

# Lessons from the ‘Board’ Room: A Watercraft Maker Talks Beaches and Business

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When Thomas Grimes was a sophomore in high school, he had an experience that changed his life. A friend, who was an upperclassman, picked him up in his Chevy Bronco and they headed to Lido Beach near his home in Massapequa, N.Y. “I remember the car was old, it stunk like worn-out leather and the music was blasting,” recalls Grimes. “I also remember that it was the start of spring, so when we got to the beach, the water was extremely cold. Needless to say, when I paddled out, I didn’t catch one wave.” What he did catch — a passion for surfing.

Fast forward 10 years and Grimes – who also happens to be a business teacher at Oceanside High School on Long Island — is still seeking that perfect wave, traveling to Puerto Rico each winter in search of “big swells.”

Surfing has defined Grimes’ life in more powerful ways, by creating an outlet for his entrepreneurial spirit. In 2009, he opened Island Industries, a business that combines his love for surfing and his skills in handcrafting. “My business model is a make-to-order manufacturing process that specializes in personal watercrafts, including surfboards, stand-up paddle boards and skim boards,” says Grimes. “Each watercraft I produce is custom manufactured to each individual, which improves their performance when they are on the water.”

As he does regularly with his business students at Oceanside, Grimes draws parallels between his life as an entrepreneur and his role as a teacher empowering teens to deepen their understanding of innovation and the business world. He spoke with KWHS about some of his most valuable lessons from the “board” room, where, covered in wood shavings and sawdust, he contemplates what it means to be an entrepreneur.

- Lesson 1: Emotional intelligence — learning how to talk to people can create natural relationships built on trust and love. “I have developed a personal brand based on how I treat and communicate with my shareholders,” notes Grimes. “After some time, people knew me as one to be trusted, which gave a strong sense of purpose to my business and my life. It also built my strong reputation, which I feel is almost supernatural. It can’t be tarnished. This lesson is difficult to those who cannot see the long-term benefits of what proper communication and respect can deliver. You need to find the purpose from within in order to be successful with it. This includes controlling emotions and reassessing personal beliefs from time to time.”
- Lesson 2: Ambition can be tricky; treat it wisely. “My eyes sometimes got bigger than my stomach when it came to running my business. To put this in real context, Island Industries was once known for watercraft repairs. This turned out to be a big mistake. Though this extra operation generated more revenue, it tied up my main operation of manufacturing watercrafts. This led to exorbitant amounts of stress and eventually started to affect the quality of my watercraft production. My lead times to manufacturing were pushed back for weeks. Therefore, I decided not to offer the service of repairing watercrafts as of last year, and I have been very happy in making that decision.”
- Lesson 3: It’s OK to sacrifice what you are for what you will become. “Anything worth achieving in life requires time, energy and integrity. I feel comfortable to say that I have failed more times than I have succeeded. I did not build a profitable business from day one based on luck and a good idea that the market needed. It required many hours donated to learning from failures, lots of research into new building methods and most importantly, developing an attitude that I needed to push through failure and keep going. It starts off by finding out what it is you are truly after. Then the code by which you live will judge you on your success.”

- Lesson 4: Even if you are a sole entrepreneur, you can't and shouldn't do this alone: Learn to listen. "When I first launched my business, I was intent on my idea being 'right,' and I was the only one who could set that course. I dismissed anyone who had feedback or suggestions as trying to get on my nerves or simply not understanding the bigger picture. This was one of my biggest business mistakes. People who offer advice are golden tickets to creating a stronger business. I had to learn to swallow my pride in tremendous gulps. This required lots of willpower. But once I did, I learned new perspectives about my business, as well as myself. One of the main focuses in my entrepreneurship class that I teach is the concept of marketing research, obtaining and analyzing information that will ultimately help craft a stronger business model."
- Lesson 5: Time is a limited resource: Don't let your passion for business prevent you from pursuing other life goals. "Being in business for seven years has certainly added to my character as a man, but developing a business is one of many things I wish to accomplish while I have time on this earth. I am constantly searching for meaning and purpose in my life, and I also have come to realize that money should not be the only motivator to happiness. Recently, I have contemplated the fact that being a teacher and a business owner could interfere with one another – and that is coming true. It may be time to pass on my business to someone else. If you own a business, you will certainly feel passionate about it, but don't let that passion dictate everything about your life. Investing in yourself yields the greatest rewards."