

Brian Sheth, Contributor

Co-Founder and President, Vista Equity Partners

Leadership Lessons From Jane Goodall: Investors Can Learn A Lot From The Iconic Conservationist

04/11/2017 09:39 am ET | Updated 3 days ago



At first glance, it might have been an odd sight last week to see Dr. Jane Goodall and me on stage together at the [School of International Service at American University \(SIS\)](#). I am half her age, an investor, and a first generation American (on my paternal side who come from India) who grew up outside Boston. English-born Jane has spent her life as an activist and primatologist; my work has been in finance. But since I was a child, Jane has inspired me and millions of people through her love of animals and the Earth – and her commitment to bringing hope to humanity.

When I was young, I wanted to be a marine biologist. My interest was piqued during hours in the New England forests with my best friend Wes, and my love of nature was further awakened when I learned about the courage and adventures of Jacques Cousteau and Jane Goodall. It made sense to me that in the absence of finding another planet on which to live, we need to protect animals, plants, and the complex systems that give us the clean air that we

breathe, the clean water that we drink, and all the resources that we sometimes take for granted that our natural world provides.

I remember the first time I watched the [National Geographic](#) film about Jane's groundbreaking work with chimpanzees in Tanzania. I could not know then that Jane – the woman who fearlessly interacted with chimpanzees, who became accepted into their natural habitat, and who fundamentally changed the way I (and millions of others) viewed the relationship between humans and animals – would become my cherished friend.

Jane's message of hope and her tireless advocacy for animals and the planet have inspired generations of people and organizations – including [Global Wildlife Conservation](#), which I co-founded with Dr. Wes Sechrest (my childhood friend who went on to become a renowned biologist). Jane's leadership as a voice for species who cannot talk, for young people who will inherit the planet and for the communities who are at the forefront of the conservation battle, make her a rare leader and sage of our time. So how does her leadership translate for the rest of us? What can we learn from her?

Last week, I had the chance to interview Jane on-stage at an event in Washington D.C. hosted by SIS. For nearly two hours, Jane captivated an audience of students, faculty, community leaders, and her fans of children and adults ranging from 10 to 90 years old. In a sold-out auditorium, Jane shared her extraordinary wisdom, meted out in one amazing story after another. As I was listening to her, it hit home to me that while my career in software investing seems, on the surface, far removed from her work as a conservationist, the lessons she shared are universal. Here are just a few of the most profound ones that I wanted to share:

Stand, don't sit: After a packed day giving speeches and holding meetings, Jane launched the evening with a 50-minute talk standing at the lectern. Then, the plan was for the two of us to sit in armchairs on stage for our "fireside chat." When I came on stage to join her, she expressed concern that if we sat, those in the back of the room wouldn't be able to see us. She insisted that we keep standing throughout our hour-long conversation. Jane is simply not a woman who stands still. At 83 years old, she has so much energy and incredible drive to get the most out of every day and every encounter that sitting down seems superfluous and even wasteful to her.

Even more importantly, Jane recognized that standing during our Q&A ensured that she spoke to every person in the audience. She cared about being heard. With no spare time to save the planet, standing showed respect and empathy for others and a determination to reach as many people as possible. Next time you are at a conference, take stock of how many people are paying attention the speaker and how many are checking their phones. Because Jane put herself in her audience's shoes, she had an auditorium full of people hanging on her every word. We should all strive for this kind of constructive impatience and deep regard for others.

Tell stories: Jane told stories and shared wisdom dating back from her earliest days studying animals in Africa in the

late 1950s all the way up to today. While Jane could have lectured us with statistics about the plight of species and shrinking forests, she instead enthralled us with tales of David Greybeard; how she convinced Chinese dignitaries to include [Roots and Shoots](#) programming in elementary schools by mimicking a female chimpanzee mating call, and more. Jane clearly showed how telling stories allowed her as a leader to connect with the audience and create memorable moments and messages that I assure you no one will soon forget

Great teachers are great students: Jane doesn't dwell in the past. She is a master of technology and a student of social media. She understands the vast power of technology to broaden her reach and engage young people in the cause of conservation. The [Jane Goodall Institute \(JGI\)](#) and her latest and most ambitious JGI effort, reflect this modern sensibility. These organizations have leveraged social media to give hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world the tools and voice to be agents of change.

In business, it is all too easy to become enamored with one's success and to believe that what worked yesterday will keep working tomorrow. Curiosity, passion, a commitment to innovation, and discipline matter. Great leaders in all fields, including business and philanthropy, must be life-long students.

Be self-aware about your strengths and maximize them: There's a natural tendency to try to become good at as many things as possible, but the most successful people tend to be specialists who discover early on that they have two or three exceptional skills and intense interests, and figure out how to map their lives around them. Jane explains how she realized as a child that her three greatest skills and traits were patience, the love of discovery, and physical stamina. She was determined to build her famous relationship with the Gombe chimpanzees over many months and years. She happily carried on when others would have long grown impatient and given up.

Jane also realized that she has an almost superhuman reserve of energy and concentration. In her younger days in the field, this meant she could devote enormous attention to her studies from dawn until dark. Through the years, it has also allowed her to maintain a schedule that would overwhelm most people half her age. She takes this very seriously; during our time on stage together at SIS, she challenged me to a foot race around the audience. I did not accept, but I'm quite certain that Jane would have won!

Jane's unyielding drive to leave a positive mark on the world each and every day has had a profound impact on my life and philanthropy. After the SIS event, an endless stream of students waited patiently to have a personal moment with her and to share the ways in which she inspired them. Her unique ability to reach and inspire people across regions, backgrounds and generations makes her a true hero. However we earn our living, whatever causes we hold near and dear to our heart, there is much for us to learn in Jane's example.

Brian Sheth is the Co-Founder and President of [Vista Equity Partners](#).