

It's Not About the Dirt

Paradise Rescued

by David Stannard

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Notice: Some of the names mentioned may have been changed.

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Introduction

I have come to believe that if we, as human beings, are not growing then we are probably starting to rot. Human personal development is critical to our existence and when it stops, we go backwards. Pretty much the same can be said about a business too.

During the time it has taken me to write this second book, a significant number of businesses will have failed. The reasons are many and varied and our experience will not be the same journey as yours. But we don't want you to 'trial' the experience to prove us right!

Thankfully Paradise Rescued has moved on – we have passed our sixth birthday. And our mission continues strongly, if not more resolutely than ever. I write this not as a statement of arrogance, but self-recognition that a small team of talented passionate dedicated people are continuing to reach new heights in excellence and personal achievement in pursuit of a unique cause and objective – our mission and vision.

There have been many highs and there have also been many lows. It is easy to look at our social media and assume that "Cabernet Franc" is growing everywhere and the challenge of sustaining a rural heritage, community vineyard and way of life has been trouble free. We clearly understand that 'bad news

sells' but that's not our style. We recognise that many lessons have had to be learnt and no matter how much wisdom one can seek and accumulate, the path to personal and business growth has to be experienced.

In "From Cabbage Patch to Cabernet Franc" I shared my story covering the events that led to Paradise Rescued coming into existence and its action packed and challenging first year.

The purpose of this book is to not only share some more of our journey but also to focus on helping readers to benefit from our mistakes. We are open in our admission of what happened, where it wasn't successful and what we then learned from it. If we can at least help a few other people or businesses avoid the errors we made, then this will be a positive outcome.

There is also a human theme. Businesses are run and operated by people for people in some way or other. Many of the lessons here are personal as well as commercial. There was (and still is) a process of my self-learning, personal development and leadership growth that I needed to undertake with Paradise Rescued in order that our success could be achieved. Although born into an entrepreneurial family, I have spent much of my life as a management engineer in a completely different commercial environment, in terms of both the nature of the business and its' scale. Pretty much all of the challenges were of my making or lack of experience. Much of the learning is about my personal journey as a leader and what I had to learn to make Paradise Rescued succeed. I first had to grow in order that my business could then grow.

This book is still a storybook, but with a difference. Sharing our journey and experience gives it life, context and reality. The learnings contained within are not theoretical. They were all learnt during the journey either by good planning, better

listening or hard real experience. I hope you can relate, but do not repeat.

I will take a detailed look at some of the key things that my team and I found to be critical in steadily building a sustainable, small winery business and brand that I believe will be useful to your business too. At the end of each short chapter, I share what I believe were my key learnings. I challenge every reader to make your own notes and set a goal for short-term action, change and improvement.

Not everything will apply to other small medium enterprises or even big corporations – a wine business is after all just that – a wine business. However, after six years covering many failures and also many better moments, we think we have some really good lessons to share.

I like the idea of the story continuing! Why? Quite simply because if it wasn't continuing, changing and adding new dimensions, then neither I personally, Team Paradise Rescued, nor our business would be changing either. Even a model of sustainability needs to change, adapt and grow. Just like a human being? We must never forget that leadership is centered around people, not things.

I want to see and hear your brand stories too. I want to sit and listen to your inspiration, journey and leadership. But please remember that the failures are easily forgotten. In order to tell your story, you first have to walk the walk to success.

I hope that in another few years from now we will be sharing even more of our story - From Cabbage Patch to World Wide Brand! And of course our Mission to sustain the ongoing heritage and culture of our community will be even stronger. But I also know that by then I will have learned further lessons to share.

Grow yourself. Grow your business.

Success is Built on Failures

Despite our first vintage in 2010 being an outstanding early success, 2011 was an unmitigated disaster. It failed, we failed – big time! We got it wrong. There are no Paradise Rescued labels with 2011 written on them as our vintage.

This is no emotional sympathy seeking first chapter trying to buy sales. But I hope it is attention grabbing? Why? Because I see so many organisations and people around the world just covering up their mistakes to protect corporate and personal egos rather than learning from the opportunities offered from their mistakes.

My team has always begged me not to write about nor talk about the Paradise Rescued vintage 2011. *“We just can’t do that sort of thing in Bordeaux”*. *“Our reputation will be destroyed”*. *“Best keep quiet and it will go away!”* And so the crazy lines go on. But, I disagree.

Yes certainly, it may not be a good idea to hold a press conference to announce your failure, but it is a much worse idea to hope that the world doesn’t find out about it and then suffer the significantly worse consequences when it finally does and the story is all over the media before you have decided to 'come clean' on the issue!

I understand that our style of operation, thinking and communication are possibly a touch different. Many would say

weird and unrealistically open. However, for us, a big part of being sustainable is telling our story as it is or was. If no one is going to be specifically hurt in the process, then why not?

It's natural to think that it's easy to "fake it 'till you make it" and in so doing, to cover up our mistakes and pretend they never happened. And then we all "look good" when the internal and external world does its analyses?

However the issues always show up somewhere, sometime later so it is far better to just be open and honest up front. Hiding reality is a false ego saving game that serves no real purpose and effectively prevents an organisation from taking the necessary steps to growing, improving and moving forward. In order to focus on excellence, the dialogue must be open and strong.

When it goes wrong, it is actually better to admit it up front, change and move forward in order to stop that mistake happening again. Denial of an issue makes one very vulnerable to it happening again! It won't go away unless you deal with it.

That Heart Stopping Call

Vintage 2011 was a pivotal moment in our journey that has contributed enormously to the quality of our wine and winery operations since. We are NOT proud of the event but happy that we had it at that moment back then and have learnt significantly from it. We are now using it to our advantage!

I clearly remember the telephone call. It was mid October 2011. I am very proud of our French Vineyard Operations team for how they managed every aspect of the matter. It was late Tuesday evening in Melbourne as I took the call from a very upset winemaker Albane. Through her own professional integrity, Albane knew that she personally had to call and explain the (very) bad news. Our precious Cabernet Franc 2011 wine had turned to vinegar.

Albane is our organic viticultural leader and winemaker. She had designed and led the Cabernet Franc recovery programme in our Hourcat Sud vineyard. She had also trained her mother, Pascale, to become one of Bordeaux's most passionate caring "hands on" *vignerottes*. This was an unhappy moment for both her and the project. Paradise Rescued is a close team.

Let's put this into perspective. In 2011, we had one block (Hourcat Sud) of Cabernet Franc vines producing one vat of beautiful wine. Our 2010 vintage had gone well, produced a wine significantly better than we had ever dreamed of and we were starting to see a strong market potential ahead. There are only a handful of 100% varietal Cabernet Franc producers in Bordeaux. We were opening our eyes to the possibility of a real niche brand opportunity. However, at a business and financial level no wine meant that there would be no income stream from that complete year of operation. All the vineyard's costs, wages and overheads would have to be simply stacked into the debt column with the hope of the previous year and the following year being able to cover them. In short, it was a potential business-terminating event.

I have reflected several times since on that phone call and Albane's bravery and strength of character in making it. I have also reflected on how I handled it. As a chemical engineer and senior manager, I was experienced in handling bad news and unexpected business events. In many instances around the world, the 'normal' management reaction is anger, aggressive disbelief and immediate blame transfer to the messenger brave enough to announce the "bad news". I have come to learn that this behaviour never actually changes the history of the event but significantly impacts on future communications and willingness to address a permanent solution. I am glad that I didn't make that same mistake, despite the gravity of the news.

Albane and I discussed the issue in our vat and she provided several potential solutions or opportunities to manage the problem. Our vat had been attacked by acetyl bacteria. The 2011 vintage had started early, continued dry through spring until finally some rain arrived in late June leading to an early harvest – our earliest harvest so far – in the third week of September. Very warm conditions prevailed through the fermentation and afterwards rendering the vintage (in Bordeaux terms) very vulnerable to this kind of event. All agricultural and viticultural products are fragile as nature is generally uncontrollable, unpredictable and at best only partially managed by human intervention.

In my own initial design of the winery and desperate but passionate efforts to find suitable committed wine making advice, I had used my seemingly good chemical engineering experience in another field of that science and incorrectly applied it to oenology – the science and engineering of wine making. In short the vat we were using was way too big for the smaller yield of the 2011 vintage, for which my design was completely inappropriate. I hadn't yet learnt that our grape harvest yields could be so variable in quantity and that we needed a different winery and fermentation vat design to manage that variability.

We could have legally blended the spoiled wine away, sold it off cheaply and recovered some cash or used a number of unauthorised means to recover value. As Albane and I discussed the options, I was staring directly at our Vision statement on the wall above me.

It contains a series of values imposed on a picture of a bottle. One of those lines simply reads 'Quality and Excellence'. As Albane offered up more persuasive suggestions, my response was a consistent but calm emphatic "*Non*". The wine didn't meet our standards. Any attempt to work around the issue

could impact our reputation and future market / brand perception. It had to go to the distillery to be converted into vinegar. And that was that.

It would be easy to read our story and conclude that we were pretty smart and had risk-planned ourselves so well that we could take apparent minor setbacks coolly in our stride. Or that we were completely clueless and just plain lucky to still be in business? The truth is probably somewhere in between. The beauty of this book is that we can get up close and personal with our readers and share a lot of those things that we did well and similarly point out where we made some fundamental mistakes. But importantly, where we made those big mistakes, we have learnt from them and moved forward.

I naturally don't wish failure upon any human being as quite often many worse situations can come from it. However, I also understand that the majority of small start-up businesses fail. I hope that by my writing these lines that you, the reader, can learn sufficiently and quickly enough to avoid many of the mistakes we made. If we change the odds of failure by just one or two percent, then indeed that will bring significant success.

I also appreciate that a huge number of small businesses will fail between the time that I write this first chapter and I complete the last one. The reasons are many and varied and our experience will not be the same journey for everyone. But if we can at least help a few more businesses avoid our errors, then this will be very positive result.

Better still, a few more dreams will come true and more lives will have been fulfilled.

"So David", I hear you ask. "2011 was a complete failure for Paradise Rescued, right? How could you have been so stupid to have not seen it coming?"

Does this sound like your boss talking, your wise caring sharing partner or even your own 'self talk'?

Whilst typical throughout our world, I don't believe this kind of behaviour is productive in any way, unless you are about to be run over by a train which you still haven't seen coming! In most cases, almost all of us can quickly see the error of our ways. And if we miss the subtlety, our bank manager, accountant or lawyer will be swiftly on hand to advise us of the impending situation.

2011 was the worst ever year for Paradise Rescued but the one where we learnt the most – about our business and ourselves. It's all about the way we looked at things. If we had even slightly considered it a major business-ending event, indeed Paradise Rescued might have fallen. Had we not done enough planning up front, we would not have had enough money and capital to get us through to another productive season and vintage – even if the two that followed were also very challenging. On the other hand, if I personally had planned better and gained more knowledge about wine making and better advice etc, then perhaps we would have avoided the technical errors we made. But then again we might not have profited from the event and learnt as much as we did about 'small vat' or '*micro-cuvé*' wine production.

The Value of Failing

As we build businesses or tackle any major goal, vision or event, it is important to realise that there will be unforeseen errors, unpleasant events, natural or human aided disasters or downright failures. Dress them up any way you like, call them what you want but they will happen! No one has accomplished anything significant on this planet without having had a good

number of major setbacks from which they have had to pick themselves up, get back on track again and move ahead.

Whilst I don't want for anyone to experience failure to the point of having to stop trying to achieve your objectives, I do wish that you encounter some significant setbacks and obstacles that help you question your strategy and determination. Only through the adversity, the struggle and your strength of leadership can you really succeed. If we never did any work to achieve our goals and success arrived 'free of charge', there wouldn't be a word for success. Nor any stories worth listening to. Life would be so easy that we, as a race, probably wouldn't even exist and we would not know the depth of our human potential.

To many readers, our whole project and goals may appear quite mad? That's the beauty of a dream and the possibility of doing and achieving something so unique and valuable – in our eyes. The brilliance of youth is that you lack fear and sense. The wisdom of increasing maturity is that you can hopefully apply some gained experience throughout the journey, providing you don't then lose the courage to ever begin.

I was lucky during a personal 'lost period' of my life to have read a lot of inspirational leadership material which had centered me well for the journey ahead. I didn't realise it at the time. In "From Cabbage Patch to Cabernet Franc" I wrote about becoming very serious in 'finding myself'; that slow period of thought and resilience building had prepared me well for the Paradise Rescued project.

We knew that we would hit a number of problems – maybe not as big as this one – but big enough anyway, such that a lot of resilience would be called for. Naturally as the leader, if I crumbled and gave up at the first sign of trouble, that would have been a career-ending step for the project. I knew how much personal commitment a few amazing people had put in

up until that stage. Letting them down would not have been acceptable. Letting myself down would have defined my life poorly. Our motto is “Failure is not an option”

A strong risk awareness from an early stage, gained through years of working in a very smart but risk adverse alternative industry, also played a valuable part. Whilst I will never tell you that we had a perfect financial plan, we certainly had strong direction and had considered the economic outcomes carefully. Despite the huge family strains of paying down the loans on the different parcels of land, the project was sound enough to go forward on the basis that we could always afford the wages for our vineyard team – paid if needs be from our own pockets. This is usually what is known as a Director’s loan! And of course we also knew that the process of making a great wine is a slow one, taking maybe a few years to achieve reasonable drinking quality. So, although we never really adequately considered the administration and marketing costs, we did have a contingency plan. We had thought about the risks – the 'what-if' scenarios and how to mitigate them, should they occur.

Being Values Driven

As I write this chapter, I have just had a quick check of our Facebook page and in our newsfeed popped up a picture plus quote from an Australian Leadership author by the name of Pat Mesiti. I have read a couple of Pat’s books and admired his straightforward, uncomplicated, and passionate writing. His quote on the post picture read: “Drive your values, drive your decision making!” Wow, I thought, that’s the other half of what I wanted to write in my first chapter! Bingo!

The decision making process during Albane’s sad call wasn’t actually that hard. Honestly, despite the loss and the knowledge that as a team we would have some tough work

ahead to rebuild financially and mentally, the decision between us was quick to make. And the reason for that “easy decision” was that we had decided on our values - the values that we wanted Paradise Rescued as a sustainable company to have and to be.

I will write later in more depth about the power of having a clear Vision of your business, organisation or goal such that it pulls you forward. On our Vision, we had taken the time and put in considerable time into thinking through, then writing down, the values and operational guidelines for the project. They are unchanged today – after 5 years of operation, three and a half as a French registered private company!

On our Vision picture, the values are written in the middle of a bottle image and even titled Values. The first one is Quality and Excellence. I have always been driven throughout my career about producing high quality products, focused on achieving the best results possible. There might possibly be a debate or question about the price of our product. But never it's quality.

As I talked with Albane, I was able to look up from my desk, set my eyes onto the A3 Vision picture above my head and there was my answer – Quality and Excellence. If we wanted to aspire to that value, there was no way we could even contemplate selling a slightly vinegary wine. The answer was “*Non*”! The answer was all there ready for me in our Values.

I was fortunate to be scheduled to travel through Europe on business just a couple of weeks later and able to amend the schedule to pass through Cardan and catch up with not only Albane and Pascale but also all of our neighbours and friends who had participated – voluntarily as always – in that harvest, and who shared in our disappointment. This was also a critical step in both acknowledging the gravity of the issue but re-affirming our commitment to continue. Our picture was bigger

than what one setback could create. It had happened but a bigger future lay ahead.

I have been asked many times about what our leadership response to the French Vineyard Operations team had been. I sense the human curiosity as to how I had reacted and whether we had fired the team and hired a new one. This is a fascinating debate. At the end of the day, the only person who was truly eligible for dismissal or a reprimand was myself. Not the team! One error can be a learning opportunity; a repeat mistake is a strong warning sign that the previous lesson was not learnt and a third strike requires a probable change in team leadership.

Our team did not deliberately set out to lose that vintage. Their biggest “punishment” was to their own pride, self-esteem and reputation. I didn’t have to do anything. Other than to re-affirm our confidence and belief in their skill and competence and their leader’s belief in the Vision we were all pursuing. We were sad for a while but we moved forward together again. We all share a little bit of the scar that 2011 had left on us, but it wasn’t a gaping open wound.

Our values and Vision statement also talks about our culture of learning, innovation and people. I didn’t ever think about it at the time but (thankfully) I had responded and reacted in a manner that reinforced the values expressed in our Vision. Yes the loss of the vat of wine was a hard blow, but the way we responded as leaders and professionals has created our own internal culture of openness, learning and continual improvement. Our attention to detail, passion to never ever again repeat 2011 now bonds our small team together like ‘Superglue’. Everyone instinctively double-checks each other at every step of the process, asking supportive questions, encouraging and ensuring that that event does not recur. The quality of every subsequent vintage has been a step higher as the result. The passion to never repeat that vintage is huge.

In hindsight it now seems like a fairly straightforward telephone call. An issue, a discussion and a calm decision. But it was another defining moment in our journey.

Over the winter, there were a number of phone calls to and fro as we sought to answer the question of what had gone wrong. The acetyl bacteria issue that had impacted our vat wasn't something new nor was it confined just to our winery. By sharing our experience and seeking answers, we concluded that we needed smaller vats. In the spring of the following year, Albane, Pascale and I sat down over a glass of wine in their new back garden, reviewed the options available for change and selected four new small vats to replace our single larger one.

The plan to bounce forward – not just move forward – was set. Our so called “micro-vat” or “micro-cuvé” strategy was set in motion. This new approach has given us whole new dimension to wine making in our Bordeaux village of Cardan, enabling us now to closely discern among different areas of the vineyard and hand select different vats for different final wines.

#LeaderTips

At each stage of the book, there are so many lessons that I want to share from our stories and journey. At the end of every chapter I have tried distil the story into a few key learning's under the heading of '#LeaderTips'. The reason I have called it '#LeaderTips' is to highlight the fact that, most often, we don't have to develop something revolutionary ourselves but, as leaders, we do have to do something. To take the lead and make a change. Frequently we can just use someone else's good idea and apply it to our own business. Proudly! Why re-invent the wheel?

I have also left a separate page after each section for you the leader reader to record your lessons learnt. And more importantly, what leadership action you personally are going to take in the next 30 days as a result of what you have read in each chapter.

So here are my tips for you from Chapter 1:-

#LeaderTips:

1. Failure is an event. Period! Not a life or business termination point. Failures, unforeseen errors and mistakes will happen. Understand that fact. Learn from them and use them to motivate you to take things to a higher, better level in future.
2. Be prepared for adverse events. In fact, prepare for them, prepare for what could go wrong and then develop your organisational culture to have a plan to deal with them when they arrive.
3. Be a leader not a spoilt child when bad events happen, knowing that part of the responsibility rests with you. Act appropriately to manage the future and prevent recurrence.
4. Values – get them established and understood up front. When you need to have them, it is too late to make them up on the spot. Write them down, look at them often, share and teach them. But above all, live by them.

My three key learnings are:-

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My next 30 day action item is:-

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About David Stannard

David Stannard is the Founder and Owner Director of Paradise Rescued.

David was born and educated in England, qualifying as a Chemical Engineer from Birmingham University in 1980. He has had a successful leadership career in the petrochemical industry in the UK, Netherlands and Australia covering more than 30 years.

In 2010, as a tsunami of new housing threatened to wipe away the rural heritage of the village of Cardan in the vineyards of Bordeaux France, Paradise Rescued was founded. Working closely with the community, David successfully brought together a dedicated and passionate team to manage the vineyard, winery, export marketing and business brand development.



Today Paradise Rescued produces and exports organically produced red wines to Australia and the USA and is internationally recognised as a niche ultra premium micro wine brand. *Paradise Rescued was the Silver Stevie International Business Award winner 2013 for Best New Company, and the Silver Stevie International Business Award Winner 2016 for Small Budget Marketing Campaign (<\$5M). The Paradise Rescued Cabernet Franc 2010 vintage was awarded a Bronze medal at the 2016 Melbourne International Wine Show.*

Today David and Team Paradise Rescued are highly sought after as advisers and leadership partners for other international Bordeaux wine business projects.

David is a passionate speaker on Leadership, the power of Mission Vision and Passion, Social Media as well as the future of Bordeaux wine. He is the author of “Paradise Rescued – From Cabbage Patch to Cabernet Franc”.

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