If Nothing Changes

The Nick Donofrio Story
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Preface

My 44 years at IBM (1964-2008) saw extraordinary developments in technology, paralleled by extraordinary social and cultural changes, both at IBM and throughout the world. I was fortunate to work at the heart of many of the technological changes and did my part in driving and enabling them.

I was well prepared for IBM, having received a great education in engineering at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and great instruction in life, change, and innovation at the hands of my father. Eventually, I was in the position of making many of IBM’s decisions about technology changes, forming the teams that developed and released those new technologies, and enabling so many talented engineers, scientists, and businesspeople to do their part in the innovations.

You will not find in these pages a year-by-year history of my career at IBM and beyond. Rather, I will tell stories about how my career unfolded, how change and innovation were such important parts of my career, and how the results of those changes and innovations impacted both IBM, our customers, and later in my life, other companies and entities I’ve had the pleasure of serving.

In writing this book, I have been fortunate to reconnect with so many of my colleagues from across nearly 50 years,
and they have contributed their stories and memories. Indeed, they tell much of what happened.

As I’ve been reviewing my career with colleagues both old and new, I can identify themes that have guided me and my work, inside and outside of IBM:

- Always be willing to ask for help and always be willing to learn; and learn what you do not know as quickly as you can. Understand full well that in the future, you will be judged less by what you know and more by what you do about what you do not know.

- Technology matters, and you must get it right. You must fully understand and appreciate what you are and are not doing, as what you are not doing may be more important than what you are doing.

- No matter how hot the technology, leadership matters, especially if you are not the smartest person in the room.

- Always listen to your clients, not the press. Value does migrate, and you do not control it. Your clients do!

- Innovation makes or breaks everything. As life science becomes the science of the 21st century, its progress is enabled and accelerated by amazing advances in computer science and information processing.

- Always understand and appreciate where you stand on the issues of change. Do you lead it, tolerate it, fight it, avoid it or embrace it?
You will recognize these themes in the stories that follow.

- Nick Donofrio

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Part I:
Lessons from My Father
Throughout my life, I have shared the story of my early life with colleagues at IBM and the students, scientists, and engineers with whom I’ve worked. I was fortunate to have as my father a man who believed in hard work, constant improvement, and change. This was how you got ahead in life, he believed; and I have found him to be right. The lessons I learned from my father have served me well.

My father taught me what I needed to know to succeed in my business career. The mindset, the work ethic, the focus on results – these lessons were drilled into my head during childhood.

Let me tell you about my father – Nicholas Joseph Donofrio – and how he was my strongest teacher, supporter, and enabler through his lessons.

My father’s story began in the Italian ghetto in Beacon, New York. His own father, Guiseppe D’Onofrio, had emigrated to New York in 1904 from the town of Arpaia in Campania, Italy. He had learned the shoemaking trade in Italy, but became a hat maker upon reaching Beacon.

A decade later, on October 9, 1914, my father was born, the third of four sons to Guiseppe and his wife Elvira. Shortly after the birth of the last son, my grandmother
Elvira passed away. My grandfather did what all good Italian fathers in America did in similar situations: he called his family in Italy and asked them to find a second wife for him. My grandmother Concetta soon arrived, played her crucial role in the family, and helped life go on for Giuseppe and his boys.

My grandfather, a serious, quiet man, didn’t speak English, but I had a sense that he was very smart, with some cultural interests, but no time to pursue them. He had to work very hard to support his family. Life was a constant struggle to keep the family together and to put food on the table, and there was little time to be deeply involved with his children or to guide them to any particular life.

Growing up, my father was outgoing and friendly and looked to his friends for guidance. He was a smart kid, but impressionable, struggling to find his own way, while not forgetting his family roots. This led him to take two actions: (1) he dropped out of school at age 14, partly to help support the family during the early years of the Great Depression and partly due to peer pressure, and (2) he became the leader in his family. My father became the kind of take-charge, go-to person most families have; someone who was there when his brothers and parents needed him.

After leaving school, my father went to work at a hat factory, a hard environment that turned him into a tough, heavy-handed person. At the same time, he became part of
the Italian social life in Beacon. He and his buddies loved partying and all that went with it. Even though this was the time of the Great Depression, they found ways to have fun. My father was young, physically fit, and good looking, but without real ambition or sense of responsibility.

Even after my father married my mother, Beatrice Fulvio, the two of them continued to find ways to socialize and enjoy life. They were great dance partners. Nick and Beatrice were poor, though, living on one side of her parents’ duplex house. Somehow having fun and being poor were not mutually exclusive for them. Only when they started a family did things start to change. And when war came.

During World War II, my father served his country by joining the Army Air Force as an aircraft mechanic. He worked with his hands and brawn, never on the front lines, and his time in the Army made him tougher and more responsible.

After the War, my father became a guard at Matteawan State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, a job that required his toughness on a daily basis. His buddies worked there, too, all of them sticking together. Their lives followed a simple but meaningful routine: go to work, have a beer, become volunteer firemen, and fight fires. They took their responsibilities seriously and believed they needed to give to get.
At this time, my father was smart, but tough – maybe by nature, maybe by habit, maybe by circumstances. He understood where he had taken himself in life so far, but now he started to want new things. A house of his own for his family. A better way for his children. He knew he needed more money, so he worked even harder. He took on multiple jobs: night watchman, house painter, janitor at the local country club. It seemed as if he was always out of the house working. He had ambition for himself but knew that given the times and the choices he had made, his ambition would have limits.

As our family grew, my father and mother took on different roles and carried out their roles following that ambition. Mother was the homemaker and in charge of our education. Father was the brawn, the provider, and the one who taught us how to reach for a better way.

My Father as My Teacher

I cannot emphasize enough how seriously my father took his responsibility for pushing his children toward bright futures. His vision involved a lot of hard work, whether we liked it or not, particularly for his two sons. Even as very young boys, my brother Fran and I had chores and responsibilities.

Fran, who was four years older than me, started with a long Monday-to-Saturday newspaper route – over 100
daily deliveries to make – and I helped him. I also started my own smaller delivery routes before eventually taking over Fran’s.

Fran and I worked hard on our duplex house, too, often alongside our father and uncle. We did the gardening, cut the grass, painted the fence, and did the many other as-needed chores that never seemed to be done. My father had no tolerance for mistakes, even the ones that kids make, and we had to do the work until we got it right. We quickly learned how important it was to pay attention and to do the work well the first time.

Of course, I didn’t work all the time. I had my own group of buddies, and we always were getting in trouble. I always feared that my tough father would punish me when I did something stupid or crazy or caused damage, and he usually did. But there were times when I expected punishment and didn’t get it – like the time I got a knife wound from playing mumblety-peg or a time I was suffering badly from poison ivy. At such times, my father might help to fix things, or bandage my wounds, or simply just understand. I began to recognize that there was a complexity to my father; that maybe this tough guy had a depth of thinking I had not been able to see or understand in my earliest years. That didn’t necessarily make things easier, and in fact, things were about to get much harder for me.
In 1955, when I was about 10, my father had earned enough money to buy his own house for his family, and we moved from the old neighborhood. The house needed a lot of work, but it was a source of great pride for him, and rightly so. My father, his friends, my brother, and I worked hard together to make improvements and repairs, and we did the work at a high level of quality. Sometimes, my father had to figure out how to fix something or make it work, and I admired him for that. I became awed that he could take something that was broken and turn it into something useful.

Naturally, my brother and I had to take care of our new house, but at the same time, we still were expected to take care of our grandparents’ duplex. As we did the work, though, I could see the improvements as they happened, and I found myself bonding with my father and brother. I realized that my father was forcing his work ethic on us, even more than before, but I did enjoy seeing the results of my hard work. I also found the beginnings of ambition in myself: I wanted to outdo my brother and be more successful than him, which would not be easy.

My mind started to change in relation to my father, too. I realized that I feared him, and that’s why I did what he told me. Yes, I was taking more pride in my work, but I worked because I had to and because I feared him, not because I enjoyed it or wanted to please him. I was still pretty young and all I really wanted was to be out playing
sports with my friends, so I realized that I needed to figure out a way to deal with what he wanted me to do, and still have time for some fun, like I had in the old neighborhood.

This realization started a process in me – a very important process – that has served me well throughout my life. I realized I had to learn how to manage my father. Instead of reacting emotionally, I learned to react logically. I would find myself thinking things like, “Even if you don’t want to do it, why bother putting yourself in a position of fighting with him?” As I moved more in this direction, I noticed that I wasn’t getting in trouble or getting punished as much. I became aware that if I thought through my interactions with him, I would be in better shape than if I just reacted emotionally to his heavy-handed style.

My siblings saw that something was different between my father and me, but when I tried to explain my ideas to them, I couldn’t get their buy-in. They were still acting emotionally, while I was figuring out how to resolve conflict by thinking and acting differently. I was seeing things in a different light.

My father started to sense this change in me, and our relationship changed. As we worked together, I started to see things as he did. I understood why quality – and the sense of pride that came with it – was so important. I learned that whatever job I was doing, I should do it well and with pride. And as I increasingly saw the results of our work, I realized that I was no longer working out of
fear. I was adopting my father’s work ethic, commitment to quality, and pride. Instead of trying to out-do my brother, I was seeing excellence for its own sake. I was developing a crucial mindset I would need in my career.

As I adopted his work ethic, the fear I once had of my father was replaced by admiration. He was a man who found a way, and I would need that trait many times in the years to come. It’s almost a funny example, but most of the tools he had at home were hand-me-down things from somebody else that he fixed.

The best example might have been our first power mower. That was a piece of garbage! We’d had lots of push mowers that he would make us use – he’d sharpen his own blades, get his own honings done – but now he brings home this horrible old lawn mower for us. I said, “Dad, what are we going to do with that thing? The gas tank isn’t even connected!”

He made it work. He had no money for repairs, but he got some old copper tubing and started fiddling with it. He figured out that he couldn’t just connect the tubing directly to the tank because it would vibrate and break, but if he arranged the tubing into a spiral form it could hold. Well, he took a big, fat salt shaker from the kitchen, wrapped the copper tubing around it like a spring, and connected it to the gas tank and the mower. He had to do it pretty precisely, because the tank and mower were on two different levels, but he figured it out. It looked ridiculous,
but it worked. I never forgot that creativity; that innovative mindset that enabled him to innovate a solution to the problem he faced.

While I now was giving him what he expected, he remained just as tough. My father never complimented me or my brother when we did high-quality work. He was trying to get us to understand that we should do work the right way because that was our responsibility, not because we wanted a compliment from him. We learned that when we did our work well, our sense of pride should be our own reward.

Even though he was just as tough as ever, I was continuing to learn to duck and weave within the systems that were presented to me. Take my report cards, for example. In the grade school I attended, our report cards had our grades on the front along with comments on our behavior on the back. While I always received good grades, I sometimes got into trouble at school. As a result, my father would look first at the back of the report card to check my behavior, and I frequently was punished for the things I had done at school. Finally, I changed. I learned to think logically about my mischief. I realized I could still be a bit of a jokester, just not in school, where my behavior would become known to him as soon as the next report card was sent home. From that point, I didn’t get into trouble at school anymore, and I understood that if I
couldn’t change a system, I could change the way I operated within that system to my advantage.

As all of this played out over the course of a few years, it became obvious that my father was focusing more intently on me than on my siblings. Perhaps he saw the high-quality work I was doing. Or sensed the changes in me and thought that he could really make something out of me. Whatever the case, as I grew, rather than let up, he got harder with me. He obviously thought that if he pushed me harder, he would get more out of me and be of more help to me in preparing me for life. I found myself up to the challenges he was throwing at me.

We continued to work together all through my teen years. I not only was working at the family homes and delivering papers, I also worked at a local store. I remember one time when my father and I worked together to put a new floor in at the store. Everything went wrong, but we eventually finished the job. Then two things happened: My father gave me a bigger share of the money than I expected, and he actually told me that I had worked harder on the floor than he did. A great teaching moment for me to see that I could earn a reward and praise from him if I worked incredibly hard.

As I moved through high school, I could tell that my new approach toward my father was working better and better. Yes, I had to be good and do the things he expected, but we were getting along well. My father liked that I was
excelling in high school by getting straight As and high marks on the New York State Regent’s exams. He liked that I was looking toward the future with ambition, too.

I was aware, though, that my father was stricter and more rigid than my friends’ parents, and this seemed like an injustice to me. I couldn’t go out and have as much fun as the others and didn’t have much free time. Going into my junior year of high school, I decided to challenge my father about his system and screwed up my courage to do so. What my father said in response was one of the strongest lessons I ever learned.

“If Nothing Changes, Nothing Changes”

My father loved to sit on the front porch in the summer after a hard day of work. He’d have a few beers. He’d sit there waving at everybody who drove by, and they’d toot their horn. Friends walking past might come up onto the porch, and he’d sit there with them and hold court. Here, I knew, was where I had the best chance to catch him in the right mood.

Finally, one particular night, I made my move. It was just the right time and the right moment. Maybe it was the cool of the summer evening. Maybe I just couldn’t hold it inside anymore.
I went out onto the porch, sat down, and said to my father, “Can we talk about my something, Dad? I really need to talk to you.”

Dad said, “Okay.” I can see this all as if it were yesterday. I asked my father why he pushed me so hard, why nothing seemed to be good enough, why he had to be so controlling.

He sat quietly for a few minutes and then said, “Because if nothing changes, nothing changes. Son if you are not happy with what you have been getting then why keep doing what you have been doing since all you will be getting is what you have been getting! If you want something different, then you have to do something different. You have to change!”

I knew this was profound and it took me a long while to think through the wisdom behind his words. I realized he had a plan for me and was doing what he could to build me into a better person, so I could have a better life than he did. I also realized that he thought that if I grew up in a strict home, I would learn how to achieve levels of success he could not even imagine. I would end up in a better place, because he had not neglected me.

*My Mother’s Contribution*
Although I have focused extensively on my father’s lessons, I don’t want to overlook my mother’s contributions to my childhood and life. My parents acted as a team, instilling their Old World values, training me, giving me my values, and shaping my success. I have a blended personality, a combination of how both my mother and my father brought me up. Both of my parents made sure I had the right set of experiences as a child, and they both made sacrifices so I could earn the good education that led to my career.

In fact, my mother was the dominant parent in many ways, a behind-the-scenes leader, as tough as she needed to be with me, but gentle, too. My mother taught me to “be nice, be thoughtful, don’t be fresh, because you need people.”

My mother could bring out the good in almost anyone and taught me how to reach out to people to help them. I got many of the qualities I eventually used as a manager and a leader from my mother.

As long as she lived, she passed away a few years ago at the age of 98, my mother was as smart as a whip. She was my rock, and a great influence in my life. I miss her greatly.

*My Father’s Lessons*
My father’s style was to let us figure out the lessons he was imparting, not to explain them to us. That’s what I’ve been doing, too – just mentioning lessons and letting you learn from them yourself.

But since my father’s lessons were so important, I want to make them more explicit:

• The way forward to a better life is through hard work
• You need to pay attention to learn how to do things right
• You can start with nothing and still figure out a way to make something
• Whatever job you’re doing, you should do it well and with pride
• You need to make a commitment to responsibility and quality
• You should seek excellence for excellence’s sake
• When you do your work well and correctly, your sense of pride is your reward
• You make many choices every day, often more subconsciously than consciously. You can use your free will to make the decisions that are right for you. If you give up your free will, you need to understand that was your choice
• If nothing changes, nothing changes
These lessons served me well while building my career. They still do today, pushing me to keep seeking excellence in the things I choose to do rather than coast on past laurels.

When I became a manager and then a leader, I found that I had to learn how to adapt these lessons to the situation. While the work ethic my father drilled into me has been a valuable gift, I came to learn that I could not use my father’s control-and-command style with my highly-skilled, often brilliant colleagues. Instead, I had to become collaborative, an enabler for my team – a lot more like my mother, in fact. As a leader, I figured out that my real job was simply to listen to my team members and fight for them until they could bring our vision to fruition. I learned to be tough, but fair; flexible, but highly productive; and to always move quickly.

Still, the substance of his lessons always has guided me: You need to be willing to work hard, change, and deliver results without excuses. You need to figure out the culture so you know how to promote your ideas and make a difference. Always accept the challenge. And most important: change may be the harder road, but if nothing changes, nothing changes. And you always need to keep changing.

I could not have had the career I did without these lessons or without the focus and push from my father. I am forever grateful to this tough, complicated, visionary man.