

## power player

People in the know who you ought to know

## Learning from Adversity

Charles Parten uses his past missteps to help others.

| BY Dan Emerson PHOTO BY Marshall Franklin Long



### BIZBRIEFING

Charles G. Parten

Title: Founder & President,  
Charles G. Parten, Inc.

Age: 67

Education: A.A. and B.A. Liberal  
Arts, University of Minnesota

Family: wife, Darlene; daughters, Kara  
Parten Mowland and Janet Parten Blach

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If Charles Parten has been an effective executive coach—as a number of his past clients contend—one of the keys to that effectiveness may be some un-CEO-like qualities. Far from the standard image of the polished, glib company leader who is loathe to show any sign of human frailty, Parten has a disarming way of talking honestly about his own failures and vulnerabilities; and imparting the lessons he's learned from those past failures.

Gaining most of his clients through direct referrals (many from past clients) the Edina-based coach has counseled more than 2,000 clients, including more than 200 CEOs and company presidents.

Adopted by wealthy parents, Parten eventually ran one of the family's manufacturing companies, and counted property on Lake Minnetonka, cars, boats and other trappings of success among his personal gains.

In the 1980s, Parten's life changed drastically. Downward economic trends led to the closing of part of the business and his investment in the company became worthless. His marriage ended in divorce and the bank foreclosed on the family's home. He subsequently went through five career changes, two bankruptcies, the death of both parents and a second divorce, and was twice admitted to a hospital for stress.

Parten says experiencing those trials left him a more compassionate, empathetic person; qualities which served him well in his next position, as an account executive for a company that helped executives in career transitions. "In the late '80s, I lost everything and had to reinvent myself," he recalls. "Much of the value I bring as a coach is that reinvention process. I listen, I empathize, I challenge, I build trust and I get critical issues on the table. My own past wounds and experiences have helped me to identify with many of my clients," says Parten, who authored a book called *In God's Army, Only Wounded Soldiers May Serve*.

Adversity humbled Parten, and accordingly he emphasizes humility as a key attribute of

**"My own past wounds and experiences have helped me identify with many of my clients."** —CHARLES PARTEN

great leaders. "Humble leaders invariably are genuine, kind, open and vulnerable. They listen until they understand. Their honesty and optimism help build a team," says Parten.

Parten first became interested in the coaching process after undergoing his own 360-degree evaluation as a corporate exec, about 15 years ago. "At that point, coaching was not in vogue and I didn't really know what was involved."

He soon learned, and launched his own executive-coaching firm in 1996 to put his newfound insights to work. Some of the most important feedback he received concerned "the power of listening," he recalls. "Before that, I listened only when I was interested. Today, I get paid for listening and asking questions."

Parten estimates he spends about 60 percent of his time working with CEOs and company presidents, another 20 percent with executive teams and the remaining 20 percent with employees of all levels, usually as members of teams.

To succeed as a business leader, "you have to have a foundation of basic values," he says. "Humility and integrity are not optional; along with some competency, emotional intelligence, seasoning and wisdom. You need to offer a value proposition where you are the solution to a certain area."

How does his approach apply to the current, post-meltdown business world?

"People are afraid," Parten notes. "But the opportunities now are greater than at just about any other time. You have to understand your competencies, though. This is no time to be arrogant. You need to ask yourself, 'What are my customers' problems and what is my solution?'"

Bjorn Christ was president of GN Resound North America, a hearing aid manufacturer, several years ago when his higher-ups suggested he enlist the services of an executive coach to polish his own interpersonal style. "I picked Chuck because of his unusual style," says Christ, who is now Denmark-based Coloplast's senior VP for the Americas, Asia Pacific and Emerging Markets. "He is kind and wise, not polished; I like that. He has great ability to coach you as an individual and help you iron out the wrinkles. He's a very supportive individual. But where he really excels is in helping a leadership team gel."

Within a six-month period, Christ says, Parten helped transform a dysfunctional team at Coloplast from "a super-low to a very high-performing team." Christ thinks that Parten's ability to build trust and help people find common ground was the main reason.

Cheryl Fiemann, director of financial services for Optum Health (a division of United Health Group) met Parten back in the late '90s, when he was brought in to help with the firm's team-building process, an area in which Parten is particularly strong. "He has a calming style and is incredible at building trust immediately. He helped us break down walls between people, and talk about the tough stuff— what the real barriers were: personality conflicts, different work styles." Fiemann says she still uses Parten as an informal, personal sounding board. "He has a tremendous way of asking the right questions. He's really effective at listening, not just to what people are saying, but understanding the non-verbal aspects." **MB**