



MICHAEL TOBIN, OBE

FORGET STRATEGY. GET RESULTS.

**RADICAL MANAGEMENT
ATTITUDES THAT WILL DELIVER
OUTSTANDING SUCCESS**

"Michael Tobin is one of Britain's most successful and inspirational business leaders. *Forget Strategy* is about thinking differently. An inspirational must-read for anyone who wants to think through problems and find inventive solutions."

Gavin Esler, BBC Presenter

WILEY

“Michael Tobin is one of Britain’s most successful and inspirational business leaders. His new book *Forget Strategy* is full of stories, observations, tips and ideas for leaders in the 21st century. From the opening – when Tobin turns up for an awards ceremony wearing a tee shirt and ripped jeans, only to discover it is a black-tie dinner – to swimming with sharks, a KGB-type interrogation or hiking an Icelandic glacier, *Forget Strategy* is about thinking differently. Even if you disagree with some of what Tobin has to say, the stories will stick in the mind. An inspirational must-read for anyone who wants to think through problems and find inventive solutions.”

Gavin Esler, BBC Presenter

“Michael Tobin avoids the traps of many management books and flies in the face of conventional wisdom. Focussing on EQ, his leadership approach delivers outstanding business performance and is equally relevant to an entrepreneur, someone taking their first steps into employment or a seasoned manager.”

James Bennet, MBE, Director, Ernst & Young LLP

“This is a concise and effective manual for personal and commercial success, penned by a friend who has ‘been there and done it’ privately and publically. One of his mantras, *‘Fear of failure closes you up. Feeling you have the power to change, to do something, is powerful. Don’t worry about mistakes’* has driven his amazing business success and his remarkable and generous private life where he has helped so many, less fortunate than him. Read, learn the lessons, and execute them.”

Alastair Stewart, OBE

“Mike is a great person, an inspiration to so many and has created success for himself and his companies through hard work, dedication and being brave enough to make tough decisions when they’re needed which is vital as a leader. Despite his rise to the top, he has remained humble throughout and stuck to his core values, which is

so important. A book worth reading if success and how to face up to challenges is what you're after."

Alec Stewart, OBE, Director of Cricket, Surrey CCC

"There is one thing of which I am certain. '*Doing good is good for business*' and that just shines through in everything that Tobin does. He has one of the biggest hearts I know in business and that translates into customer and staff loyalty. It can also alter perceptions from hard-nosed analysts like me. I learnt a lot from this book. Not just about Tobin but it also made me rethink my own personal approach to business. I suspect it will for you too."

Richard Holway MBE, Chairman, TechMarketView LLP

"It's amazing how Michael Tobin takes us through his own experiences to enlighten true fundamentals of leadership. It's a must-have book for any CEO."

**Miquel Lladó, Professor of General Management,
IESE Business School**

"*Forget Strategy. Get Results.* differs from the 'traditional' management books I have read in the past. Tobin is direct and the 'F' themes are a useful guiding principle through the book. Certainly some of the practices are really valid and you'll likely find yourself relating to some based on your own experiences, either as a leader or a follower."

**Carlos P. Hornstein, Head of US Executive Education,
IESE Business School**

"Pacey, direct, challenging and very well written."

**Professor Susan Blackmore, Psychologist,
freelance writer, lecturer and broadcaster**

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To my wife Shalina, whose “leap of faith” has given me
happiness beyond measure

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INTRODUCTION

“This book is about experiences that have stuck with me and ideas that have influenced my life. What I have learned has enabled me to empower and inspire people around me – people far brighter than I will ever be – to perform fabulous things. I am riding the waves of change.”

Often it takes someone else to point out that maybe you do things a little differently to other people. Because the way we behave in our life on a daily basis is – from our own point of view – simply the way we are.

A couple of years ago, I was trying to get back to London for an industry awards ceremony: I had been nominated as Personality of the Year, and the organizers were very keen for me to be there. I had taken a few days off to go skiing in Switzerland with my kids and was planning to fly back for the ceremony. As luck would have it, on the day itself, the weather was against me and all the flights were delayed or cancelled. I phoned in to say it didn't look like I was going to be able to make it after all. "Please make it," was the message back. "We really need you to be here."

There was a break in the weather, eventually, and well behind schedule a flight managed to get off the ground while the

weather window was – precariously – open. I landed in London and, with minutes to spare, a cab whisked me over to the Grosvenor House Hotel just in the nick of time. As I walked into the ballroom, which was full to bursting with industry colleagues in immaculate tuxedos and evening wear, heads turned as they clocked my T-shirt and ripped jeans. “It’s black tie,” hissed someone helpfully. “I know, I know, I couldn’t help it,” I muttered as I sat down at the table.

The awards were announced and, gratifyingly, I had won the personality award I was up for. It was the main award of the night, and obviously explained why the organizers had been so insistent on my attendance. I made my way to the podium where the comedian Ed Byrne, who had been compering the event, made a suitably sardonic comment about my sartorial choice: “You could at least have made a f***ing effort.” I joshed with him – “Hark who’s talking!” – since he was looking pretty scruffy too. We all laughed and the evening moved on. But the impact of that lasted a long time. I was, from then on, remembered as the guy in the ripped jeans who had picked up the main gong. And people thought how daringly different I had been to go up and get the award like that. They didn’t know it was entirely *faute de mieux*.

Although I had not planned to turn up to the event in ripped jeans, I had still been determined to be there no matter what, against all the odds – a commitment to honouring promises that has always been important to me – and then be prepared to take a certain amount flak and ridicule for standing out quite

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so obviously. It played in my favour, because that was what made me memorable.

These things stick. Ever since, I have been asked to talk about my approach to work, to business, to management, because other people perceive it as being somehow different, radical or creative.

For me it is just a natural way of operating. A management technique that has grown organically and imperceptibly out of the experiences of my life, and the way I view the world – a world that demands a new approach to business, where old-school, analogue management techniques are defunct. Where fast, flexible, fearless business thinking is the only way forward.

So when, following a merger between two companies who had been fierce competitors, I needed to diffuse the tensions between colleagues who had until recently been bitter rivals, I took them up to the Arctic Circle where they would have to huddle up together to keep each other's bodies warm to survive the night. When I wanted to encourage my team to break old patterns of thinking, I treated them to an unprotected swim with sharks to learn how to confront fear. To help key members of the company learn to field tough press enquiries I arranged for them to be “abducted” and “interrogated” on a trip to Tallinn.

Extreme? Maybe. Unusual? Definitely. Effective? Yes. Even if the way I run my business seems to others a little out of the

ordinary, there is always a clear reason behind it, a result I have in mind, a purpose I am determined to aim for.

Although I was taught how to perform tricks by a member of the Magic Circle, there is no magic formula. No smoke and mirrors. No sleight of hand. My approach to business is grounded in real-life pain and toil, twinned with a little left-field imagination, plenty of business experience, and, I hope, a liberal dash of nous and gut feeling.

I always try to respect everyone, hurt no one and regret nothing. It is a kind of a mantra for me. The problem is that it is almost impossible to do all those things all the time. They end up conflicting with each other. But life for me is all about how we meander through those conflicts, making the tough decisions. Otherwise what's the point?

The strategies and attitudes in this book are, to me, instinctive, practical common sense driven by the realities of commercial life in the 21st century. They are applications of the core characteristics that underpin the philosophy I apply personally every day, and which I try to instil in the people who work with me. I want to encourage them to stand on “groundless ground;” to have the courage to believe in something when there are no logical grounds to assume they should. Our company operates in the ever-changing IT sector, and we are constantly having to predict, react and adapt to technological shifts that in turn impact directly on the way we will all live and work.

INTRODUCTION

I am definitely not trying to set down in stone The Thoughts Of Chairman Michael (or of CEO Michael at least). The ideas in this book are meant to help you review and rethink the way you currently do your job or run your own business or team. They should provoke a questioning, querying, quizzical mindset. You may find it provocative. You may think it is outrageous in places. But, best of all, you don't even have to agree with me.

I didn't go to university. I don't have a brain the size of a planet, unlike many of the people I have the privilege to work alongside or do business with. But I do believe that by reflecting on your own experiences in the right way you can apply a new type of thinking to the way you operate in the future. And, because those experiences are personal to you, you will be better equipped with flexible optionality than you would be if you were to follow a set of hard and fast rules or theories.

That way you can take the decisions and the initiative in creating an experience, fostering an attitude, and developing a memory, a culture and a vision that directly inspire the business success of a company.

I have divided up the book into ten chapters, each centred on what I call an F Factor: from Freedom to Fortitude, Focus and Faith. Each starts with a story from my business life: a problem I had to deal with, the solution I devised and the positive outcome that followed. The F themes are the essential strands of my business DNA, and I hope you will come away with

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questions you can pose to yourself about your own approach, and which may prompt fresh ways of thinking.

One of my F Factors is Fun: however serious and pressurized your business, however difficult and unrelenting the economic climate or market conditions, always leave a sliver of space to have fun, as well as doing business in a way that makes you feel good. If we can all achieve that, I believe the world of industry and commerce will be a far better place.

1 FEAR

“I learnt early on in my life never to have regrets, to face the future whatever it was going to be, to make tough decisions by getting on and doing it.”

The Problem: *The fear of fear itself*

It was the summer of 2006, the really hot one. As a major merger loomed between the company that I was running at the time – Redbus – and Telecity, one of our fiercest competitors, I knew that core members of my staff were getting increasingly nervous about who amongst them might be at risk of losing their jobs.

There was history between the two companies. Since the late 1990s they had been sworn enemies, battling to dominate the nascent market for data centre capacity. At times the fighting had been nothing less than cut-throat.

However, I had a vision that if Redbus and Telecity could only be brought together as one entity, the new company that emerged would be able to reshape the industry, by pulling in the same direction rather than expending energy locked in a

bloody battle. Competition between companies is healthy, but it can also be exhausting.

After two years trying to engineer the merger, and three or four failed attempts, I was finally at the point where, barring last-minute or unseen problems, the merger was on the verge of happening.

But my team was understandably worried. Each member knew that in most mergers there are going to be two people for each job and, out of necessity, one of those people will have to be let go. It was a time of tough decisions and there was nervousness about who would get fired. It was exacerbated by the fact that those who lost their job would do so to someone from the rival company they had been up against, some of them for their entire career.

I could sense, practically smell, the fear in my key management team. It was distracting them from the functions they had to carry on doing in the meantime. I needed them to confront and overcome that fear.

The Solution: *Swimming with sharks*

I wanted to create an experience that would help the team convert their fearfulness into *fearlessness*, something that would instil fear in them but then show them that their fear was unfounded.

FEAR

“We went off to swim with sharks. Face to face with an icon of danger. This would be confronting fear by being thrown in at the deep end.”

We had, as we still do, a regular management meeting away from the office. On this occasion I booked us into a hotel in Edinburgh: we held a business meeting, talked about the future, and the merger. We also visited a local whisky museum and, one afternoon, I took them out towards the Forth Bridge, where the minibus turned into the Deep Sea World car park.

Everyone was relaxed, if somewhat puzzled. The first inkling they had of what I had in mind was when each of them was asked for their wetsuit sizes. I wasn't letting them in on anything. With the suits on, we all had breathing apparatus training. Already there was apprehension in the ranks. Some had never put a wetsuit on before, most had never used an aqualung. For a first-timer, the sensation of wearing the suit and the apparatus felt claustrophobic and very uncomfortable.

Once the training session was complete, I finally broke the news of what was ahead. “Listen up,” I said, “you are all going to be swimming with sharks. Down on the seabed, inside a man-made aquarium, but with no cages, no Plexiglas protection. Upfront and personal.” That was when the fear kicked in. It was palpable.

There were 13 of us on the outing. One of them had to be excused on medical grounds because he had a back problem. Fair enough. Four simply said they were too scared and were insistent they couldn't do it. I didn't try to railroad them, but left them to make up their own minds. While they thought about it, the others were being taken, two by two, into the water by the instructors. There was a five-minute swim down to the seabed, just long enough to get really frightened. Then you saw the sharks.

These were big beasts. Three-metre-long hammerheads and tiger sharks. When it was my turn the anticipation on the way down was definitely unpleasant but, once I was down there, I felt much better. It was extraordinary to be this close to the sharks. They swam right up to me, out of curiosity, but – well-fed by their handlers in advance – they were not looking for a little lunch. “Just don't put your hands out to touch them,” we had been advised. I hoped everyone would remember that because there was no insurance and I didn't want to lose anyone from the management team before I absolutely had to (and the danger was real – some years later there was an incident at the same centre when a staff diver was bitten by an angel shark).

As the groups of two went down, those left waiting their turn had an exquisitely painful time. They could watch each pair swimming down, then see them coming back out of the water – some absolutely buzzing with the wow factor, others just glad to be out of there, though still exhilarated. In the end everyone swam, bar one.

The Outcome: *Emerging from the challenge*

Once the shark dive was finished, we all went out to dinner. I asked everyone what they had felt when they realized what was in store. One guy said he had been excited, that it was something he had always wanted to do. Most of the others said they had felt a huge panic. Everyone admitted to having been terrified – regardless of the fact that the instructors diving with them had assured them it would be fine. Nothing the shark specialists said had alleviated a primeval fear.

And what about when they were on the seabed? That was still terrifying, they said, but nowhere near as terrifying as the anticipation and apprehension. As the seconds and then minutes ticked by and the sharks were only staring, not attacking, they had realized that what the instructors said was true. They started adjusting their expectations.

“And what did you feel when you came out?” I asked. “It was a life-changing experience.” “I was overcome. I dealt with something that I didn’t even know was an issue.”

The shark swimming experience became embedded as part of company folklore. At my wedding in 2012, more than five years later, I had four best men, three of whom were part of the team who had been on that swim. And all of them mentioned it in their speeches.