

Scott Gessay

A Difference in the World

In September of 1984, Scott Gessay went to work for a company called CTEC, where he and his team developed Cold War Era software systems to track submarines all over the world. For two years, Scott loved working for what he called an “energetic, mission-focused company.”

“We focused on what we did for the customer,” he says, “and not just on the bottom line. And because we loved it so much, we worked all kinds of hours. At the end of the day, we were making a difference in the world.”

But as often happens with small, successful companies that provide a niche service or product exceptionally well, CTEC was acquired by a larger company in the mid 1980s. For some time it maintained the culture embodied by Scott and his colleagues, but by the end of the decade, the management gradually changed, and that culture began to change as well. “The tipping point for me,” Scott says, “in terms of thinking about doing something different, came during a project we were working on.” He and his colleague, Mike Morehouse, worked almost 48 hours straight, over a weekend, to finalize a capability to be delivered to the Air Force in Hawaii. That weekend they were holed up in a small lab that was adjacent to the executive suite, and using the coffee station there to keep up the breakneck pace necessary to finish the project on time. They finished working late on Sunday, shut everything down, and went home for a few hours of sleep before coming back in at 9 A.M. on Monday morning.

“Upon coming back to the office, we realized that one of us forgot to turn the coffee machine off,” Scott recalls today. “It had exploded all over the kitchen.” Scott and Mike received a memo stating they were no longer permitted to use the coffee station—but the memo said nothing about their considerable effort to complete the

deliverable and to support the customer's mission in Hawaii. “To me, it was a signal that things had changed,” Scott says. “It was no longer a mission-focused company.”

Not long after that, Scott and a CTEC task manager, Mike Fortier, traveled to Hawaii to support a software delivery. While there, they had the opportunity to discuss their perspectives on CTEC and its direction since being acquired. “This led us down the path,” Scott says, “to say, I think we can do better at creating a company that is better focused on the customer's mission... one that is better at providing opportunities and growth for the employees, and that will enable them to feel like they're making a difference.”

With that, in 1987, at just 27 years old, Scott Gessay and his colleagues at CTEC, Mike Fortier and Mike Morehouse, started FGM, named for the initials of its founders. And while Scott had never run a company before, his life up to that point had certainly showed signs that he would one day take that entrepreneurial leap.

Scott was born in Rockville, Connecticut, where he lived for nine years before moving with his parents and younger sister to Rockville, Maryland. Scott's father, an educator, started as a shop teacher in the early sixties. He moved his family in order to pursue advanced degrees in education, eventually becoming a senior administrator in the Montgomery County public school system. Neither he nor Scott's mother came from affluent backgrounds, and they instilled in Scott a strong work ethic.

“One thing my mother and father taught me,” Scott says, “was that if I wanted something, it was up to me to go out and earn it.” He would partner up with a friend in his neighborhood to mow lawns, deliver newspapers, and sit pets. “My work ethic is a tribute to my parents,” he avows



today. By the time he was preparing to apply to college, his parents said they would pay tuition for his undergraduate degree, but that Scott would have to pay for everything else on his own. Most of his classmates set their eyes on the University of Maryland, but Scott felt as though his path lay elsewhere. "I didn't necessarily want to follow the pack," he says.

Enrolling at James Madison in the fall of 1977, he worked two jobs throughout his college career, the first in campus security. "I walked a beat at night," Scott says. He looked out for any kind of incidences, checked buildings to make sure they were locked, and responded to any calls that came in. But more demanding and far more interesting was a position he later took at a meatpacking plant in nearby Timberville, Virginia. There, Scott worked on a loading dock moving beef and pork products. As the only college student who worked there, he certainly had a unique perspective.

"Working in the slaughterhouse had a big influence on me," he says today. "It really made me appreciate the opportunity I had to go to college. The young men I worked with were very bright, but they didn't have the opportunities that had been presented to me. It really inspired in me a determination to take advantage of the opportunity I had, and to appreciate where I was."

Scott had always been interested in engineering. His father was a shop teacher, and growing up under his influence led Scott to participate in the formulation of many of his father's lesson plans. "I would be a guinea pig for some of his projects," he remembers. "He would always say my inclination was in the area of engineering and mathematics." Although Scott experienced a brief period of rebellion thinking he might go into broadcasting, he soon changed his major to math with a concentration in computer science.

Graduating in 1981 at the age of 21, Scott entered a stagnant job market. His father thought he might become a teacher like himself after all, but Scott was able to find an opportunity with a small, now defunct company in Bethesda called Vector Research. He was assigned to work at the David Taylor Model Basin in Carderock, Maryland, where he was first exposed to shipboard engineering, testing various hull designs in the quarter-mile canal built there.

"We were testing submarine hulls against active sonar," Scott explains. "The submarine hulls would be coated with different materials that would be effective at sound absorption underwater." Acoustic engineers would take these test submarines to open water and hit them with sonar from all angles. Scott's job was to work on a team that would take the data and run it through various mathematical transformations. "This was a tremendously interesting project to me," Scott recalls. "I got to leverage my math background, and at the same time I ran software to do signal processing of the data. And that's where I fell in love with building software."

In 1984, Scott felt he had reached the limits of his position there, so he left to join CTEC, which was performing higher-level software development that seemed perfectly aligned with his desire to further develop his software-building skills. And after a few years of mastering those skills, it was only natural for him to set out with his partners to begin his own venture.

Natural, too, was the cooperation of Scott and the two Mikes. "We may not have known it up front," Scott says, "but it turned out that the team was very good. We all had different skills and acumen that we brought to the table." Scott was the detail-oriented person, who had the desire and know-how to build a solid corporate infrastructure. Mike Morhouse, the extrovert of the bunch, led the sales and marketing side of the business. And Mike Fortier, ever the technologist, focused on what the next big thing in technology would be, and applied that to customers' problems. "He very much focused on the art of the possible," Scott says. As of June 2012, FGM will celebrate 25 years as a company, and its founders' chemistry is reflected in the fact that they are still at the company today after all these years.

Not only will this year be FGM's 25th anniversary as a company, but it will also be Scott and his wife's 30th wedding anniversary. Having met while freshmen at James Madison, both 17 years old, they married a year after graduating.

"One of the things about being an entrepreneur and starting a business from scratch," Scott says, "is perseverance. You'll see that common thread with a lot of successful entrepreneurs. At the same time, it's vitally important to have someone at the end of the day with whom you can go to and talk those things out with—someone who can push you to persevere in

those difficult times. My wife was that rock for me as we built the business, and she remains so today.”

Today, FGM is an information technology company that serves the national security community, including the Department of Defense and the State Department. “Our primary focus,” Scott says, “is enabling our customers to leverage their most important asset: information. They leverage that asset through a spectrum of services that range from information protection, to sharing and exploitation.” This year, FGM won an award related to work they did to support the Information Management System for Mine Action, a humanitarian de-mining organization.

FGM has also been featured in the Washingtonian's *Great Places to Work* list four times. In discussing his own leadership style, Scott relates the experience of working under a retired Army colonel at CTEC, who had been in Special Forces in Vietnam. “This is someone who led people in some very difficult situations,” Scott says, “and in some tough times. One of the things I learned from him was that he would never ask us to do something that he wouldn't do himself. He was always there for us. If we were working long hours, he was working long hours.”

Scott's leadership values are similarly collaborative. “I try to bring the group together and the leadership team together,” Scott says, “and collaborate on different ways we can approach something. At the end of the day, what I try to achieve is that everybody has had a chance to voice their opinion and their ideas, and then generate a collective buy-in to what we're going to do and how we're going to do it.”

More than creating a successful company from scratch and leading it well, Scott is proud of the stability of his family and the success of his two children. One has just graduated from James Madison and now works for Scott. The other is thriving as a third year student at Dickinson and has interned at FGM since high school.

In giving advice to young entrepreneurs entering the working world today, Scott advises that careful consideration be given to one's chosen course of study. “You need to look at what the opportunities are going to be in this next decade,” he says. “Really think about that in terms of positioning your education. I have a strong opinion that we need more students involved in science, technology, engineering and math. I fear

our country is falling behind in these areas in the global marketplace. With innovation comes new opportunities, and it is in these areas that we need to focus if we will continue to be a global leader in innovation.”

Beyond this, Scott emphasizes a strong work ethic above all else—one that not only transcends college to characterize one's life, but also makes that difference in the world that he himself sought to make all those years ago. It is this difference that makes work—and life—so worthwhile.

– By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®

About Gordon J. Bernhardt

President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).