

Reinvention

by Heather Gibson

Many talk about reinventing themselves. Few actually achieve it. This, though, is the story of someone who has: Vic Laws - a senior industry executive who became a consultant and found enduring personal satisfaction helping others behind the scenes of industry. So why did he turn his back on corporate life and why has he found his second career so fulfilling?

"ARA wanted to merge catering and vending together. In my view these were totally different businesses and, I am pleased to say, I was ultimately proved right. However, I walked in one day and the Chief Executive said that we couldn't work together and sent me on my way. I was devastated. I went from being in the thick of it, to being an outsider in an instant."

And so begins the story of Vic Laws' transformation from a frontline corporate player, towards becoming one of the industry's most respected advisors and consultants. He went on to manage Spinneys in the UK but in some ways the die was cast. Vic had held senior positions with Grand Metropolitan, in their airport company in the UK and Mexico and had been the MD of ARA Catering. However, it can be argued that it is in his second career as a consultant that he has had real influence - as an advisor and mentor to a number of today's leading players.

Many senior executives turned consultants are viewed in a slightly cynical manner. This may have once been true about Vic too except that he has truly transformed himself into one of the leading food service consultants, and also by providing administrative services to ACE (Association of Catering Excellence), FCSI (Foodservice Consultants Society International), LACA (Local Authority Catering Association) and with the HCIMA/IOH, where he held the President's position in 1998/9. Vic may have been devastated after

he was fired from ARA but it seemed to give him a surge of energy that has seen him work tirelessly for the industry over the past two decades. The other interesting question is whether it changed him from desiring leadership roles to supporting/advisory roles?

Careful...

Vic is a naturally extrovert character and therefore, it is easy to make assumptions rather than look beyond the surface.

"People think I am this entrepreneurial character. Yet I am risk averse. I am someone who will analyse a problem or investment before I make a decision.

"After leaving Spinneys I didn't want to work for a large organisation again, or be in the position of making sure other people had jobs"

An established facilities management contracting business in the Middle East, Spinneys wanted to capitalise on the Thatcher government's foray into privatisation in the NHS. Following his departure from ARA, Vic was brought into the Company by his mentor, the late David Hutchins, previously a Grandmet Director and Midland Catering's former Managing Director.

"Spinneys were the first ever company to offer full FM services in the UK. We wanted to offer multidisciplinary services, fixed price catering and have large self-accounting units where the managers were autonomous.

"I ran the company for around four years prior to undertaking a European strategy review to look at

where catering should be discipline led or geographically led. We agreed that it should be geographical and I ended up without a job again."

A turning point

Vic setup AVL Consultancy in 1986 and comments that his first six months in business were "fantastic" but that, in his naivety, he failed to ensure any forward selling leading to an income of £27 in one month. "The biggest shock was that there was no one to talk to - it was literally my Amstrad PC and the dog," he chuckles. Vic then tuned into the first wave of compulsory competitive tendering in local authorities and undertook, through an old colleague from Forte's, some consultancy work at Surrey County Council.

"Also at that time in London the local education authority had closed down and London Boroughs often had people with no experience given direct responsibility for catering. They needed someone with commercial knowledge to work with them and I ended up working with about 60 Boroughs and County Councils across the Country."

"This was, in many respects, how my role in coaching and mentoring came about - I became someone to talk to, who could give people confidence and market intelligence. Depending on the client you might play a different role. Clients could easily make the wrong decision through a lack of knowledge and consultants can take a holistic approach."

Vic has since established himself as a respected and reliable advisor in

this sector. Despite offers, he has made a conscious decision not to work with private contractors. "There was no way that I could be an assessor of a contract catering one day and then work with them the next. This has enabled clients to have total confidence in our integrity."

For the past 18 months, Vic has been working with the Lansdowne Road Stadium Development Company, which is being rebuilt into a 50,000 seat venue in the heart of Dublin.

"Suddenly I have been working in the leisure market again and it is a completely different environment. Yet, clients still need someone to work with them to persuade their line managers or Board; I was seen as offering a bit of 'grey power'."

One of Vic's great strengths has been his network. This is exemplified by the fact that he currently carries out the administration for the three industry bodies with which he is involved as well as a small role with the Institute of Hospitality.

"It has been said that I am an influencer behind the scenes and in some ways that's true. However, the Associations are run by voluntary committees. I'm there if they have a query. Ultimately, the difficulty is that you have to know when to draw back as it is not an executive position. I'm quite happy either way."

Having been through the sometimes painful journey of transition from corporate executive to consultant, he has also taken on the mentoring of others in a similar position.

"It can also be lonely and I have helped other consultants starting out who were in a similar situation to me. Julian Fris and I worked together, when he first left the BBC, for the first three months of setting up his own business and it gave him support and reassurance and now is very successful in his own right."

The career...

Vic states up front that he always saw "catering as a career of first choice." After leaving College he first embarked on a career in hotels, which he decided was not for him, and swiftly moved in to public sector catering, including a period running over a dozen restaurants and parks with Coventry County Council and two other local authorities. This was followed by a one year job selling food products into prisons, hospitals and schools to gain sales experience.

He was subsequently appointed as Luton Airport's first Catering Manager in 1968, then part of the Forte Empire. When Britannia

Airways outsourced their catering to Forte in 1970, Vic took on the role of Flight Catering Manager at Luton Airport and over an eleven year period ended up as European Director of Flight Catering until 1979 when he was head-hunted by Grand Met to run their airport business.

"I think you have to say that working for Forte was the best education that anyone could have. You were at the cut and thrust of business, doing things that had never been done before, and you walked around with a toolkit. Rocco was very supportive and Lord Forte was there when needed. It was a great shame when THF was taken over."

Vic then worked in the retail arm of Grand Met taking over their UK airport business setting up a duty free business in Mexico prior to the formation of Compass. The new company "did not see airports in its future, given the political scenario", according to Vic and he was head-hunted to become ARA's first Managing Director of their catering and leisure divisions, where his achievements included winning the Wembley Stadium contract from Letherby and Christopher after 57 years.

Vic's story is one that is full of possibilities and opportunities; something which he is ready to embrace even after nearly 50 years. Perhaps it is the steely determination embedded from his time in the corporate world;

"The great thing about being in catering is that you can actually turn your hand to anything. I suppose I was scared of going into consultancy initially, it's a different mentality. But I love winning and hate losing - whatever it is. I am not someone to say that it is good enough to win one in five; I want to win them all."

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Picture: Susannah Fields. With thanks to The Pearl Restaurant & Bar



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