

# Leadership Principles

## An Interview with Gary Kusin

**EDITORS' NOTE** Gary Kusin is a mentor, investor, entrepreneur, business advisor, and author of *Always Learning: Lessons on Leveling Up* from GameStop to Laura Mercier and Beyond. Today, he advises an array of public and private companies, large and small, on strategy, management, and growth issues. In addition, Kusin ([garykusin.com](http://garykusin.com)) continues his full schedule of mentoring and has mentored well over 1000 individuals during the course of his career.



Gary Kusin

Kusin co-founded two companies, Babbage's, operating today as GameStop, and Laura Mercier Cosmetics, both of which are well-known global brands. Kusin spent 13 years as a senior advisor to the global private equity firm TPG, including a large amount of his time mentoring CEOs of TPG portfolio companies. From 2001-2006, he served as President and Chief Executive Officer of Kinko's, today operating as FedEx Office. Kusin was responsible for the turnaround, strategic growth, and transformation of Kinko's and oversaw the ultimate sale to FedEx, directly reporting to Fred Smith, founder of FedEx, for the two years required to integrate Kinko's into FedEx and be renamed FedEx Office. Kusin is an Inc. magazine "Entrepreneur of the Year" award winner and has served on many public and private firms both in America and abroad including names such as Electronic Arts, Petco, Sabre, and Myer Department Stores in Australia. Kusin has been very involved in Dallas community activities throughout his career. A representative sample of organizations and positions include the St. Mark's School of Texas Board of Trustees, Dallas Young Presidents' Organization (YPO) chairman, Dallas Citizen's Council Board of Directors, and the Southwestern Medical School Foundation. A member of the University of Texas McComb's School of Business Hall of Fame, Kusin earned a BA degree from the University of Texas at Austin and an MBA degree from Harvard Business School.

### Will you discuss your career journey?

My recently released book, *Always Learning*, traces my growth and journey from my childhood to today, with stories illustrating my evolution from a small-town boy who couldn't stay out of trouble to a CEO, entrepreneurial co-founder of two global brands, and corporate turnaround specialist.

These stories track the reasons behind my development of a set of Leadership Principles which serve today as my business North Star.

### What was the inspiration behind GameStop and what were the keys to GameStop's impact and longevity?

GameStop was informed by deep analysis into the early rise of video game equipment and video games coupled with the knowledge that department stores were giving way to specialty store channels. My co-founder, Jim McCurry, studied the impact of advances being

made in semi-conductor speed that would continue on an ongoing basis to much more robust gameplay in video games, soon to exceed the power of upright arcade video game machines. Understanding that the rise of this new form of entertainment would lead to large demand for new video games and an array of equipment to play those games made us feel like it was a good bet to create a specialty store concept and get first mover advantage in what would be a new major global type of entertainment. It worked.

### What are the keys to developing an accurate "sixth sense" for finding opportunities for investment and growth?

Pattern recognition is critical and that only comes with an array of experiences and learning key takeaways from each. That leads to an ability to synthesize an array of inputs ranging from market size and growth rate to competitive sets, margins, and an understanding of the risks inherent in the category. Nothing is an exact science, mostly due to the capabilities of the founders and the surrounding team and financial markets appetite at the time to venture capital.

### How critical has resilience been in your career and having the ability to take the biggest failures and frustrations and turn them into opportunities for growth and success?

I am pretty sure I have no example of a successful entrepreneur that didn't have a wellspring of resilience, optimism, and passion. No one can see around corners, and no one has an unblemished track record. It is negotiating and maneuvering around speed bumps that determines success.

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# ALWAYS LEARNING

Lessons on Leveling Up from  
GameStop to Laura Mercier  
and Beyond



# GARY KUSIN

**How important is it for business leaders to have a continuous improvement mindset and do you feel this is a skill that can be taught?**

Continuous improvement is a table stake for any successful company. And yes, I believe it can be taught and monitored. Business environments evolve, technology evolves, market tastes evolve, promotional approaches

evolve, etc. I think the key question here is measuring the importance and understanding the differences between continuous improvement and continuous change. Many companies need both.

**Will you highlight your views on how to effectively manage emotions and employees during high-stakes brand mergers and acquisitions?**

Critical to any successful merger or acquisition is open and honest communications. The entire organization needs to, on an ongoing basis, be filled in on what the integration objectives are, what the differences will be in the combined organization, and what will be the impacts of the changes. In addition, the entire company needs to quickly learn which people will comprise the new senior leadership team, who will lead the integration efforts, and what will be the communications process for everyone to ensure their thoughts are brought to the integration team in a timely basis.

**You mentioned your recently released book, *Always Learning*. What interested you in writing the book and what are the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?**

I realized from years of mentoring people earlier on their own journeys that my career stories helped give them confidence in their own abilities. This book enables me to mentor on a wider level. Additionally, I felt it important to show which leadership principles surfaced from my own journey, and to show how and why they emerged and how they came together in a form that, for me, has become my North Star in business.

**Did you always know that you had an entrepreneurial spirit and desire to build your own businesses?**

I graduated from college as a government major and had no idea I would become an entrepreneur. In *Always Learning*, I track that journey from a person with no idea what a career could be to the entrepreneurial co-founder, CEO, and business turnaround specialist that I became.

**What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership and how do you approach your management style?**

I go into detail on the evolution of my leadership principles in *Always Learning*. There are six discrete principles – alignment, accountability, respect for others, open and honest communication, honesty and integrity, and continuous improvement.

**What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers?**

Regardless of the job you are working, work harder than anyone else at that particular job. It is very hard to distinguish yourself in your workplace any other way. This hard work will lead to real competence at whatever it is that you are doing, if for no other reason that you do it so often. A person in the workplace who exhibits competence at their work gains the respect of others in the workplace. That respect leads to better opportunities for the person. And then do the same thing in your next assignment. So, four steps any person can follow in their workplace:

1. Work harder than anyone else.
2. Develop competence that can only come from repetitions on the job.
3. Gain respect for the competence you are showing each day.
4. Be promoted and start the process over. ●