



“A business is just a whole group of people pulling in the one direction.”

**Naomi Simson**”

*Leaders*

# Flying high

## Naomi Simson: RedBalloon Founder

From a corporate marketing career with IBM, Apple and KPMG, Melbourne-raised Naomi Simson quit her day job to launch RedBalloon – the gift experience platform – from her living room with two young kids. “The reason I started my business was because of my kids, I just thought they were great,” Simson told *Mamamia* in a 2017 interview.

“My kids used to gang up on me... ‘Why do we have to go to bed at 5.30?’ Because Mum’s got work to do. As soon as they went to bed I was working again, until 11 or 12 at night.”

The time and energy invested – and the \$25,000 she piled in with then-husband Peter Simson – has paid back in spades, growing to an employer of 46 staff in 2011, ten years after the adventure began.

“You cannot be their friend,” she told *Mamamia* of leading a workforce.

“You are accountable for leadership and for challenging people to greatness. And you do that with love and respect, but it means you cannot go out drinking with them on a Friday night.”

In her blog (ranked number two in the 15 Top Business Blogs by *smartcompany.com* in 2016), Simson said of her own leadership style, “Leaders set the vision, create the strategy, determine the values (and culture) of an enterprise as well as align people to the plan. In other words, a leader unites everyone to the ‘cause’.

“Leadership is about personal

responsibility, asking powerful questions and bringing people with you on your journey, whether that be customers, suppliers, employees or any other stakeholder.”

Simson’s personal motto is “if it is meant to be it is up to me”, which she interprets as needing to “translate the ideas and the vision to make it real and tangible and to ensure people want to come with me on the journey.”

“Leading by example and diving into the employee experience, living the values and reminding people of why we do what we do – I have a better chance of achieving this,” says Simson.

“Leading in this fashion does not mean that I have to do all the work – that is not possible. What it means is that I am absolutely happy to lead from behind, to be in the trenches and to always stay connected to what our customers are telling us.”

Although Simson stepped back from operations – and her role as CEO – she continued to grow the business through the parent company Big Red Group she co-founded with David Anderson in 2017; today the largest marketplace of experiences in Australia and New Zealand.

Author of two books, *Live What You Love* (2015) and *Ready to Soar: Turn Your Brilliant Idea into a Business You Love* (2016), Simson was recognised as 2012 LinkedIn’s World’s Most Influential Thought Leaders.

[naomisimson.com](http://naomisimson.com) ■

Leaders

# Dream world

## Robert Iger: Disney CEO

American media executive Robert Iger is CEO of Disney (2005 – 2020 and 2022 – 2026), previously President of Disney (2000 – 2005), President of the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) and COO of Capital Cities prior to its acquisition by Disney in 1996.

In his book *The Ride of a Lifetime*, Iger explains the life of a CEO: “You go from plotting growth strategy with investors, to looking at the design of a giant new theme-park attraction with Imagineers, to giving notes on the rough cut of a film, to discussing security measures and board governance and ticket pricing and pay scale... There are also, always, crises and failures for which you can never be fully prepared.”

“Even in the face of difficult choices and less than ideal outcomes an optimistic leader does not yield to pessimism,” Iger says.

“Leaders must encourage a diversity of opinion balanced with the need to make and implement decisions. Strong leadership embodies the fair and decent treatment of people.”

Born in New York in the early 1950s, Iger is the son of a World War II Navy veteran who was the executive vice president and general manager of the Greenvale Marketing Corporation, and was also a professor of advertising and public relations.

Iger was named president of Disney in 2000 and succeeded



Michael Eisner as CEO in 2005, until his contract expired in 2020. He then was executive chairman until his formal retirement from the company in 2021. After his exit from the company, Iger continued as an advisor to his successor.

However, at the request of Disney’s board of directors, Iger returned to Disney as CEO in November 2022, following the unscheduled and immediate dismissal of his appointed successor, Bob Chapek.

Considered a highly effective and visionary media executive, Iger was able to broaden Disney’s roster of intellectual properties, expanded its presence in international

“One of the most important qualities of a good leader is optimism, a pragmatic enthusiasm for what can be achieved.”  
**Robert Iger**

markets, overseeing almost five-fold increase in market capitalisation in his initial 15-year stewardship.

Acquisitions of Pixar, Marvel Entertainment, Lucasfilm and the entertainment assets of 21st Century Fox. Named 2019 Time Businessperson of the Year,

a year later he was inducted into the Television Hall of Fame.

In September 2022, Iger was appointed an Honorary Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire (KBE) by Queen Elizabeth II “for services to UK/US relations”.

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