

Gamble on stupid ideas—and win!



In the late 1970s, Richard Fain was stuck on a sinking ship. Then an executive at a big cargo shipping company, Gotaas-Larsen Shipping, he knew the London-based firm could go bankrupt at any moment.

Rather than play defense, Fain proposed that the board of directors authorize a major investment in new ships. Expanding in a rocky economy—when the company’s very survival was in question—hardly struck observers as a prudent strategy. But Fain persevered and won over the board.

When Gotaas-Larsen’s chairman told Fain that the first newly purchased ship would be named after Fain’s wife, Colleen, the executive was initially flattered—until the chairman explained his reasoning.

“If this idea is as stupid as I think it is, I want everybody to remember who proposed it,” he told Fain.

But Fain’s plan worked and the company bounced back. By 1988, he became CEO of Royal Caribbean Cruises.

When seeking input from his managers on how to transform an unused wall of a cruise ship into some kind of recreational activity for passengers, Fain was taken aback when they suggested making it a climbing wall.

“They came up with five , and I have to tell you that each one was stupider than the last,” Fain recalls. “The least stupid was the rock climbing. And now I think it’s the best idea I ever had.”

The climbing wall became a big attraction for younger travelers who wanted to experience it at sea. Royal Caribbean promoted it in advertisements and became known for its innovative recreational offerings.

— Adapted from [“Royal Caribbean’s Richard Fain: Letting People Know You Care Is of Surpassing Value,”](#) knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu.