

# WHEN OPPORTUNITY CALLS

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**J**ohn Koskinen's parents taught him a few important lessons growing up: believe in yourself, make the most of whatever you do, work hard, and whatever you start, finish it! These were valuable Finnish lessons that carried into a career that spanned some of the most challenging assignments in the private and non-profit sectors, and to the highest offices of government — all the way to the White House.

**HIS UPBRINGING WAS AN INTEGRAL PART OF HIS SUCCESS.** John's grandparents were Finnish on both sides. His mother's family settled in Minnesota and his father's family in Ohio, and their heritage was always a source of pride. His parents met at a Finnish dance hall in Cleveland, and John remembers enjoying the sauna at his grandfather's farm in Minnesota, and his mother baking Finnish coffee bread and letting it rise on the radiator.

**JOHN'S PARENTS BELIEVED THAT EVERYONE SHOULD BE ASSIMILATED INTO AMERICAN SOCIETY WITHOUT ANY ACCENT, AND DID NOT TEACH THEIR CHILDREN THE FINNISH LANGUAGE.** Still, his maternal grandfather spoke only Finnish, and John picked up a few words here and there. It was nice to have a secret language to use when you needed it.

**JOHN GREW UP IN CLEVELAND UNTIL THE AGE OF 12, WHEN HIS FATHER TOOK A JOB IN KENTUCKY.** Education was always highly valued in his family; his mother earned her degree later in life at Morehead College. John studied physics at Duke University (graduating magna cum laud), followed by Yale Law School. His parents were proud of his academic accomplishments, but never boastful or overly congratulatory. "They were supportive of whatever you wanted to do," John says.

**LIKE HIS FINNISH ANCESTORS, JOHN SET OUT TO MAKE HIS OWN WAY IN THE WORLD AND TAKE ADVANTAGE OF WHATEVER OPPORTUNITIES CALLED ALONG THE WAY.**

**AFTER COLLEGE, HE WORKED AS AN ATTORNEY IN A LARGE LAW FIRM IN CALIFORNIA.** But he felt a stronger calling for public service. In 1967, the cities were burning and he was energized to do something. He went to Washington, D.C. in August to find a job in government, and arrived just a few days after the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (known as the Kerner Commission) was created. When the opportunity arose through a mutual acquaintance to work for the commission, he seized it. The Kerner Commission investigated the causes of the racial riots during the long, hot summer of 1967, and made programmatic recommendations to avoid a recurrence.

**JOHN LOVED THE WORK AND THE CITY, AND TOOK A POSITION IN THE D.C. OFFICE OF NEW YORK MAYOR JOHN LINDSAY. HE THEN WAS CHIEF OF STAFF FOR SENATOR ABRAHAM RIBICOFF OF CONNECTICUT.** After several years of public service, John — with college-bound kids — moved to a better paying, private sector job with the Palmieri Company, where he helped manage the non-rail assets of the bankrupt Penn Central. He became a specialist in turning around failing organizations, and in 21 years with the company, progressed to become CEO.

**ANOTHER OPPORTUNITY AROSE IN 1985 DURING THE ANNUAL, EXCLUSIVE "RENAISSANCE WEEKEND" WHICH BROUGHT TOGETHER INVITEES FROM THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS, ENTERTAINMENT AND MEDIA AT HILTON HEAD, SOUTH CAROLINA.** There, he met someone who would change his career trajectory: the little-known

Governor of Arkansas. When Bill Clinton became president, John seized the opportunity to work in the White House, where he held the job of Deputy Director of the Office of Management and Budget for three years.

**FOLLOWING THAT POST, WHILE ON A BRIEF TOUR OF EUROPE WITH HIS WIFE, PAT, THE WHITE HOUSE RANG AND SAID, "WE HAVE A Y2K PROBLEM," REFERENCING THE GOVERNMENT AND NATION'S IT SYSTEMS IN THE TRANSITION TO THE YEAR 2000.** After a call from President Clinton offering him the position of "Y2K Czar," and further urging from Vice President Al Gore, John agreed to the challenge. U.S. computers did not collectively crash at midnight on January 1, 2000, thanks to John Koskinen and the teams he organized across the country and around the world.

**AFTER Y2K, HE SERVED AS DEPUTY MAYOR AND CITY ADMINISTRATOR OF WASHINGTON, D.C., DURING CHALLENGES SUCH AS 9/11, THE ANTHRAX ATTACK AND THE SNIPER WHO KILLED 10 IN OCTOBER OF 2002.** Upon leaving city government, John, a passionate soccer fan and member of the U.S. Soccer Foundation board, became its president. He is most proud of the increased support provided to inner-city soccer initiatives and grants to expand the growth of the game in the U.S.

**JOHN'S PLANNED RETIREMENT WAS DERAILED BY A CALL FROM SECRETARY OF TREASURY HANK PAULSON'S OFFICE REQUESTING HIS TURNAROUND SKILLS AT FREDDIE MAC.** In

September 2008, the economy was in free-fall, and the government was taking over the failed mortgage lender, which had helped precipitate the global recession. In his position as Non-Executive Chairman he rebuilt the board, helped to turn the organization around, and left it in a stable (and much better place) than when he started. He looked forward to retirement.

**FOR THE SECOND TIME, HIS RETIREMENT WAS INTERRUPTED BY A CALL FROM**

time, a co-worker passing by my office didn't notice the phone and thought I had lost my mind eating alone and talking to myself," he laughs.

**"I FEEL FORTUNATE TO HAVE BEEN AT THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME, OR PERHAPS THE WRONG PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME, IN LIGHT OF THE POSITIONS I FILLED," HE SAYS. "I TOOK THE JOBS NOBODY WANTED, BUT I FEEL BLESSED TO HAVE HAD THESE OPPORTUNITIES."**

**HIS FINNISHNESS HELPED.** John notes that "instinctively, Finns try to help other people and solve problems. Working with other great people made all the difference."

**JOHN SEES FINLANDIA FOUNDATION AS A CATALYST TO BRING OUR COMMUNITY TOGETHER TO LEARN FROM ONE ANOTHER.** He advises the organization to keep up the visibility of Finland and our Finnishness. "It's a small country, but with a great reputation for excellence. Finns have made admirable accomplishments."

**HE ALSO THINKS IT'S IMPORTANT TO PRESERVE OUR FINNISH HISTORY AND HERITAGE, AND SUPPORT SCHOLARSHIPS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.** "Supporting scholarships honors our Finnish values. Finland is one of the best-educated countries in the world."

**ALTHOUGH JOHN NOW LIKES TO THINK HE IS FINALLY RETIRED, EVERYONE KNOWS THAT OPPORTUNITIES WILL CALL AGAIN.** Given his success, we hope he'll take the call.

## JOHN'S WISDOM TO YOUNG FINNISH LEADERS

- 1. ACCEPT NEW OPPORTUNITIES: DON'T BE AFRAID TO DEVIATE FROM YOUR PLANS AND TAKE THE OPPORTUNITIES WHEN THEY ARISE. YOU DON'T ALWAYS NEED TO LOOK TOO FAR DOWN THE ROAD. LOOK AT ALL THE OPTIONS AND CONSIDER EVERYTHING TO BE A GREAT LEARNING EXPERIENCE.**
- 2. NEVER MAKE A DECISION BY YOURSELF: ASK PEOPLE WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO THEM AND GET THEIR SUGGESTIONS FOR WHAT TO DO. THEY'LL THINK OF THINGS YOU DIDN'T.**
- 3. DON'T WORRY ABOUT WHAT OTHERS THINK: DO THE THINGS THAT RESONATE WITH YOU. "I WAS WORRIED ABOUT LEAVING SENATOR RIBICOFF'S OFFICE FOR THE PRIVATE SECTOR. WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY? BUT NO ONE SEEMED TO CARE, AND IT WAS THE BEST THING FOR ME TO DO."**
- 4. DO THE THINGS THAT INSPIRE YOU: FIND SOMETHING YOU ENJOY AND YOU'LL BE GOOD AT IT. DON'T DO THINGS JUST BECAUSE THEY ARE A STEPPINGSTONE TO SOMETHING ELSE. IF YOU ENJOY THE WORK, YOU'LL BE DEDICATED TO IT. PEOPLE WILL KNOCK ON YOUR DOOR.**
- 5. MAKE INCREMENTAL PROGRESS EVERY DAY: DO WHAT YOU CAN TODAY TO MOVE THINGS FORWARD, RECOGNIZING THAT THERE'S A LOT MORE LEFT TO DO. IF YOU KEEP WORRYING ABOUT AND FOCUSING ON EVERYTHING YET TO BE DONE, YOU'LL BE OVERWHELMED AND NEVER MAKE REAL PROGRESS.**

**THE WHITE HOUSE. IN 2013, THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION ASKED IF HE WOULD RUN AND HELP TURN AROUND THE IRS.** He was confirmed as IRS Commissioner, and for four years provided steady leadership during some of the most tumultuous times in the organization's history.

**IN ALL OF HIS IMPORTANT JOBS, THE HOURS WERE LONG AND THE DECISIONS WERE SOMETIMES LONELY.** "I can recall talking to my wife Pat on the phone every night while still at the office. We would sometimes light a candle and we would both eat our dinner together while talking on the phone. One