



Blaise Brosnan

How accurately to describe the subject of this month's On the Record? That was the first challenge. Blaise Brosnan has a unique blend of experience gained over 25 years in his capacity as chief executive of Wexford Farmers Co-op and later as adviser to a range of Irish businesses. He has also worked in the US, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Russia. He is a founder director of International Dispute Resolution (Ireland) Ltd, which specialises in providing disputants with an alternative to the normal litigation routes, to solve their commercial disputes, oh, and he's also working on his third book which is due to be published later this year.

Keeping it simple with sound advice!

Blaise Brosnan is a very busy man. But he is generous with his time. It's an achievement that is hard to pull off, yet he manages it in style.

The enigmatic Wexford-based Kerry man has been a contributor to *Hardware & Homestyle* since the beginning. We have reviewed his first two books and benefited from his words of wisdom on various topics, but, we thought, it was time to find out a little more.

To begin at the beginning.

'My parents and grandparents were in the retail business in Kerry,' says Blaise, when we meet over coffee in a County Wicklow hotel. It's just off the main N11, so it's convenient, given that he's just driven from Wexford to meet us.

'There were tough times in the forties and fifties in Kerry,' he recalls, 'and we were reared in that environment.'

Consequently, the young Blaise grew up in a milieu where there were always customers to be looked after. 'We did everything,' he says, 'groceries, provenders, milling'.

However, as often happens, none of the Brosnan children had any great interest in joining the family business after school.

Blaise went on to do a degree in agri-economics. He was, he says, 'one of the lucky ones' in that he did not have to follow the emigration trail on graduation.

Instead he got what was rather a good job with Golden Vale in Limerick.

'So I got into senior management very early in my career,' he says.

He clearly made his mark. Two years later – he was only 25 – and Blaise was head-hunted for the position of chief executive with Wexford Farmers Co-op.

It was a position that he would hold for the next 21 years.

Wasn't that very young?

'It was perhaps a bit too young,' says Blaise. 'You had to learn on the hoof but it was a great learning experience too.'

'It was great exposure. Nothing I came across in the subsequent years phased me after that experience.'

What changes did he oversee in the two decades at WFC?

'I joined when they were only a couple of years in existence,' says Blaise. 'We built a fine business over those 21 years.'

'The time coincided with Ireland's joining the EEC.'

'As for products, there were hardware and farming provisions. We targeted the farming community.'

How does he look on the agri sector now?

'It is difficult. Farming is growing as an industry but numbers-wise it is contracting and I suppose the balance of power is also changing.'

'Big farmers have greater purchasing power than they had. The balance of trade between buyer and supplier is in a constant state of flux. But that is change and you manage change.'

The bigger issue, says Blaise, is now the whole area of credit. 'The farming community has lived on merchant credit to cover their working capital over the years and it hasn't changed. Then the builders started to live on merchant credit.'

'The merchant was not only supplying the product but banking as well. A lot got badly caught when the recession came.'

The decision to leave WFC came as a result of a couple of things happening around the same time. True to form, Blaise is straight up in explaining the processes that took place.

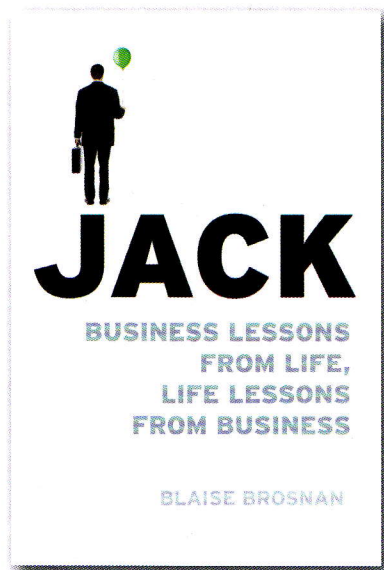
'I was at a board meeting one evening and I asked myself if I really wanted to be around the table for the next 20-odd years,' he says simply. The answer was "No".

'Secondly, a very good friend of ours died in her late 30s. It really struck me that if you want to do something just go and do it.'

'At the graveside I decided that I was going to make a change. I wasn't too sure what to do though.'

One thing that Blaise did do was a Masters degree in management. 'As part of that I set up The Management Resource Institute in Wexford,' he says. 'That has now been going more than 20 years.'

It has brought Blaise into contact with a range of businesses where he has shared his expertise and also learned a lot about the nature of business and success.



'I remember being at the tenth anniversary of a client of ours,' he says, reflecting back. 'It was a black tie event. I knew the business well and had been involved from day one.'

'They were participants in the first management programme we delivered. Everyone who had been in that group was invited to the reception. One of the girls who had also been on the programme spoke as well as me.'

'Some of the best business people I have met don't have formal education but understand commerce.'

'I'll never forget it. She was congratulating the lads on their success but she said that when she did the programme herself, she was a one-person operation and she was still a one-person operation.'

'But in her head she was just as successful.'

The message, says Blaise, is that there are many definitions of success.

'Over the years we have indeed found many such definitions of success,' he says. 'And we would be encouraging people to define their own success.'

Blaise works a lot with SMEs and larger organisations too. There are particular challenges facing SMEs at the moment.

'Running a small business is a lonesome game mentally,' he says. 'They don't have a big team around them and have to make all decisions themselves.'

'They have to wear so many hats – no one is fully equipped. So, we play to their strengths and try to cover off their weaknesses.'

Blaise is often asked what is the most important thing as regards business success.

'There are lots,' he says. However, I think that most importantly, there is clarity of purpose. You can't be successful in business if you are not clear what you are about.'

'With SMEs we do work with enterprise boards or LEOs a lot. I think they have done fantastic work over the years. I know that running a small business is a lonesome game and any help they can get they should get.'

'The family-owned types have specific challenges, I think, in trying to divide the business from the family mentally.'

'Running the family is very emotional and running the business is quite a pragmatic process: you should use the heart at home and head at work but sometimes it is the other way around!'

Blaise also believes strongly that the second generation should have to earn their rights in the business.

'I think it is a pragmatic process,' he says. 'I don't think that a family member has a right to be appointed managing director if they are not fit for it. It is putting everyone at risk.'

Blaise often works with the parents and the next generation together to broker agreements. It is done in a very pragmatic way.

'If they have confidence in you they'll eventually agree with you,' he says.

Blaise is also involved in commercial mediation.

'Instead of going to court we get involved to mediate solutions in commercial mediation. I'd say that probably 70 per cent of cases are disputes between one generation and another. It may not be open warfare but they are disputes nonetheless.'

'We often see cases where you have co-directors in small businesses who don't have shareholders' agreements. Something happens and they fall out but they don't have a formula by which to break up.'

'We'd encourage a shareholders' agreement. It's like a pre-nuptial

You can't be successful in business if you are not clear what you are about.

agreement basically. The most important clause would be the exit clause: How are we going to break up?

'We know from mediation experience that we have never been involved in a mediation case where such an agreement was in place. We have been involved in many where they meant to have it in place but didn't.'

It's an impressive workload for someone who thought that his first management development programme would be a one off!

Now 2,000 people have been through the programme. It is a 24-module programme. Normally it involves working with groups of 15 to 20.

Blaise stresses: 'every time we deliver the programme it is different'.

Blaise has also travelled a lot in the course of his work. It makes for a unique perspective. He has worked abroad in Russia, Ukraine and Turkmenistan, for example.

The common denominator is usually that 'we are facilitating people achieve what they want,' Blaise says. 'Our objective is to help them achieve theirs.'

'We could have people from retail to manufacturing professions and from trades, it's all about the mix actually. The

group learns from itself.

'You might have people with Phds and ones who left school after national school. They'd be sitting at the same table and all learning from each other.

'Some of the best business people I have met don't have formal education but understand commerce.'

So, is it something that people are just born with?

'It can be nurtured. I think we are all the products of our genetic make-up but also the product of how we have reacted to the various influences in our lives.

'My mission has been to try to influence as many business people as I can for the better and give some guidance.'

Which brings us to the books. Blaise is currently finishing his third, due for publication later this year.

The first was based on the management programme. 'I was always being asked for notes and, eventually, I was asked if I'd put it all in book form,' he explains.

'Jack was the second book.'

'I was anxious to try to influence people as much as I could,' says Blaise.

'In my view Jack is a great role model for ex-pats. I was trying to capture the message that no matter where you start from that doesn't determine where you

finish.

'I go though Jack's lifecycle and see where the influences were. He could have got lost at times but there were various interventions and help along the way. We all encounter watershed moments.

'It's how we react to those moments that is important.'

'I think there are always two or three people that will stand out in life as influences on you.'

In his own life these were his parents and a priest that Blaise knew and it was also people that he played sports with. Being from Kerry he is a big football fan.

'I do think team sports are very good,' he says. 'There is a lot of give and take and so it is in life. In business I can see the difference in people who participate in team sports.'

The next book has the working title: *Patches of Your Life*.

It is taking the full life cycle of a person, divided into various sections. It will be built on a series of quotations – more of a handbook you can dip into really, Blaise says.

Meanwhile there are many other things going on for Blaise Brosnan in the various strands of his professional life.

It makes me wonder how he keeps on top of it all.

'I am a great believer in not getting too stressed about things which we can do nothing about,' he says. This is clearly a philosophy that he passes on to others.

'There are lots of variables in our businesses which we can do something about,' he explains. 'My approach is to get people to focus on the variables that they can control.'

Sound advice but then sometimes Blaise also meets people who are in a complete quandary, especially in recent years.

'Mental isolation often is a factor,' he says

'There is no such thing as a perfect business. It doesn't exist. Some look more perfect than others but every business has a soft underbelly somewhere. That is where we try to help them.

'My view is if that you can pick four or five variables that you can improve by 5%. That can be the difference.'

Is there a core message?

'I suppose it's for people to be honest with themselves,' says Blaise. 'Surround yourself with people who can add to you too.'

'They are out there but you have to go towards them.

'Really what I am trying to do is get people to think differently. I know from experience that if I can get a group to think about themselves and their businesses just slightly differently, they'll act differently.

'And if they do so then they'll have a different outlook.'