

## CHAPTER THREE

# BUTCHER BY TRADE

### A WORK STORY

Coming from a dysfunctional family in a medium-to-low socioeconomic area, I learnt pretty quickly that if you want something you have to earn your own money to get it. If I ever tried to ask my father for money, all I was likely to get was a clip around the ears. But I figured out that if you were prepared to do work that people wanted done, then they would pay you. This looked like a possible path out of the toxic family environment, and so at a very young age I started to do odd jobs around the neighbourhood as much as I could.

As soon as I got my push bike at age 11, I went out and secured my first official paid job, as a local Courier paperboy, delivering papers every Tuesday afternoon. Then I hit the big time at 12 as a morning New Zealand Herald paperboy, up at 5 a.m. every day except Sunday, in rain, hail or shine, to deliver the daily paper. I saved hard and only spent money on what I considered were the big things. I would not even go on any of the school trips or camps, as my father would never pay, and I considered them not a worthy recipient of my hard-earned savings. I discovered that the more I saved, the more I could look to have the things that hitherto I could only dream of. Like an overseas trip to Australia with the Manurewa Marlin Rugby League team, and finally being able to buy my own cool clothes.

My older brothers, Peter and Ian, were pretty much doing the same things to earn money, and one of my other big breaks in life came when they both landed part-time student jobs at our local supermarket, Foodtown Papakura.

I couldn't wait to follow suit, as they were earning the big bucks — at least 40 cents an hour! The trouble was that I was only 13 years old, and the rules were that I would have to wait until I turned 14 to get a job there. This is where I learnt one of the most valuable lessons in life: If you do not ask, you do not receive. In October 1973 I fronted up to the store to apply in advance for a role for after my December birthday, and — boom! — I was asked to start the very next week. I can thank my brothers for that, as the boss knew they were good workers. He also liked my cheeky but confident approach, and hired me early anyway.

I was on my way; I was prepared to work hard and anytime I could. My first role was as a 'car hop' (taking customers' groceries to load into the boots of their cars), and then moved on to becoming a 'packer' (packing customers' groceries into bags at the end of checkouts). I strived to be the best and most efficient student they had, no matter the task.

I also wanted to work every shift available — day, night and holidays. In fact, from that year on I pretty much never had any more school holidays off, as I would be working every day, even when my mates were away skateboarding and surfing New Zealand. However, as there was no weekend shopping in those days, I at least got to have Saturday and Sunday off to catch up on my social life.

I was so focused on doing a great job and earning money that I even started to behave better at school. There was a strong incentive to keep my nose clean. With our shifts at Foodtown starting at 4 p.m. on the dot, and my high school (James Cook) finishing at 3.30 p.m., some 5 kilometres or a fast 15-minute bike ride away, it was best not to get into trouble during the day. If you were late you would likely lose your job, and many did, so I was never prepared to take the risk.

I have to admit that I even asked a number of my teachers to give me the cane on my backside instead of keeping me behind after school for school detention. This provided me with another valuable life lesson: What sacrifices are you prepared to make, to achieve your goal?

I was an intelligent student, and if I could have managed to stay focused I could probably have excelled in my studies, but my focus was not really on the curriculum, as my new goal was to earn money and leave home ASAP. So that meant there was no time for study, especially as with any real spare time left I focused on playing sports. My teachers, right from primary through to high school, would all make the same comments on my school reports: 'Brett has the ability with plenty of potential, but needs to concentrate more, as he is too focused on talking and being the first person out on the sports field.' I loved playing all sports, from bullrush to rugby, soccer, tennis and softball — I couldn't get enough of it. The thrill of putting in the extra effort to get a winning result was like a drug to me, and also being in a team and achieving with your mates was a really great feeling.

I found that it felt very similar being part of the student team at Foodtown Papakura. We had such great times; we worked hard, but had lots of fun doing it. Who was the best and fastest car hop or packer? Who could play a prank on others and get away with it without the boss noticing? I loved it, I was working and saving hard, and I was making plans for what I could buy. Maybe a motorbike or what about my own car, as my fifteenth birthday was fast approaching?

My home life at this time was probably at its worst, and I was desperately looking to find a way out. I knew staying at school for another two to three years was never going to achieve that, so I started to make a plan to leave school as soon as I turned 15.

One night, provoked by another verbal strafe of abuse from my father, I blurted out: 'I'm going to leave school and get a job — so I can leave here as soon as possible and get away from you!' Now that really ticked him off: 'You're good for nothing, you're a loser. You'll never amount to anything. And by the way, you cannot leave school at 15 unless you get my signature, and I'm not giving you that unless you join the army or get an apprenticeship in a trade'.

Okay, there you go: if you do not ask, you do not receive. And now I had my answer.

The very next day I went to the school's career adviser and investigated how to join the army as an officer cadet. I thought that joining the army sounded great. I liked the idea of their routines and structured organisation, but the big bonus was that you got to live away from home. Maybe one day I could be a great general, or at the least a captain like my boyhood comic-book hero Captain Scarlet. To my deepest disappointment I found that I could not

apply until I was 16. I was devastated. I just couldn't see myself waiting another year. That seemed like an eternity to me at that time.

So I started to look at my other option: an apprenticeship in a trade. My Uncle Ron was a spray painter working just down the road, so I thought that would be one of my best options, but alas they were not looking to take anyone on in the near future. That's when I got another big break, or, as I like to say now, I received some karma for all the consistent hard work I had been putting in.

The father of one of my Foodtown mates was the assistant meat manager at Foodtown Papakura, and had told my mate that they were looking for a new meat apprentice. Over the preceding year I had worked a few times in the meat department on what was called the back bench. This was a large wash tub in which the students and meat apprentices used to hand-wash the blood and fat off the trays and baskets used by the butchers during the day. It was hot, wet work, but I loved it, and especially as only the most hard-working students got to do that job.

Again, I didn't muck around. That week I asked for an interview, using the 'if you do not ask, you do not receive' approach. I was given the role, starting as of January 1975. All I needed now was my father's signature on my school-leaving certificate. The one thing I would say about my father is that he was always true to his word. 'You're going to get a hiding', and I did. 'I'm not watching you play sport', and he didn't. And 'I'll sign your leaving certificate if you get an apprenticeship', and he did. Although he made it very clear to me that being a butcher was considered one of the least desirable trades, and as such I'd probably never amount to anything anyway.

I didn't care what he or anyone else had to say. I was on top of the world. I got a haircut, as I had a real job. At first I found working full-time very daunting, but I absolutely thrived in the tough butcher-shop environment. I had already developed a hard working ethos, and I really wanted to be the best meat apprentice ever, so one day I could be the fastest and most efficient butcher they'd ever had. So I committed to consistently performing my tasks accurately and diligently. I fitted well into what was a very big production unit for its day: 12 butchers, two apprentices and up to 15 meat-packers.

I was to find out what many before me had learnt: that all new apprentices are subject to a number of initiation traditions. So it was that I was sent to the hardware store for a long weight/ wait, and to the paint shop for striped paint, and then teased for being so gullible. We were often scragged and hosed down, and sometimes even thrown in the brine tub, which held a mixture of meat juices and salt water. I will never forget how red my ears and face were when I blurted out one morning to the bakery ladies, as instructed: 'The butchers have sent me over to collect half a dozen randy tarts. Please.' But I was a quick learner, wising up relatively quickly, and, because I was very focused on being the best, I was soon accepted as one of the team.

Back in the mid-seventies there was no political correctness in the workforce, especially not in the butchery departments, where the culture was pretty much a cross between The Lord of the Flies and Animal House. I learnt more about the facts of life and how to look after

yourself in the big, wide world in those first six months in the back of the butchery than most teenagers learn in 10 years.

I was drinking in the pub every Friday afternoon from when I was 16 years old, even though the legal drinking age then was 20. I also started to smoke so I could have an extra work break, and I had seen or had described to me about nearly every sexual act imaginable. Most importantly, to fit in I learnt that if one of your workmates is in a fight, then you fight, too, even if you are outnumbered and sure to get a hiding.

But I loved it, as I felt welcomed, admired, and even loved. I felt secure, and it felt really good to be part of a team. We knew what our purpose was: work hard, play hard. I felt that I truly belonged somewhere at last, and my whole attitude to life changed dramatically. Karma was in play again, as I had not only got a meat apprenticeship, but I had got one in what was New Zealand's leading supermarket brand.

Foodtown was originally a private company developed and owned by Tom Ah Chee, Norm Kent and John Brown. They brought the first American concept supermarket to New Zealand in 1958, opening their first store in the South Auckland suburb of Otahuhu. The Papakura store was their second store, and by 1975 they had established a public company called Progressive Enterprises Ltd (PEL) and had a large number of supermarkets throughout Auckland.

They built their successful business model on delivering great prices on quality products, with outstanding service, and their sales were in rapid growth, as they gained ever-increasing numbers of loyal customers.

They had also developed their meat business as a cornerstone to their offer, and they put a structure in place to train and develop their people in roles, and ultimately into management. I was part of their newly developed apprentice training programme, once it was explained to me that if you studied the theory side of the meat apprenticeship and improved your practical skills, you could earn more money. I set my goal to be at my best every day, and I planned to achieve top marks, recognition and extra monetary rewards.

Nearly every night I studied the biological names of the bones and muscles for beef, sheep, pork and chicken. I studied maths with a passion never seen in my school years. I learnt how to calculate sales and profit, and I worked every hour I could, sometimes not even being paid, so I could hone my practical skills of boning and slicing meat.

I passed top in company and in the technical institutes in all my theory and practical exams; I worked extra nights boning on night crews, earning double hourly rates and deducting more precious hours off my 8000-hour apprenticeship requirement.

I completed my four-year-plus meat apprenticeship in just over three years. At only 18 years of age I was a fully qualified butcher with a trade certificate, and had recently been promoted to assistant meat manager. It was certainly a great day for me when I left my weekly pay sheet lying on the dinner table at home so my father could see that, in less than four years of working, I was already starting to earn more money than him. From then on, he never repeated how becoming a butcher would never see me amount to anything.

There had been a lot happening in my home environment in those three to four years. My father, to my delight, had not been around home very much at all. We found out he was having an affair with what was ultimately to be his third wife. My father had recently bought a brand-new iridescent-blue Austin 1300 GT, which he would not let anyone touch, let alone drive, including my mum Pauline. This, however, proved to be his downfall. For some time we had all known that something was up, with my father never being home, but then Peter saw something that confirmed our suspicions. He had been cruising down the South Auckland motorway on his motorbike when he came across a brand-new 1300 GT. Now Peter knows his cars, and this one definitely was our father's — identifiable not only by the distinctive paint job, but by the number plate, too. So imagine his surprise when he pulled up alongside to see it was not our father driving, but a young Maori girl with her black hair blowing in the wind. Clearly while the car was too good for his wife or any of his sons to drive, if you were part of the Telegraph harem you met the standard.

Both Peter and Ian had moved out of our Manurewa home to go flatting by the time my father finally told Pauline he was off and their marriage was over. I had been staying pretty much five nights a week at Lee's house, but since starting full-time work I was also paying for my board at home. Pauline was devastated. Michael was only eight years old, and she was working in the Manurewa post office. With my father gone for good, I decided the right thing to do at that time was to stay at home and support Pauline by increasing my weekly board payments and helping out with odd jobs around home. I know it was tough for Pauline, but I have to say this was a dream come true for me. Pauline was kind, compassionate and loving towards both Lee and me, and we started to spend more and more of our time at home with her.

When I was 19, I was promoted to be the meat manager at Foodtown Otahuhu. It was quite a vote of confidence as I was the youngest-ever meat manager, and it was definitely a leap of faith by the then management group at Foodtown. I was not long out of my apprenticeship, and here I was in charge of 20-plus people in a high-production and diverse environment. I had to use all my courage and resilience to overcome the initial lack of trust in my yet-to-be-developed leadership skills and my limited enterprise skills. I was fortunate that Foodtown had set up and implemented a well-structured management training programme that I was able to be put on. The Management Study Programme, or MSP, was a first-class management programme for its day. It had been specially designed for store managers, and I was the first non-store manager to attend.

We were given lectures on leadership and basic management principles, which I really got into, and I studied extremely hard. I was also able to put these new principles into practice, with great success. It was there that I was exposed to my first lessons on the power of the mind, and on how we can use it to plan and achieve success for ourselves and others.

I was blown away: here was the structure to the thinking process I had been instinctively using since my childhood, and when I read extracts from Maxwell Maltz's book *Psycho-Cybernetics* my learning was taken to a new level. I was fascinated with the power of the subconscious mind, and how you can use it to guide you to your goals and deliver on what you believe. This thinking was to ultimately shape my life story, and in particular my leadership style for the next 35 years.

Foodtown had also established an operational structure, with area managers and field specialists who effectively supported and coached the store management teams with any daily or weekly issues. I was like a sponge, learning as much as I could. I also sought out a number of other key leaders to be my mentors, and I listened and learnt from people who I thought then, and now know, were the best in the business. Without this support I would have taken much longer to come to grips with my role as manager.

After Lee and I were married in 1982 I accepted a role as the meat manager of Foodtown Hamilton Central, which was the first Foodtown to be opened outside of Auckland. This role was a great opportunity, as it was one of the company's busiest stores and it was outside the existing regional structure. That meant that I would have an autonomous role, and so would be able to prove my true ability. The store was in a huge growth mode and operated differently from other Foodtown stores. There was no area manager nor fresh specialists, and I was quick to see that the team culture was toxic. It certainly challenged my leadership skills as well as my commitment and resilience.

I was keen to establish and embed the practical principles I had learnt over the past three years on how to run a successful meat operation. However, this was the first time I had come up against a militant, hard-nosed team of both butchers and packers, who until then had been able to run the operation how they wanted. And how they had run things was a long way off my standards and goals. The butchers were slow and rough, which contributed to the department regularly reporting poor yields, and having poor product quality standards. While sales were growing, they were not being maximised, and the profit was constantly below expectations; in fact, it was the worst in the company.

I distinctly remember the day when everything came to a head. I had about 10 butchers working on boning and slicing meat, and they did not like me constantly challenging them to hit the productivity and yield targets. They finally rebelled and called a non-authorized stop-work meeting out by the back door. It was a management coup, and this was not their first rodeo; they were good at it. Over the preceding six to eight months, they had already managed to remove the two previous managers sent down from Auckland.

And here I was, a fresh-faced 22-year-old upstart, constantly preaching positivity and demanding success. They basically told me that if I did not ease up on them, they would all quit, which would put me specifically in the lurch with the customers, and ultimately the company. I took a deep breath. I listened. I calmly offered that I would personally make up their pay for them if they all wanted to leave the business that day. I told them: 'If you do not want to work here to the standards I know we can achieve, then there are no locks on the doors and you are all free to go.'

As it turned out I did arrange for two of them to leave on the spot; I did not know it yet, but I had just learnt to set my first corporate prisoners free. I rang up one of my mentors, who helped me arrange a couple of temporary recruits from Auckland to keep production going until I could hire a more permanent local team. Wow, what a difference it made. The rest of the team slowly but surely started to buy into our plan. We started to get better day by day, week by week. Soon we had the best sales growth and the most profitable meat department in the business.

We set up role-clarity sessions and daily communication huddles, not only with the butchers but also with the female meat-wrapping team. In fact we joined those meetings together, which was very uncommon for the day, and had open discussions and active participation on how we could get better every day. We set out agreed goals and objectives, and it worked like a dream. The team bought in and they loved it, especially as we found different ways to celebrate our success nearly every day.

Lee and I lived in Hamilton for three years. It was a fantastic time. Lee was working in a printing business as a paste-up artist, and we were saving hard for a deposit on our first home. I was earning great money. I was one of the highest-paid meat managers in the company, but I also worked nearly every Saturday, being paid double-time (two times the hourly rate), which had me earning more money per week than most store managers.

The company continued to grow, opening new stores in Auckland, Hamilton and Tauranga. I was still managing the Hamilton Central store, but had also been given the extra responsibility of supervising the two new stores opening in the Hamilton suburbs of Chartwell and Nawton. In 1985 I received a promotion and was transferred back to Auckland to take on an area role as a meat field specialist, supporting the meat departments in 10 stores.

## **My reflections**

I discovered that my work environment was another key to unlocking my potential, enabling me to create a better life than I had ever thought was possible in my childhood. I did not know it then, but this was the start of my journey in developing a model for how to create an environment where others can be at their best, too. I also learnt how important it was to first find and then set free your prisoners in a work environment.

I will always be very grateful to my many Foodtown mentors, but there were two in particular, the late Mike Hutton and John Van Lieshout, who helped guide and mentor me through those early years. I am also extremely grateful to all of the original Foodtown management team, for their outstanding vision and the specific actions they took to create such an amazing environment and culture that enabled us all to experience the joy of being successful retailers. It was to become an ongoing source of inspiration in my own leadership journey, when I attempted to change the culture of the Countdown team some 30 years later.

*The three key lessons from these years were:*

1. If you do not ask, you do not receive.
2. The power of the subconscious mind — how you can use it to guide you.
3. How to set both your personal and corporate prisoners free.