



# DON CLOW

CEO, BUSINESS OWNER,  
VANIER CUP WINNER,  
1983 DRAFT PICK FOR THE  
OTTAWA ROUGH RIDERS.

*From the outset, P.E.I. native Don Clow has been what's known in athletic circles as "coachable." Which is perhaps why the 49-year-old chartered accountant and CEO of Crombie REIT — Atlantic Canada's largest property owner — has been mentored by, and worked side-by-side with, some of the region's business and athletic luminaries, including legendary football coach John Huard, property developers Simon and Jim Spatz and the Sobey family.*

*A willingness to be a constant learner, and an ability to show up fresh and ready to play — day after day after day — helped Clow parlay a six-month contract in 1989 with Southwest Properties into his eventual role as president & COO, and finally an equity owner, before taking up his current position with Empire Company & Crombie in 2007.*

**I NEVER LOOK AT MYSELF AND SAY I'VE SUCCEEDED.** I learned early on in life that even though you may have just won a national championship, the day you get home practice starts for next year. At Crombie we set a goal of \$100 million of acquisitions this year and we achieved \$173 million. So that's the new normal. Hit those big goals, and then re-set.

**HIRING ALL-STARS WILL NEVER GET YOU THE RESULTS YOU DREAM ABOUT.** When my football coach at Acadia, John Huard, took over the team, it was a collection of individuals who had been to the national championships two of the previous three years and lost. He said he didn't care about individual

stats; it was going to be nothing but a national championship for us. He built our practice sessions, our plays, our whole way of working together completely around the concept of team. We were slower and smaller than everybody else, and usually underdogs. But by working together we won the Vanier Cup. To this day, I believe good leadership in business isn't about hiring all-stars. It's about taking everyday people, bringing their performance up a notch, and focusing on the entire team.

**IT'S IMPORTANT TO BE TOUGH.** There are people with whom I have great working relationships who may not like me on every deal. And sometimes in business, people don't

treat you well and you have to be very tough. Don't shy away from that. But always remember that your personal reputation takes a career to build and a moment to lose.

**GREAT LEADERSHIP ISN'T COMPLICATED.** You have to have vision, you have to communicate it, and you need to have urgency. Get stuff done now — we call it the GSD, and the "S" isn't for stuff. There's a professor at Harvard Business School's leadership program, and you're sitting there with dozens of high-performing CEOs and she's the smartest, most engaging person in the room. So we asked her once why she wasn't running a company and she said, "I don't have the GSD. I can only write about it."

**LEADERS HAVE TO DEVELOP A VISION AND STICK TO IT.** It's not just about your industry or your market — you have to see the bigger picture. Four months after my partner at Southwest Properties, Jim Spatz, and I committed to a \$25-million redevelopment of the Sunnyside Mall in Bedford, the bottom fell out of the real estate market. We made it through, but a couple of years later, in 1995, our anchor tenant told us they were moving across the street. Our lender was pressuring us to accept an offer to replace the anchor with Eaton's. We didn't think it was right for the property, so we found another lender and pursued our plan — which was to bring in Pete's Frootique, Mark's Work Wearhouse and Nubody's. Two years later, Eaton's went bankrupt. Meanwhile, Sunnyside went on to become a brilliant success, winning two Canadian Shopping Mall ICSC (International Council of Shopping Centers) awards for best redevelopment under 500,000 square feet. If we had followed the advice of our lender — a company filled with brilliant people — we never would have seen that success. Sometimes you have to stick with your own ideas. | ABM

*Interviewed by Jeff Forbes, vice-president, Knightsbridge Robertson Surette — Atlantic Canada's leading human capital solutions firm. Leader's Insight conversations are published in each issue of Atlantic Business Magazine. Feedback: dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com*