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THE LEVIN CODE



An eminent hotelier looks to his youngest daughter to carry on his legacy. David and Kate Levin spoke to Leader's Gina McAdam about the transition to a new generation.

David Levin recalls how, as a young hotel manager of 27, his immediate boss chastised him for being too successful. Perplexed, Levin asked him what he meant. 'Let me put it this way,' said the boss. 'Whoever takes over from you won't be able to sustain what you've done. I don't want anyone asking me why this hotel isn't doing as well as it did the year before.' It was 1964, and soon after, Levin handed in his resignation. 'I don't understand why you're leaving,' said his boss. Said Levin, 'Because you don't understand why I'm leaving is why I'm leaving!'

Growth of an empire

Seven years later, in what those with less foresight thought was a backstreet ('No one will find you!'), Levin opened his first property, the Capital Hotel. The luxury townhouse hotel on Basil Street, Knightsbridge, built by the young Levin from the ground up, couldn't have been better situated. Like its sister The Levin Hotel next door, opened in 1981, it's been described as 'a croissant's throwing distance from Harrods', the world's most famous department store.

And speaking of croissants, The Capital Group -- Levin's perfectly formed hotel and restaurant empire of which he is Chairman -- now includes The London Bakery, which bakes and delivers artisanal bread and pastries to top hotels, clubs and catering companies. Food and drink are deeply embedded in the Levin proposition. The restaurant at The Capital



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has spawned some of the UK's most celebrated chefs, from Richard Shepherd (who at the time was still a larder cook at The Dorchester) to Brian Turner, Gary Rhodes to Paul Merrett. (*Ed's note. See [Chef Entrepreneur](#) in the November 2010 issue of Leader*)

'When I said I was going to create a fine dining restaurant, everyone said it was impossible. In the sixties, when we started building The Capital, no one ate in London restaurants because the food was dreadful. No one knew who the chef was, no one cared,' says Levin.

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In 2001, The Capital was awarded two Michelin stars and even Arianna Huffington's influential 'Huffpost' gave the hotel and its amenities a thumbs-up last year. Then there is the serendipitously named Levin Winery in France's Loire Valley, where Levin grows and bottles his private label Sauvignon Blanc wines. Finally, 195 Piccadilly, the conference and meetings venue and headquarters of the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (Bafta) is managed by and thus part of The Capital Group.

Standing up for oneself

To think that when Levin decided to embark on his mission to build a 'grand hotel in miniature', his parents vehemently disapproved. A nice, bright middle-class boy like him would be more suited to the professions.

But The Capital opened to quite a stir, and Levin was invited by the BBC to talk about his career in the hotel industry. Levin says, 'It's a career now, but it wasn't then, so everyone was interested in my success in hotels. My mother listened to it and after that phoned me and said, "I just want you to know that every word you said is true. If your father were alive, he would be so upset that we didn't support you." And you know, that was one of the biggest things ever in my life. My mother actually said that I'd pulled through.'

Things change

What a difference a generation makes. Almost forty years later, Levin happily transferred the seal of his office – The Capital's General Manager's office, that is -- to his youngest daughter, Kate Levin. There are other progeny but neither of them works in the family business. Kate's older brother Joe holds senior position in the hospitality division of a global investment bank. Her elder sister Samantha is a high-flying lawyer.

But does the classically-educated Kate, who by her own admission never went to a traditional hotel school and instead majored in Italian and Art History, have what it takes to live up to her father's good name (to which we may add her mother's -- Margaret Levin, the highly respected Managing Director of the renowned Groucho Club)?

In fact, unlike the man she fondly calls 'Papa', who had to prove to his parents that there was more to hotels than being a guest, being in a hotel is second nature to Kate. The hotel is walking distance from both the family home and Francis Holland School, where she spent her schooldays. 'We spent a lot of time as a family at this hotel,' Kate says.



And although the ladylike Kate grew up amid both the clamour and grace of the family business, in even younger days, Kate actually chose to go her own way, displaying some of her father's independent streak. She worked at the high-end of the health and beauty industry, at the Third Space health and fitness club in Soho and Urban Retreat in Harrods. Further back, during her gap year, she'd worked in sales with perfumers Jo Malone and Gary Willcox, whom she followed from Walton Street to their Sloane Street flagship. 'I was with them when they sold to Estee Lauder,' she says.

It all made for a fine, roll-up-your-sleeves commercial platform. Ready to join The Capital a

few years ago, Kate was unexpectedly summoned to Bafta to cover the telephones in the events department. She ended up staying there for over two years, working her way up. But the time to devote herself to The Capital had come. She accepted her father's invitation to come back.

Three-Way Conversation

Christmas is just around the corner and Kate and David Levin are sitting comfortably across from each other in the cozy bar of The Capital Hotel. Guests, obviously regulars, move in and out of the room, but the Levins reserve their courtesy for the interviewer. Clearly, they have full confidence in the attentiveness of their team.

The result is a candid portrait of two generations of a successful hotelier family, a father and a daughter, sharing qualities, voicing concerns, and together determined to maintain and prolong an enviable legacy.

Leader: When was the decision made to turn over the reins to Kate and how did you go about it?

David Levin: In 2009, when Kate came to see how things would be, I didn't say right, here's the job of General Manager, it didn't work that way. But I spoke to Harry Murray (*Ed's note: See [A Leader & A Gentleman](#) in the November 2009 issue of Leader*) to help Kate. He's a wonderful chap and we go back 50 years and I felt that he and Kate would get on well. He mentors Kate a lot, and comes once a week. Kate discusses things with him and then comes to me and says what do you think? So there is a buffer. It's very important that Kate has a little team around her and then comes to me.

I'd also asked Harry to go around the heads of department and get them behind Kate while I was in Australia for the winter. When I came back, we had all the heads together and I said, I'd like to tell you all that Kate is now going to be your General Manager. And there wasn't a dry eye in the house. It was very emotional.

L: Kate, what has it been like to be mentored by someone like Harry Murray?

Kate Levin: Harry has really changed my working life here. He is a very inspiring person to have. It's very much like having Papa here. Harry taught me that if ever I'm going to be successful we've got to do it as a team. All the departments have got to be moving in the same direction. And I see that through both Papa and Harry's leadership styles. I knew that if I did nothing else in my first few months I had to convince the team to move with me. I'm not stupid. I know I could be perceived as just the boss' daughter.



L: How do you overcome that?

DL: You have to prove yourself.

KL: I was at a networking meeting and I met a young man in a similar position to myself, and I think we both agreed that you just have to prove yourself doubly because you're your harshest critic. But the hotel is in a better place this time this year than we were this time last year. We're busier, we've got better rates. If the staff can see and be proud of the results, hopefully they'll accept me being here as well.

And although the ladylike Kate grew up amid both the clamour and grace of the family business, Kate actually chose to go her own way, displaying some of her father's independent streak.

DL: Someone asked me in an interview, how do you find all your good people? And it annoyed me, and I said, there is no such thing as a good team. You find people and you train and work with them, they gain respect, you gain respect for them and so on and they become good, whatever good is.

L: David, are you very hands-on yourself?

DL: Totally. You may say well, this is just a blue suit. It's not, it's a uniform I wear. I have five of them, one for every day and I'd much rather wear jeans and a polo shirt, I assure you, but I take a view and have done for 40 years that the hall porter, chef, waiters and chambermaids all wear a uniform and so should I. And that is how you create a team. Everything has to be a team effort.

L: Kate, when did you think that this was the business for you?

KL: I think from an early age. As a little girl, I sort of worshipped my brother Joe because

little girls do worship their older brothers. Because he was in it and all of his really cool friends at hotel school were too, I thought it was the coolest thing to do. I never really wanted to do much else, although it was always the bedroom side of things that I loved most.

L: Why the bedrooms?

KL: I don't know, it's where I feel the most confident and comfortable. I hopefully come across as quite a hospitable GM and I like the idea of making people comfortable for the night.

L: David, what were your ambitions for your children?

DL: Well, you want your children to be well and then of course successful in whatever they do. I had groomed Joe because I felt that was what he wanted. His training was immaculate. It's everything I would have wanted for me, but I didn't have anybody to help me do it. I simply tried to do the best for my children. I advised Samantha not to be a hack lawyer, so she specialised in marine law.

L: Did you advice Kate on her future?

DL: I don't think I ever influenced her nor did she ever come to me saying 'Daddy, I feel lost, help me on a path'. And I think that's to my credit that I didn't interfere. I just want her to be well and happy and Kate has developed her personality which is gorgeous, wonderful and she excelled herself in sales at Jo Malone.

KL: I learned a lot from Jo about passion and belief in your own product.

L: Kate, apart from the fact that it's your family's business, what do you like about working in The Capital?

KL: This hotel is based entirely on service and that stems from Papa and I love the fact that the guests come through the front door and they want to see him there. That's a wonderful thing. We can't offer a spa and we don't offer enormous suites but that's not what we are here for. But we have such repeat clientele and such a wonderful atmosphere in the hotel and that's totally based on service. Also, the staff are amazing and I am so fortunate to get to work with each and every one of them. I've actually just done all the appraisals for the heads of department out at different hotels and the lovely thing is we were all so pleased to come home back here. It's nice to know that you can be very proud of your product.

DL: People used to say to me, you're a perfectionist, how wonderful, and I'd say, you don't know how agonising it is being one. But I think I've calmed down now. I always want not more, but better.

L: Is your father a hard act to follow?

KL: An impossible act!

DL: I sometimes worry because she goes out into the industry and people say 'You're David Levin's daughter'. That must be a nuisance.

You just have to prove yourself doubly because you're your harshest critic.

KL: No, of course not. But it's a name within the industry, and of course I see the benefits of it. It opens doors to me that wouldn't otherwise open and my mother's the same, she's another name in the industry, in a different area of it. I just have to make sure I'm doing them both proud all the time. The same for my brother, who is very well respected in his own right now.

L: Usually, they say when you're bequeathed success, the pressure becomes quite difficult. How do you see yourself coping with that?

KL: I went to a school where we were taught that we mustn't fail. I wouldn't do anything unless I thought I could do it. I enjoy a challenge and see it more of a challenge than a pressure. I wouldn't be here risking The Capital's reputation if I didn't think that I could bring value to the hotel. I love the hotel too much to do that. The success of the hotel comes first, and if I can help to do that, then I will always be here.

L: What have been the challenges for you, irrespective of being your father's daughter?

KL: There's an enormous amount for me to learn. Touch wood, I'm a fairly fast learner so hopefully people only have to tell me once The next challenge of course is working with the team and making sure they want to come with us on this next bit of the journey. The hotel turns forty next year, so it's a really big year for us. We won't be changing what we're providing but making sure we're continually improving things.

L: Can you be concrete about some of the improvements?

DL: I wasn't in the office earlier this morning because I was talking to people about the vineyard and it's now just possible that we can expand it. And we're looking at the possibility of having another restaurant which I think will open opportunities for people who have been with us for a long time. That's how you build the company, with people. That's management. And everything that I do always allows for the next step.

My ultimate dream, which may happen with Kate, is that we would have a small hotel, anywhere between 40-60 rooms, mainly suites. This was my dream before The Capital was built. Then we would have the same sort of thing in Paris, called the Capital, we'd go to Washington and we'd look at each capital city in the world. I never achieved that partly because I didn't want to give up my family. I don't know if Kate's even heard me talking about it. I see Kate expanding the company.

L: Kate, do you see yourself, 5-10 years from now, being known as Miss Levin just as David is known as Mr Levin?

KL: I don't know. I'm very happy just to be here now but it's very important that we do always plan forward. Papa and I are a team at the moment, and I'm so new here I can't really look that far ahead quite yet. So someone will have to come back in 5 years and ask me again.

L: How will you know you have succeeded?

KL: If we can maintain The Capital's standards and bring it forward, then we will have succeeded. There is an awful lot of competition in London today. If I can succeed in continuing to make this a successful commercial business while keeping my parents' values within the hotel industry, then I will have been a success.

To find out more about The Capital Group, visit www.capital-group.net, and to find out more about The Capital Hotel, visit www.capitalhotel.co.uk.

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