

Judy Kuszewski, Chief Executive 16/06/2017

When it was announced in 2002 that Ernst Ligteringen had been selected to serve as the first chief executive of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), I asked my colleague Bob Massie – who founded and led GRI alongside Allen White, from its inception – to tell me about him. I learned the usual background résumé, that Ernst had had a lengthy career in international development, including some 6 years as executive director of Oxfam International, roles at the Red Cross/Crescent and International Labour Organisation, among others. But most importantly, Bob told me that, when he'd spoken to Ernst's previous colleagues, they had – to an individual – told him “they would work with him again in a heartbeat.”

This, to my mind – far more than any content expertise or prestigious list of contacts that Ernst might have been able to bring to GRI – was the highest praise and most distinctive qualification GRI could possibly have asked for. GRI was starting out as a newly-minted independent institution, and no one knew quite where it would go or what to expect. What was needed was a leader that people wanted to follow.

And so it proved, for 12 solid years, as Ernst exercised – in his trademark softly-spoken, warm and generous manner – a combination of strategic leadership, solid control and active listening that took GRI from its bootstrap beginnings to a global standards-setter behind the vast majority of the thousands of corporate sustainability reports issued every year around the world.

It was by no means plain sailing. Ernst periodically struggled to see eye-to-eye with some fellow travellers, and presided over repeated overhauls of the organization's structure or strategy, which, regardless of their value nevertheless meant going backwards in order to go forwards.

Yet all the while, Ernst's dedication to GRI was never in doubt, and his tireless, methodical outreach to funders and collaborators built the organization's reputation and massive international following.

Ernst – who was married to a Colombian national and spoke perfect Spanish and English alongside his native Dutch – was particularly visionary, in my opinion, in reaching out to reporters and stakeholders in the developing world. From its earliest days, GRI has placed a deep value on the relevance of sustainability reporting to companies and users all over the world, not just in the wealthy business clubs of New York or Paris.

When Ernst decided to move on in 2014, an era came to an end – not altogether unexpected after such a lengthy tenure, but nevertheless a dislocation, one that always felt somewhat incomplete to me. He and his wife returned to their plantation in Colombia, where Ernst continued his involvement in numerous boards and initiatives, as well as his own advisory work.

I have been massively privileged in my career and in my life to have had the chance to work closely with many amazing people who influenced me deeply. Ernst was one of them, and I join together with the many hundreds of others he influenced in mourning his passing and honouring his life and his contributions.