

A portrait of Robert Dutton, a middle-aged man with short, graying hair, wearing glasses and a white dress shirt with a patterned tie. He is smiling and standing outdoors in front of a large tree trunk. The background is softly blurred, showing green foliage.

## Robert Dutton

By Nathalie Dumas

Photo: Sylvie-Ann Paré

# A TASTE FOR HARD WORK

Robert Dutton was just 4 years old when his parents Marita and Richard bought a hardware store in Sainte-Dorothée. He grew up between the racks of tools and gallons of paint. In the modest store, he learned to work and got his first taste of running a business. From his father, he gained an understanding of dedication to the community; from his mother, he inherited his business acumen.

This son of a hardware man, shy and spiritual, went on to become the top man at RONA. Then, after 35 years developing and shaping Quebec's jewel of the home renovation industry, he was booted out of his position as President and CEO in November 2012. Today, he has turned the page on that bitter episode. Now an adjunct professor at HEC Montréal, Robert Dutton teaches future entrepreneurs the art of making the most of their talent.

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Robert Dutton has an impressive track record. Freshly graduated from École des Hautes Études Commerciales in Montréal, Robert Dutton was hired on June 27, 1977 by RONA, where he was quick to climb the corporate ladder. At age 22, the new retail pricing analyst was already very ambitious—for his own future, of course, but perhaps even more so for the association of merchants that he wanted to see become the hardware retail leader, in Quebec and across Canada.

"I had a vision for the company. I knew where I wanted to take it. And it wasn't for any trivial reason," he says. His goal? "To build a profitable company based on irreproachable ethics and strong values." He stabs a finger at his desktop, emphasizing his words. Dutton built his house on bedrock, inspired by his family and the people he met along the way. He stayed the course in turbulent times, sticking to the plan he had wisely set himself.

## His career plan: to serve

He thought he would stay six months. But after six years, Dutton was still at RONA, taking on new responsibilities and changing job titles in pace with the structural changes that swept the company as it transformed, innovated and expanded. Promoted to a new position in 1983, the young manager felt a need to take a break, just long enough to catch his breath. It was time to take stock, both personally and professionally. And so he headed off to Vancouver, on the other side of the country, where he lost himself in introspection for 10 days. He wrote down his thoughts,

which would lay a solid foundation for his career.

"What motivates me?" he asked himself. While the question was deep, the answer from the 28-year-old businessman with such a bright future before him proved very surprising. He wrote: "Is it money? No, not really. Not at all, even. I make a decent living. [...] Am I motivated by power? But what is power? The right to decide on the life or death of your subordinates? An intoxicating drug? If that's what it is, it's not what I want. [...] Am I motivated by fame and recognition? No, I don't care about that. As I fill up these pages, in the evenings in my hotel room, I realize that what really motivates me is to be part of something bigger than myself. My ambition is to serve."

Thanks to his experience at the family store, Dutton understood that his parents did much more than just sell goods to their customers: they were helping them. Despite what it sounded like, the question "Can I help you?", which he had heard his parents speak so many times, was anything but trivial. The verb "to help" means just that: to help. "That's the reality in small communities and small main-street stores: you're there to help the community," he explains.

## Business is people

To serve others, you have to be able to listen. Dutton learned that lesson one fine day in May, when he demanded that his staff work on a holiday. "I ran up against one employee who categorically refused, saying 'If you're not happy, fire me!' I learned my first lesson as a manager that day: namely, that the human factor would always be the



A great listener, Robert Dutton is a professor who is well-liked by the students at HEC Montréal. Photo: Sylvie-Ann Paré

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most complex." He decided to sit down every Friday with his employees to resolve any problems that had come up. "I would always learn

something with them. I would grow as a person," he sums up.

"When you acknowledge the contributions made by employees, they will want to give you more," states Dutton with conviction. "That doesn't mean you make them into workaholics; it just means that the seven and a half hours that they give you, they give you wholeheartedly. It's not about making people *do* things, it's about making them *want to do* them. The old way was about forcing them to perform; instead, you have to make them want to perform."

Dutton's philosophy can be summed up in a short, three-word phrase that over time has become his motto: *Business is people*. It's a motto he had repeated often to his students. "You're not managing a company, a department or a team: you're man-

aging men and women. Always and everywhere."

## Taking a time-out to think

Some 15 years after his 10-day introspection in Vancouver, RONA's President decided to take another break, but this time for six months. "The sabbatical I took when I was 42 was the best thing I ever did. I realized that it served my need to push myself, and I wanted to challenge myself in my spiritual life too. When I did it, I was nervous. I didn't want it to get out that I had decided to take my sabbatical at the Grand Séminaire de Montréal." The businessman had always remained very discreet about his faith. "It was a very private thing; I never spoke about it. I went to mass every morning for years at



Photo: Sylvie-Ann Paré

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## I wanted to challenge myself in my spiritual life too.

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Saint Joseph's Oratory, but I never spoke to a priest until I was 40!"

And so Dutton withdrew from the working world to think about the meaning of life. "I like to think. It's a great loss today: people don't take time to think about things anymore. There's an old world I love: to discern. We don't take the time any more to discern. It's not a word we use anymore but my God, it's a beautiful word!" he exclaims sincerely, his eyes shining.

That time of prayer, silence and study with the Sulpicians transformed him and sustained him in his everyday life. In 2000, as a guest speaker at a prayer breakfast for Montréal businesspeople, Dutton shared his story. Always the perfectionist, he had asked a theologian for assistance writing his speech, "in order to impress his listeners," he admits. Four days before his presentation,

the theologian returned the text to the author, with no changes or additions, saying "Just say what you wrote. It will be fine." And it was. "I learned an important lesson about authenticity. I had wanted to be good, but when it comes right down to it, I was better off being real than good." Dutton delivered that address more than 150 more times, including at the National Prayer Breakfast at the House of Commons, in Ottawa.

### Setting the record straight

And there you have it. It's done. Dutton has publicly revealed a side of himself that had always been a secret: his faith and the meaning that it gives to his life. (See *the sidebar*

*on the next page to learn more.*) This kind-hearted man would tackle an even thornier subject in his biography, released by Éditions Origo in fall 2018. For Dutton, the book was a response to a journalist who had commented on the 2016 sale of RONA, raking the former CEO over the coals in the process. "I am going to set the record straight," Dutton told himself. In his book *Mise à niveau*, he tells his story and that of RONA in rich detail. He explains the circumstances surrounding his forced departure in late 2012: an arrow straight to his heart after 35 years of keeping the Quebec hardware giant going. Was it a settling of accounts? "No," he says. "If I had written a book out of revenge, I would have done it right after leaving the company." His book didn't fail to elicit strong reactions from the business community, and Dutton's version didn't go unchallenged. But the author remained unperturbed: his book was rigorously researched and written, in collaboration with Daniel Larouche, and it was supported by some 200 references. "We reported the facts," Dutton told various forums and book fair audiences. Throughout the book's 422 pages, the former CEO also offers readers several management lessons.

### A new calling: professor!

But it was primarily in his role as an adjunct professor at HEC Montréal, his *alma mater*, that Dutton got his chance to present his management philosophy to tomorrow's entrepreneurs. Starting a second career was a challenge, and he hesitated before taking the jump. "I am a hardware man. What business would I have being there?" he asked himself for three years, unsure whether to accept the offer. Ultimately, his students had the answer. "I don't think you know what a big impact you have on us," one told him at the end of a class. "Of course I'm happy to hear that," says Dutton, "but this role comes with a great deal of responsibility. As a professor, you pass on knowledge but soft skills as well. And that's what students remember most. I try to give them everything I have." There's little doubt on that point.

## A Hardware Man's Faith Q&A

### Was your family particularly religious?

When it comes to practising religion, we were very “lukewarm”. My mother didn’t like it when I said that. It goes without saying we didn’t take our baths in holy water when we were young!

### At what point did faith become important in your life?

Around the age of 16 or 17, coming back from mass one Sunday—I don’t want to come across as being too esoteric or some sort of mystic—I suddenly felt a certainty that I have never had a need to question.

### How do you define your faith?

I always say it’s the faith of a hardware man. It’s a faith of the heart. It’s not something you use to judge other people. It’s a state of openness, a simple faith. You’re good to your neighbours, and you treat others as you would have them treat you.

### Who are your sources of inspiration?

Henri Nouwen ... I’ve read all his books ... Benoit Lacroix and some others. I’ve always found it comforting to read their words. They have an openness, a wisdom. I like the word “wisdom.”

### What passage from the Gospel speaks most to you?

The parable of the sower, because that’s what I do now: I sow. I don’t have to know whether those seeds will grow or not. I often think in terms of *The Man who Planted Trees*. It’s as if the author, Jean Giono, has transposed the parable into a more contemporary timeframe.



***The Man who Planted Trees***, Mosaïcultures internationales de Montréal.  
Photo: N. Dumas

In addition to teaching self-awareness and respect for others, Professor Dutton even addresses matters of spirituality. In his course on change, he encourages students to think about themselves and the impact they can have on others and society as a whole. Endeavouring to get students out of their comfort zone, he proposes a range of activities that includes a silent climb at Saint Joseph’s Oratory followed by a period of contemplation at Place du 6-décembre-1989, erected in memory of the 14 women killed in the Polytechnique tragedy 30 years ago. At École d’entrepreneurship de Beauce (EEB), his approach includes a mandatory 12-hour period of silence for his students, who always wonder how they will manage. “The next day, many of them want to do it again,” Dutton points out. “They like it and write about it in their evaluations.”

## On a mission

Dutton’s methods are anything but standard, and he knows he’s swimming against the current. His HEC Montréal colleagues call him a missionary. “Yes, I’m on a mission!” he agrees, happy to wear that hat. He believes in the next generation and takes his work with students seriously.” I am not there to tell them what to do,” he clarifies. “I’m there to assist them with whatever they take on.”

Asked about his views on the new generation of entrepreneurs and their talk of social responsibility, wealth sharing and environmental stewardship, Dutton says he hopes that young entrepreneurs will stay true to their values, and that their good intentions will translate into decisions and actions that remain consistent throughout their lives.

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We can all make a difference, so go out and make a difference!

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“Make the most of your talent, go as far as you can go,” he repeatedly reminds his young protégés. “We can all make a difference, so go out and make a difference!” ✱