

**Remarks of William Douglas Parker (MBA '86), Chairman and CEO of US Airways — Vanderbilt Owen Graduate School of Management, May 10, 2013**

Dean Bradford; Owen administration and faculty; the Class of 2013 -- thank you for inviting me here today. I am honored to be with you on this big day.

I'm particularly honored to be here to celebrate with Dean Bradford as he retires from Owen. Jim is a good friend that has done great things for Owen and Vanderbilt and we are lucky to have had him as our Dean. I join all of you in thanking Jim for his outstanding service and wishing him, and Susan, wonderful times in their well-deserved retirement. Thank you, Jim.

It's great to be back at an Owen commencement ceremony. The last one I attended was my own 27 years ago. This is an important day, and one you'll always remember, but I remember mine for a different reason than anyone else that has ever graduated from Owen.

You see, back then I shared a two bedroom apartment with a classmate and friend. As you all know, there is a lot of running around toward the end of your second year here, so I was thankful when he told me one day, "Our forms were due for our caps and gowns, so I turned one in for you when I turned in mine." I was even more thankful a couple of weeks later when he reported that he had picked up my cap and gown when he picked up his and that it was hanging in my closet.

But my sense of gratitude took a major turn on the morning of commencement day. By the time I woke up, my friend had already left the apartment to meet up with his parents. I got myself ready, pulled my gown out of the closet, threw it on, and immediately thought – "This seems a lot shorter than the ones we had in undergrad." The gown barely reached my knees. These big sleeves stopped just below my elbow. Worst of all, the cap barely fit over my fist, and certainly didn't fit on my head.

Thinking there must have been a mix-up, I checked the form to see whose cap and gown I had. There I saw my name and address written in the handwriting of my "friend," but also in his handwriting it stated that I was 5'2" tall, weighed 135 pounds and wore a size 6 3/8 hat.

They had gotten me – and it was really funny. I had nothing I could do except cut the seam out of the hat so it could sit on my head and get down here to our ceremony where all of my friends were waiting in great anticipation. They were standing with my parents, who had driven down from Cincinnati that morning to proudly watch their youngest son graduate from business school, and they were suddenly not-so-proud. My poor mother, who is here today, looked on as my friends erupted in laughter, and shook her head as if to say, "Why would they pick on my boy?"

Look, Mom – I've got one that fits. It took 27 years, but I fixed it.

And that story – while not particularly flattering to me – is consistent with what I want to talk to you about today: the importance of relationships. Even though we liked to mess with each other, the friends I made at Owen are some of the best friends I have ever had and we all remain very close today.

In fact of all the important things I learned at Owen, the most important – the lesson that has helped me the most in my career – is this: Relationships Matter. Capital R, capital M. It's not a sentence; it's a title. Personal, human relationships are really important in the business world. I know this is a critical theme taught by your professors at Owen, and you are fortunate that it is, because it will serve you well throughout your careers.

As simple and straightforward as Relationships Matter may seem to you, there is still a perception by some that successful business leaders need to be cut-throat and heartless. That the way to get ahead is to look out for yourself and if necessary, you need to cut down others to benefit yourself. The reality is that type of behavior does not work in business. It may work for some people for a while, but eventually they will be pulled down – and pulled down hard – by the weight of unhealthy relationships.

Business is the ultimate team sport. Your success as a leader will be dependent on the success of your team and you will win or lose together. The best leaders like to win, but what they really love is helping others win.

We certainly experienced the benefit of relationships over the past year at US Airways as we pursued a merger with American Airlines. As you may know, when we began talking about a merger with in early 2012, the leadership at American wasn't too keen on the idea. They had just filed for bankruptcy and wanted to focus all of their effort and energy on emerging from bankruptcy as a standalone entity.

We at US Airways, though, felt it would be best to merge while American was in bankruptcy. So we had to rally support for our plan with people important to American's leadership – their employees, their investors, the media, etc. Our hope was that if we could convince these groups we had a strong plan; they could help us convince American.

This was no small task and required us persuading thousands of individuals and diverse constituencies. Throughout that effort, though, our team started to see a fascinating and rewarding trend. Embedded in each of these groups representing thousands of people, we kept coming across individuals we had worked with before. Some we had worked with recently, others we hadn't seen in years.

But they were all important. And these past relationships, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant at the time, were huge now. Fortunately, we had built a team that treated relationships with respect and integrity. People that had dealt

with us in the past trusted us, and now they were willing to stick their necks out for us and recommend our proposal to the people they represented. Each time this happened, our team would look at each other with amazement and agree, "Relationships Matter."

And every time those people stuck their necks out for us, our resolve to get the merger done was strengthened. We developed a corollary to Relationships Matter that we also began to say to each other – "We cannot let these people down."

As in any complex transaction, there were times it felt like it might not happen and we began to think maybe we should put it on hold. But seemingly whenever that would occur, one of the groups supporting our plan would stick their necks out again and we knew we could not let them down. We fought back even harder and we got it done together.

That is the power of relationships. Teams of people working together to do something for the greater good are infinitely stronger than individuals working in their own self-interest.

My favorite example of Relationships Matter was a big meeting we had early on with the union that represented American's ramp employees and mechanics. These are tough, straight-talking people who, as a rule, do not trust management types in suits. We somehow needed to convince them we were trustworthy and we needed to do it pretty quickly.

As luck would have it, one of our US Airways executives in the room had previously worked at American and he had worked with one of the union officials many years before. The union official asked our executive how he liked working at US Airways. Our exec told him he loved it and he loved working with our team. His actual words were "I'm in the right church."

That was all we needed. In one of the most important meetings in a multi-billion dollar transaction loaded with high-paid consultants, lawyers and formal legal documents, the key to our success was a long-standing personal relationship. One man having a trusted friend tell him he was in the right church was far more important to our success than anything else that happened that day.

We never could have orchestrated that. And that's the other important point about Relationships Matter: there is no way to figure out in advance which relationships are going to matter in the future – so you have to treat everyone the same way. This is hard for some people. They want to figure out who is important or is going to be important and then figure out how to get to know those people. When I was in business school, they called it networking. Whatever you call it, it doesn't work.

The kind of relationships I'm talking about can't be forced or contrived. They happen naturally between people who work together over time and develop a

mutual respect and trust for one another. I've never seen that happen between two people where one of them had an ulterior motive.

The day you start your first job after Owen, you will begin building new relationships. You will begin them with your new boss, your peers, the security guards, everyone. They will start the day you walk in the building and they will keep growing over time. My advice to you is to treat each of those relationships the same.

Take all of the great knowledge you have acquired here at Owen and go out into the workforce with confidence. And be a good human being. Be kind. Be respectful. Be trustworthy.

Help other people succeed. And have fun while you do it. Don't take yourself too seriously.

Be the person people want on their team. Be the person people want to work for someday. And be that person all of the time – to everyone. It will make your life more pleasant and it will help your career.

You have formed great relationships here at Owen and I'd encourage you to grow and foster those. New relationships await you tomorrow and I am excited for you and proud of you. Have a great time – you've earned it. Congratulations!