

BIG IDEA

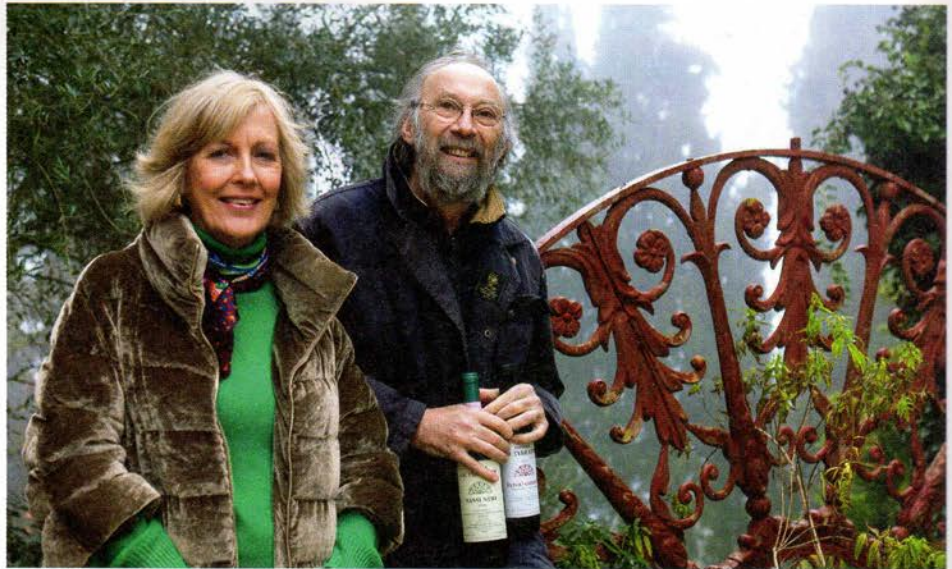
Corporate amnesia

The way companies store knowledge, remember and retain their skills is important to their effectiveness. For example, excessive churn in a workforce, especially among knowledge-workers, threatens capability through the loss of their skills. And divisional labyrinths make it hard for organisational learning to be shared and acted upon.

Perhaps the most interesting kind of forgetting is the Freudian airbrushing of past errors, coupled with 'Merrie England' nostalgia. Too often, learning from failure doesn't happen because of the need to project a strong and confident self-image to stakeholders; the f-word (failure) is abominated, suppressed and forgotten.

This is a missed opportunity. Past disasters, should, in a spirit of humility and maturity, be part of the corporate narrative, which should project aspirational and realistic visions of an adaptive future. Tough learning is a form of corporate 'annealing', reminding us that experience is not what happens to you, but what you do with what happens to you.

➔ To see Nigel Nicholson's book, *The 'I' of Leadership: Strategies for seeing, being and doing* (Jossey-Bass, £18.99), go to iofleadership.com




HOW WE BEAT THE ODDS

GEORGINA AND ANTONIO TERNI

Owners of Fattoria Le Terrazze vineyard in Numana, Italy

I was 38 when I married Antonio. It was 1984, and I'd lived in Numana in the Italian Marches for a few years after my first husband died in a plane crash, not far from our home. Antonio, an idealistic nuclear physicist and Bob Dylan fanatic, inherited a rickety old vineyard and asked me to help run it. He probably regretted it soon after.

I always had a lot of zest, but never an outlet. Like many girls of my generation, I'd left home looking for a husband, not a job. Nobody thought we had any brains, and at first I'd been too indoctrinated to think differently. But by the time I met Antonio, I


'Antonio once described me as "hatefully efficient", which I took as a compliment'

was restless to achieve something. I stuck my finger into everything and, where necessary, massaged salt into the wound. I didn't know much about wine, but I didn't like ours. The grapes just weren't ripening, so I asked an agricultural professor why.

Our ploughs used to be pulled by oxen, but tractors had widened the gaps between vines, leaving too much space and sun. Grapes, I learned, needed hardship to thrive, so I narrowed the rows and pruned mercilessly.

The workers weren't impressed. The vestiges of feudalism and the post-war Communist Party had left an antagonism between employers and labourers. It was particularly difficult to give orders to Italian men, who assumed I should've been hosting dinner parties or playing bridge instead.

Despite this, our wines began to improve, and we found new national and international markets. Sales increased, and in 1993 we extended the vineyards and planted some rows of French grapes, such as merlot and syrah.

The fruits of this endeavour were Chaos and Visions of J, startling wines Antonio dedicated to his twin loves, chaos theory and Bob Dylan. Dylan heard about this in 2003, and asked us to make him his very own wine, which, as you can imagine, made Antonio's day. We're a good team because we're opposites in every way, but working together is hard. Antonio once described me as 'hatefully efficient', which I took as a compliment.

Last summer was the worst for 25 years. Many farmers didn't even bother to pick their grapes. I left the office and joined the workers in the vineyards, stripping leaves to fight off fungal infection. It was exhausting and costly, but losing the harvest would have been worse.

For the first time in years, I was out in the vineyards, and I loved it. The grapes responded well. It's exhilarating to produce a good wine in a bad year, but the best thing was my changed relationship with the workers. I see more smiling faces now. When I ask them to work on Saturday because a Sunday storm's coming, they don't complain any more. Sweating with them in the sun, I finally earned their respect.

Last year, we extended our farm shop, and its revenues rose 30%. I'd love my daughter Giulia to get involved, but I'd never press her.