



Larry Kessler

Co-owner Kessler Restaurants, Inc.

*"If no one ever took risks, Michelangelo would have painted the Sistine floor."
Neil Simon*

Larry Kessler's turning point is one that he describes as a "2x4 experience". What he means by that is an experience that, in no uncertain terms, hit him square between the eyes and shocked him out of something of a trance state in which he'd been living his life up to that point.

In 1965, Larry was attending law school at St. John's University, because at that time the best careers for Jewish students were either medicine or law. Thinking no more of it, or perhaps not thinking of it at all, Larry followed along the path that had been set out for him until the point that he was dismissed from law school for failing an elective course. At the time, St. John's had a stricter requirement for all Jewish students and failure in even an elective course resulted in an immediate dismissal. The blow was one that went unforeseen by Larry and totally took him off guard. Here he was, at the age when most other people were just beginning their careers, and he had just flunked out of law school and had no idea what he was going to do with himself.

Soon after he flunked out of school, Larry received some helpful advice from his father that he ended up taking to heart. "Larry," his father said to him:

"How you make your bed is how you sleep in it."

Though it was something of a catastrophe at the time, today Larry views it as the turning point in his life. Considering the success he's made of himself since then, this can hardly be seen as a bad thing. But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves.

Understanding that his father meant that you're the master of your own destiny, Larry went out in search of work. Finding a position in sales, Larry rose to the top very quickly. After only a short time, he had achieved the highest level of sales in his firm, working as a pharmaceutical sales representative. Feeling that he had exhausted his potential in that market and wanting to diversify his experience, Larry branched out and took a job as a stockbroker. This was a risky maneuver, but it proved to be a wildly successful one. He became the first Jewish vice president in his firm while still in his 20's. In the 1970's, only a handful of years after he had experienced what he had thought of as a major defeat, he was with yet another top company and found himself being appointed their senior vice president.

In everyone's eyes, Larry had reached the heights of success. And yet, somewhere inside him, the desire for something more was brewing. His work experiences had shown him that he had excellent top-tier potential in both sales and leadership. These were talents that he didn't want to go to waste. He considered his background and thought of Wolf's, the successful delicatessen that his father had been running in New York for quite some time. Though the jump seemed logical from his perspective, it must have come as a big shock to everyone else when he announced that he was leaving his successful senior vice president position to work at a Burger King. Larry sought his father's advice, something he always did throughout his career. He again received a comforting affirmation of his abilities when his father told him **"it's only a job, seek your star"**.

To be more specific, he intended to purchase a Burger King franchise in upstate New York. Despite this shift being viewed with skepticism at best, or outright derision at worst from most people he knew, Larry ended up making the jump at the age of 31, with a three year old daughter to support.

Like the other ventures Larry had set out on, his Burger King franchise seemed to turn to gold at his very touch. But however easy it seemed to those on the outside, Larry put in countless hours seven days a week, doing everything from cleaning the bathrooms to serving guests. Before long, he had three successful restaurants under his command, and along with his brother Dennis (also profiled in this book), developed and purchased quite a few more. In time, he was approached by a group of investment bankers, who would give Larry what would shape up to be his second turning point.

The investment bankers had a large group of restaurant franchises that they wanted him to take over, based on his success with the Burger Kings he already owned. At first Larry turned them down outright, preferring to concentrate on his own plans. But when they kept approaching him time after time, he eventually signed a confidentiality agreement in order to get more information. When he did, Larry said he became even more adamant about turning them down. The restaurants in question were all Friendly's, a full-service chain. Considering the purchase incompatible with his fast food experience, Larry expressed his reluctance to the sellers. In the end, however, their continued persistence made him take another look. He went to visit the franchises in question and as he says "there was low hanging fruit". In other words, there was some key potential to each one that could be capitalized on by an owner who had the right mentality: an owner's mentality rather than a corporate mentality. Deciding that the opportunity was just too great, Larry made the purchase.

In no time at all, his unique approach to business and his good work ethic had turned the franchises around, and they became some of the most profitable Friendly's in the country. Although the Friendly's brand has changed hands several times since then, Larry says that he's held fast, and

to this date he's so well-respected that he's always approached by the corporate headquarters when they have decisions to make. He and his brother are the largest and most profitable franchise holders in the entire corporation.

When asked what lesson he took away from the experience, Larry has this to say:

"The key to good negotiation is not wanting it so badly."

His reluctance to purchase initially had caused the sellers to return to him time and time again, each time with a more favorable offer. He eventually found out that the group was having financial difficulties and he could have virtually named his own price. Since then, this detached "take it as it comes" approach to negotiation has served him well.

Ever since Larry "woke up" thanks to his St. John's experience and discovered the true heights of his professional potential, he's showed no signs at all of stopping. Outside of work, he maintains an active lifestyle with his involvement with the RRDC, a racing club for sports car enthusiasts that ranks among the top 1% of drivers in the amateur racing community. Despite being sixty-five years old, he says he just doesn't understand the retirement personality, indicating a love of his work that is enviable. He says:

"If you like what you do, you never have to work a day in your life".

Coming from someone who knows what it's like to be left with nothing, Larry is evidence that it's never too late for a single turning point to turn one's life completely around.