

BY CAROLYN CAMILLERI

# After 25 years as a high-powered CEO and international business executive working in 30+ countries, Victoria-born Peter Ciceri has bundled his experience with an MA in psychology and is coaching CEOs on being CEOs.

**W**hen you find out you are going to interview a CEO coach, one with an established reputation for advising the heads of companies on how to be a good at what they do, as well as offering sage wisdom on business decisions and leadership qualities, a man who has held CEO or similarly high-level positions at several major international companies with as many as 5,000 people on staff, you tend to expect someone, well ... corporate. You know, suit and tie, big chair, the epitome of everything that comes to mind when you think "CEO."

Think again. Turns out this CEO is really very ... human. Wearing jeans and a button-down shirt, Peter Ciceri welcomes me into his comfortable office and makes tea, heartily praising Silk Road, the trend-setting teashop in Chinatown. The first thing I notice once I sit down is the acoustic guitar propped near his desk. It turns out it's just one guitar in the collection of this self-taught guitarist (after 30 years of playing, he only began lessons when his daughter had to cancel hers and he decided to take the lesson instead) who counts Ryan Adams, Kings of Leon, and even White Buffalo among his favourite musicians.

The guitar is the first clue I need to drop any preconceived notions about CEOs, because Ciceri is anything but typical. But make no mistake: he knows business and he knows CEOs. He's been there, done that, several times, most recently during a four-year stint here in Victoria as president and CEO of Custom House Currency Exchange, the company founded in 1992 by Peter Gustavson. Ciceri was brought into Custom House by Gustavson to increase the value of the company — which he did, to the tune of four times its value — and to sell it — which he also did, to Western Union for \$370 million in 2009.

Before that, Ciceri was president and managing director of Compaq Canada, a \$1.7-billion company with 5,000 employees. He is a seasoned international businessman who has worked in more than 30 countries, mostly in Asia Pacific, where he spent over 10 years living in Hong Kong and Tokyo working with Compaq, HP, and Unisys. He's been lead

director and chairman of Sierra Wireless, one of B.C.'s most successful tech companies, as well as a member of the University of Victoria's Board of Governors. And he's has been recognized by the Financial Post's Report on Business as one of Canada's top 100 Business Elite and by UVic as the "Alumni of the Year" for Business Achievement in 2000.

Now he's bundled his executive experience, along with his MA in Counselling Psychology and his training with the International Coaching Federation and the Institute of Corporate Directors, into his newest role — coaching CEOs and other business executives.

**DOUGLAS:** *How would you characterize yourself as a CEO?*

**CICERI:** When I was CEO or president of a company, I never saw myself as better than anybody else. As a CEO, I have a role and I am the leader and I am ultimately accountable. The decisions that I make have a much greater influence and effect. People want strong leadership, they really do, and it's really important, and it is a privilege to provide it, but that doesn't make the [CEO] better.

**DOUGLAS:** *What is business all about for you?*

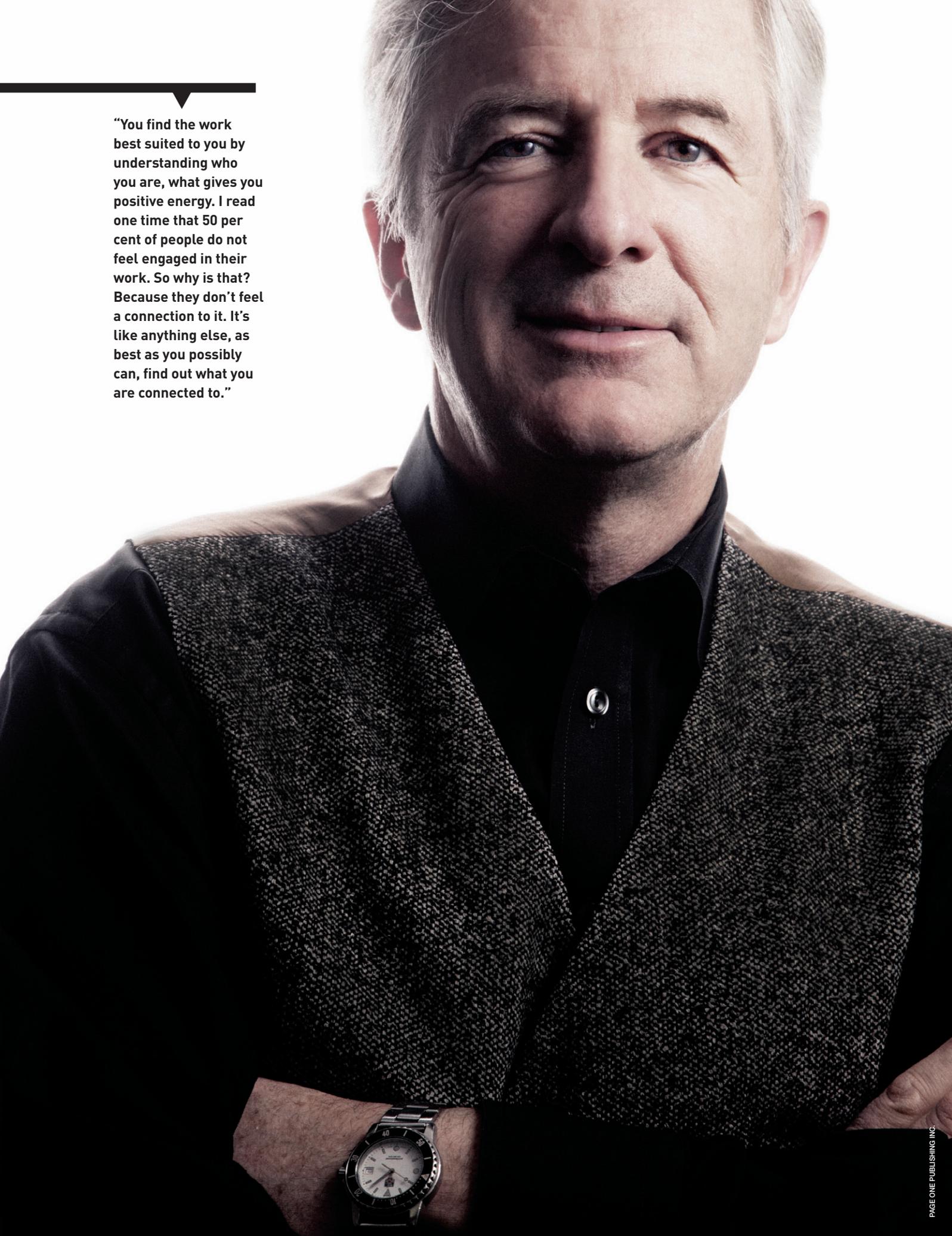
**CICERI:** In business, it's about people — always about people, first and last. The factors of production from an economic standpoint are land, capital, and labour — and most important is always people. It is the determinant of whether you are going to have a successful business or not.

**DOUGLAS:** *Custom House was bought by Western Union. What is it like internally when one company buys another one?*

**CICERI:** It was difficult: no question. It's really important that the value of the company that has been bought be preserved. In order to preserve something, you have to understand it. And unfortunately, I think Western Union was more concerned about managing and controlling than they were about understanding the value of the business. It's like when you buy a house, and

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**“You find the work best suited to you by understanding who you are, what gives you positive energy. I read one time that 50 per cent of people do not feel engaged in their work. So why is that? Because they don’t feel a connection to it. It’s like anything else, as best as you possibly can, find out what you are connected to.”**





Emotions play a huge role in [business], and the number one norm that men believe they need to adhere to is emotional control, emotional stoicism. They say emotion is weak. It's not. And if you don't realize that it's not [weak] and if you don't realize the role that it plays in your life, in decisions, and in business, you are going to be handicapped.

**DOUGLAS:** *Is the job of a CEO the same here as internationally?*

**CICERI:** I think it is pretty much the same. The job of the CEO is to drive shareholder value — first and foremost. Anywhere. Government owned, you still drive value; however, that bureaucracy defines values. It could be the number of widgets, bits, shares, profits, it could be all sorts of things — the job of the CEO is to build value irrespective. You build shareholder and stakeholder value — stakeholder value being employees, customers, and the community. [Community] is increasingly important and it should be: there's social and moral responsibility around that. And a smart company is going to realize that if they have a focus on community and sustainability, it provides their employees and customers with a stronger bond to the company within the community. What goes around comes around and so it is good for business.

**DOUGLAS:** *Who do you consider good as a CEO and why?*

**CICERI:** Two that come to mind. There was a guy named David Sutcliffe, who was president and CEO of Sierra Wireless. I have a lot of respect for him. He was there for a long time, and I learned a lot from him. He was just a very trustworthy guy, and I would define that by the fact that he was very sincere, competent, consistent, and open. He always tried to do the right thing. And just integrity. I mean there is no grey area in integrity — people say there is but there's not and ethics says there's not. Just do the right thing, because it is going to find the light of day anyways.

But the other guy who I really like is Fezziwig, Ebenezer Scrooge's first boss in *A Christmas Carol*. When Ebenezer Scrooge is watching the dance with the ghost of Christmas past, Scrooge says Fezziwig was the kindest, best employer ever. He cared about his people, he treated them like family, and he gave them a place where they could connect to the business and to themselves and to each other. He really wanted to have a work environment and a culture of work that was very humanistic in its approach. He embodied that. I think he should be just about everybody's CEO — every CEO. He was a role model. ■



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