.

The second piece of advice I want to share with you is to manage your lifestyle, because otherwise everyone will manage it for you.

In the first 20 years of my career, which was spent in roles at Westinghouse, Booz Allen, and General Electric, I lived in ten different U.S. cities and had four international assignments. This includes two stints in Japan, as well as far-flung, exotic places like Lima, Ohio.

During this portion of my life, I was willing to make a lot of sacrifices to be able to grow in my career. As I got married and had kids, and as our kids got older, I had to make some changes to my priorities. I ultimately left GE and joined another company to take a job that would allow me to stay in the same place for a few years. And our daughter, Kayla, who is just finishing her freshman year at Penn State, was able to go from fourth grade through high school in the same school system.

On the other end of the spectrum, my best friend from Penn State went to Pitt for law school, and settled in Pittsburgh and has been there ever since. He has four kids who have never lived anywhere else. He is a very successful guy – a partner in a local law firm – and our decisions coming out of college were very different.

You have to decide what balance is right for you. It's up to you to decide what trade-offs you want between work, family, and other aspects of your life. Be thoughtful about this decision, just as you would any other aspect of your career. If you are willing to work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, your boss will probably let you. Don't let yourself end up working all the time just because email makes it possible.

Everyone at ADT knows that on Saturdays in the fall when the Penn State football game is on, I'm unavailable. I won't answer emails, I won't take calls, and if I'm on Twitter, it's just because I'm providing real-time commentary on the game. Same goes for the Steelers games, and when I'm at my son's lacrosse game or spending time with my daughter when she's home from college. Those are the choices I've made that make work and life satisfying for me.

OK, third and final management lesson. Manage your personal brand.

There is an old joke about engineers: "How can you tell if an engineer is an introvert or an extrovert? The extrovert engineer looks at your shoes when they're talking to you."

When you tell people “I’m an engineer” – that means something to them.

And when you say “I’m a Penn State alum” – that means something to them, too.

Everything you do reflects on you. The question you should ask yourself is “How do I want to be known in the workplace?”

In today’s environment, what you Tweet, what you put on Facebook – all of that contributes to your brand. I’m not saying don’t do that stuff. I finally have Facebook and Twitter accounts. Just be sensitive to how you are portraying yourself and your brand. Your future colleagues will look at it.

I realize it’s difficult to separate who you are at home from who you are at work. In fact, I believe people do their best work when they bring their whole self to work every day. In our careers, we don’t check our personalities at the door. And employers want to hire people who are curious about the world, passionately pursue their interests and are a pleasure to work with. It’s a buyer’s market for talent, and smart companies will take the extra time to learn a little more about candidates. Your personal brand could make or break that hiring decision.

You are a Penn State Engineer. That will be part of your brand forever. The next aspect of your brand starts the day you begin your first job. Or your next research project. The next community volunteer project. The next day at graduate school.

And, one more note on branding, as a Penn State engineer – you represent me, and everyone else wearing a cap and gown in this arena, so make us proud.

I want to close with a few final notes as you think about your role as CEO of your own life. The stock market goes up and down every day, and I can tell you from personal experience, sometimes those fluctuations have nothing to do with you or a decision you made. In the same way, you will have ups and downs in your own careers, sometimes based on factors you can’t control. So you have to take the long view, and focus on the aspects of your life and career you can control. Your journey will inevitably include mistakes, failures, and difficulties. It will also likely have unexpected twists and turns, exciting opportunities for personal and professional growth, and if you’re lucky, the chance to make a difference in the world through your work.

Trust yourselves and the training you’ve been given by your parents, mentors, and Penn State.

And while you take the long view, you also have to seize the moment. Every day counts.