

# WELLNESS WARRIOR

INGO SCHWEDER | CEO AND FOUNDER, GOCO HOSPITALITY



**WHEN WELLNESS GOT PERSONAL:** I was diagnosed with stage 4 terminal cancer in 1993. Before that, I'd felt invincible. Clearly, then, I was faced with my own mortality. It was very sobering. This led me to analyze and learn a lot about health and wellness. I subsequently merged that knowledge with my hotel industry knowledge and shifted my focus to spas and wellness hospitality. I changed my daily life to incorporate healthy foods, yoga and meditation. That made me calm, even in crisis situations. It certainly helped when we launched GOCO Hospitality just as the economic crisis hit in 2008. I didn't anticipate how intense that recession would be, but I came to see that a lot of people were turning inward and looking for an escape from stress. They wanted places to go that were about wellness, not pure hedonism.

**HIS RISKIEST MOVE:** To start the company, I sold my two houses and my three cars in order to set up the legal, logistical and other infrastructure and generate cash to pay for the rent and salaries. I was left with no physical assets. This was a big risk, but it clearly paid off. This year our turnover will be \$40 million. There's never any reward without taking a risk. I enjoy taking calculated risks. I have fewer anxieties because of my lifestyle changes and no fears.

**WHY HE'S A MAVERICK:** I'm very hands-on. I pay high attention to detail. And I want to create projects that are unique. Too many investors engage you, but only want the same old thing. There are very few people genuinely interested in creating a new chapter, further expanding the market in a more creative fashion and crafting new experiences. This is particularly true with the

large brands. They become a commodity—merely a set of standards and processes without any real personality. Greed, insecurity and a lack of creativity are what limits new thinking. Often, individuals are too complacent.

**HOW HE KEEPS HIS VISION FOCUSED:** I rarely look at my competition. Instead, I read a lot in terms of politics, design and culture to discover new ideas. I travel the world and try to explore the sights and sounds and observe people that I encounter. Too many people feel they can get everything from the internet and don't really exchange ideas with leaders, get their hands dirty and put themselves into new, uncomfortable environments to discover what's there.

**WHAT RULES NEED TO BE BROKEN:** Hotel schools prepare students to sell rooms and maybe F&B, but they fail to educate future hoteliers on the evolving aspects of hospitality such as wellness, design, real estate and technology. That has to change. Hotels need to address more clearly defined guest segments and understand their needs fully, not superficially. Designers shouldn't just design spaces for the sake of design but should read the customer needs and create new experiences. Steve Jobs did that so successfully at Apple—inventing what we love before we even knew we wanted it. But, designers can't forget about the practical needs of a space and just go for the wow. I'd like to see more of a focus on sustainability throughout—from development to design and operations.

**CAPTAIN OR TEAM PLAYER:** A ceo has to be a leader, but also has to be collaborator. I second-

guess myself. I spend a lot of time on personal constructive reflection. But I usually follow my intuition. It's also important, though, to absorb creative and constructive feedback. I seek input and insights from our team, but as the head of the organization, I make decisions fast. It's important to remember that implementation is always a collaborative endeavour and requires the support of many. I'm a leader and a captain, but I have an amazing team I respect a lot. Very few corporate headquarters invest in hiring a personal health chef to provide team members with complimentary lunch every day. We provide a variety of dishes for the team here. Healthy nourishment is very meaningful. It's important that we truly live a health-conscious lifestyle. That's what we sell and who we are.

## WHY GIVING BACK NEEDS TO BE A LIFESTYLE

**HACK:** Once you've provided for your own needs, you have a responsibility to help those who are less fortunate. From 2004 to 2006 in Hong Kong, I was supporting an orphanage every Sunday with five to six hours of hands-on care of 10 to 15 infants. It's so important to give these children a positive outlook and a chance to be part of a family. I spent quite a lot of time, effort and money to do what I could for them, and that work completely changed my outlook on life. My current goal is to develop a small business or a home that provides career opportunities for and supports orphans. The young and innocent deserve a lot of love, support and nurture. Serving on the advisory council for the Indian School of Hospitality is very important because India is such a vibrant and exciting country, and also one of the most complex nations on earth. I'm very grateful for being able to work with Ananda and the Vilas Collection. For the latter, my core team of 12 and I traveled through India, interviewing over 10,000 students and hiring the top 150 based on outlook, attitude and potential. Everyone had to have enough knowledge to be able to take on the duties of any role in the hotel, regardless of department. We also trained them in meditation and yoga to give them focus and concentration. It was a resounding success. I'm fortunate to have been able to contribute to the careers of hundreds of employees. You only get in life if you give.

Many people just take but don't give back. That's the start of an imbalance that can't last much longer. However, I believe it's an individual decision, so I don't pressure others to do it themselves, but would rather lead by example. I believe in win-win. One of the responsibilities of success is to give.