

## Smart Leadership And Team Building

An Interview with Gerard “Jerry” J. Inzerillo, Group CEO, Diriyah Company

**EDITORS' NOTE** Jerry Inzerillo is a globally celebrated visionary in the hospitality and tourism industry, with a deep aptitude for positioning strategies and iconic developments. In June 2018, Inzerillo was appointed by His Royal Highness, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to be the founding CEO of the newly created Diriyah Gate Development Authority (diriyah.sa), a \$63.2 billion project aimed at restoring and reimagining the



Gerard “Jerry” J. Inzerillo

ancestral home of the original Saudi state. In this role, he is charged with developing and implementing a master plan to turn its 14 square kilometers of development area into one of the world's greatest gathering places, encompassing world-class cultural, entertainment, retail, hospitality, educational, religious, office, and residential assets, with the UNESCO World Heritage site of At-Turaif as its center-point. When complete, the development will add 70 billion Saudi riyals to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's GDP, attract 50 million visitors, and have an average of 63,000 workers on site. Inzerillo also serves as Vice Chairman of the Forbes Travel Guide. He previously served as President and CEO of IMG Artists, a leader in artist management, performing arts and lifestyle events planning, from 2012 to 2014. From 1997 to 2011, Inzerillo was President of Kerzner Entertainment Group, where he raised the profile of its properties in South Africa, the Bahamas, Dubai, Morocco, Mauritius, Mexico, the Maldives, as well as conceptualized and positioned the startup of its One&Only and Atlantis brands. He oversaw the launches of The Lost City at Sun City in South Africa, Atlantis in the Bahamas, and Atlantis Dubai. From 1992 to 1996, Inzerillo served as COO of Sun City, the South African resort complex built by Sol Kerzner. While in South Africa, he enjoyed a close personal friendship with President Nelson Mandela and, in 1994, coordinated major portions of his Presidential inauguration in South Africa. In 1987, he was the founding President and CEO of Morgans Hotel Group, later rebranded as Ian Schrager Hotels. While there, he conceptualized and opened Morgans, Royalton and Paramount in New York; the Delano in Miami Beach; and Mondrian in Los Angeles. Inzerillo has long been involved with philanthropy, especially

with respect to children, education, and HIV/AIDS. He was honored with a Knighthood by the Knights of Malta in Rome, Italy, in 1996. Inzerillo is a founding advisory board member of the Clinton AIDS initiative. In recognition of his leadership and empathetic outreach to the tourism community during the COVID-19 pandemic, he was awarded the prestigious HOTELS magazine “Corporate Hotelier of the World Award” as well as the “Tourism for Peace Award” by the World Association of Non-Governmental Organizations.

### What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership?

Over the course of a career spanning more than five decades in global hospitality, I have developed and refined a set of principles that continue to guide me in how I lead and build teams today, especially during periods of transformation and rapid growth. But when you narrow it down, I think there are five key lessons that can be applied to smart leadership and team building.

The first is always to remember your roots. I strongly believe that service is nobility. In a place like Saudi Arabia, where hospitality is deeply

embedded in the culture, this principle becomes even more meaningful. Staying true to roots allows you to create authentic, memorable experiences that resonate with people on a human level.

The second is that passion drives excellence. In hospitality, the difference between good and exceptional is rarely technical – it is emotional. When leaders bring genuine passion to what they do, it elevates every interaction and sets the emotional tone for the entire organization.

Third is to actively embrace change, innovation and sustainability. Today, leadership requires more than delivering results – it requires shaping developments that are responsible, forward-looking, and built to positively impact society, the environment, and future generations.

The fourth is that teamwork is everything. At Diriyah Company, we are working toward a shared long-term vision with a deep sense of ownership and accountability. Our progress is a direct reflection of a team that is aligned, committed, and working toward a shared long-term vision with a deep sense of ownership and accountability.

The final lesson is to stay close to people. The most valuable insights come from personal connections. At Diriyah, that means engaging directly with thousands of smart young Saudi men and women whose talent, ambition, and sense of purpose are shaping the future of the



Salwa Palace, At-Turaif



*Bujairi Terrace*

Kingdom. You never stop learning as a leader. I continue to learn every day from the remarkable young Saudi talent around me – their energy, ideas, and perspective are not only inspiring, but essential to building what Diriyah is becoming and what it represents for the Kingdom.

**How important were mentors early in your career?**

It is a difficult question to answer, as I have never had a single defining mentor. From starting out as a 13-year-old bus boy in Brooklyn, I have taken something from every experience and every individual I have worked with, building those lessons into who I am today.

From the support of my family at the very beginning, to the colleagues and leaders I worked alongside in New York, Las Vegas, and across the world, each has played a role in shaping my perspective and approach to leadership. Among them, two individuals stand out as truly exceptional and deeply influential in my journey. The first was during my time in South Africa, where I had the privilege of working with the late Nelson Mandela at a pivotal moment in history, contributing in a small way to a broader effort to move beyond apartheid and help shape a new nation. Witnessing his leadership firsthand left a lasting impression on me, particularly his humility, moral clarity, and ability to unite people around a shared purpose.

The second was in 2018, when I first met Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, His Royal Highness Mohammad bin Salman, who shared a clear and ambitious vision for Diriyah – the City of Earth. The scale of that vision, and the conviction with which it was articulated, reinforced my belief in the power of leadership to mobilize people and redefine what is possible.

Two individuals who have had a profound impact on my perspective, and who represent, in very different ways, leadership defined by vision, conviction, and the ability to shape the future.

**What are the qualities you look for when building a management team?**

It starts with building a team that understands the power of partnership. No leader succeeds alone. The scale and complexity of meaningful projects demand collaboration, trust, and shared ownership. Throughout my career, I have worked in partnership with world-class firms as well as local and national government entities, both globally and here in Diriyah.

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You need people who are true experts in their fields, but who remain humble, open-minded, and committed to excellence. Expertise is essential, but it must be paired with the ability

to listen, adapt, and work constructively with others. Within the team, there must be a culture of openness, where people are encouraged to share perspectives, challenge thinking, and contribute to a broader understanding of the organization. That collective perspective ultimately leads to better decisions and stronger outcomes. The best people will challenge you and each other – and that is what drives smarter decisions and stronger results.

When building a great team, I am often reminded of something that Frank Sinatra once told me during my time at IMG. He told me, “You’re either all in, or you’re not. There are no rehearsals in life.” Wise words that have stayed with me to this day.

**How do you define success?**

I define success through three lenses:

The development of your people and capabilities, and setting a culture of excellence, inclusion, dignity, and self-esteem.

The feedback from customers and stakeholders, those who visit, engage, and invest in what we are creating. If we are delivering successfully, we will see sustained growth in both visitor numbers and revenues.

And finally, business and commercial lens. Has the project delivered on its objectives? Have we delivered assets on time, and are they built and operated to the standard we committed to? At Diriyah, we are achieving both, with five million visits since opening in December 2022. Regarding people, are we retaining talent and investing in their growth through training and career development? As Diriyah grows, are we continuing to attract top talent to the organization? We measure this through strong retention, meaningful training programs, including partnerships with institutions such as the Institute of Chartered Surveyors, London Business School and others. Today, we directly employ over 2500 people – the vast majority of whom are Saudi, with women representing 36 percent of the workforce.

That, to me, is how success is measured.

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

First, be curious and ask questions. The more you learn the faster you grow. Leaders value people who are proactive, engaged and eager to develop, and curiosity is often the starting point for that growth. Second, be prepared to work hard. Put in the effort, take initiative and make yourself visible. Show genuine interest in what you do and be willing to step forward when opportunities arise. It is often those moments that accelerate learning and responsibility. Third, be resilient in the face of challenges. Every career includes difficult moments, and progress is rarely linear. Resilience allows you to navigate setbacks, maintain perspective, and continue moving forward with confidence. Finally, and this is something I have always believed in, rejoice and share success and never fear failure, approach each day with positivity, look forward to the day ahead, value the people you work with, continue learning new skills, and view your career as a rewarding journey of growth and discovery. ●