



HR STAR



## John Putzier: President and Founder of FireStep, Inc.

[By Robin Salisian]

John Putzier admits he didn't follow his passion in music because he didn't want to be a starving artist all of his life.

But it's hard to call Putzier a "starving" anything—not after he founded his own company in 1985 called FireStep, Inc., "a performance improvement consultancy based in Prospect, PA."

So how did he make the jump from music to HR?

Putzier took a number of assessment tests at his college's counseling center and discovered he had a strong interest in business and psychology.

"Back then, there was no profession called HR. It was either personnel or industrial relations, etc., so I graduated with a B.S. in Industrial Psychology," he said.

"I did not have the luxury of starting my career in HR straight out of college," continued Putzier, "so [I] got stuck in the financial field for several years, and then leveraged my labor and benefits experience as a board of education treasurer into an entry-level position at PPG Industries as a personnel assistant," which involved glamorous jobs such as carrying the watermelon to the picnic, keeping the band-aid box full, and writing the company newspaper.

Putzier later served 10 years in the Fortune 100 and several years prior to that in the financial field.

"The HR field is a very difficult field to break into," he said, "so many times it is necessary to work in jobs in which you learn

**Q. What do you like to do outside of work? Any odd hobbies/interests? Are you married? Do you have children? Can you explain a little about your personal life outside of your company?**

**A.** I play keyboards and race cars and boats. I am a stimulation junkie. I own a powerboat and a 427/550hp A/C Shelby Cobra, which I drag race and participate in cruises, etc. I have one son, who is an '04 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, currently working at the NSA (National Security Administration). As you already know, my wife is an entrepreneur, and we talk shop a lot since she originally started in HR but has since become a COO and owner of IntegraCare Corp., which owns and operates senior living/elder care facilities.

**Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?**

**A.** A homemade mix of music. I have very eclectic taste. That helps keep one creative and open to change (country, rock, blues, etc.).

**Q. What is the last magazine you read?**

**A.** *Fast Company*; *Professional Speaker*; *HR Magazine*.

**Q. What is your favorite TV show?**

**A.** Used to be *Everybody Loves Raymond*, but I've seen them all several times now. Currently, I pretty much despise TV. News is not news; it is entertainment and superficial sound bytes. Sitcoms are mindless, banal, and marketed to the lowest common denominator. Sorry.

**Q. Who is your role model?**

**A.** I don't have one right now. At my age, I am trying to be one. That's a constant work in progress.

skills that are transferable to HR."

For Putzier, years of learning transferable skills paid off. In 1985, after completing graduate school with an M.S. in HR Development, Putzier founded FireStep, Inc., and acquired a list of clients that includes Blue Cross, Hilton Hotels, General Motors, and Farmers Cheese, Inc.

"I founded the company...after realizing that I had great disdain for bureaucracy and politics. Now I get paid to say the things I would have been fired for had I stayed in the corporate world, but now it is considered wisdom," said Putzier. "My focus now is primarily on improving both employee and customer satisfaction (they are intimately intertwined) and on creative strategies to attract, recruit, retain, and motivate high-performers."

And Putzier knows his stuff. Besides acting as president of his own company, he has also authored two dynamic books: *Get Weird! 101 Innovative Ways to Make Your Company a Great Place to Work* and *Weirdos in the Workplace: The New Normal—Thriving in the Age of the Individual*.

In *Get Weird!* Putzier explains his three philosophies of hiring:

1. Hire hard/manage easy.
2. Hire slow/fire fast.
3. Hire for style/train for skills.

"Look for people with the style and values you are looking for," explained Putzier,



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“more than the hard skills, for which you can train.”

Putzier’s other philosophies include being in the business of “collecting great people (not the actual product or service), fun and work are not opposites (even in the most difficult and even undesirable positions), and every manager must be an HR manager!” He went on to explain that HR cannot be and should not be responsible for other departments’ employee motivation, communication, recognition, coaching, counseling, etc. That’s the everyday job of every manager, he said.

Having done everything from starting his own company to authoring two books, Putzier is an HR guru. With such credibility, it’s no

surprise Putzier has advice to give young individuals eager to enter the field.



“Be a businessperson first and an HR professional second,” said Putzier. He added, “There is no such thing as risk avoidance—just risk selection. Taking the low-risk road can sometimes cost the company a lot more than doing something a little more creative or innovative.”

## ON THE NET

FireStep, Inc.  
[www.firststepinc.com](http://www.firststepinc.com)

Get *Weird!*  
[www.getweird.net](http://www.getweird.net)

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