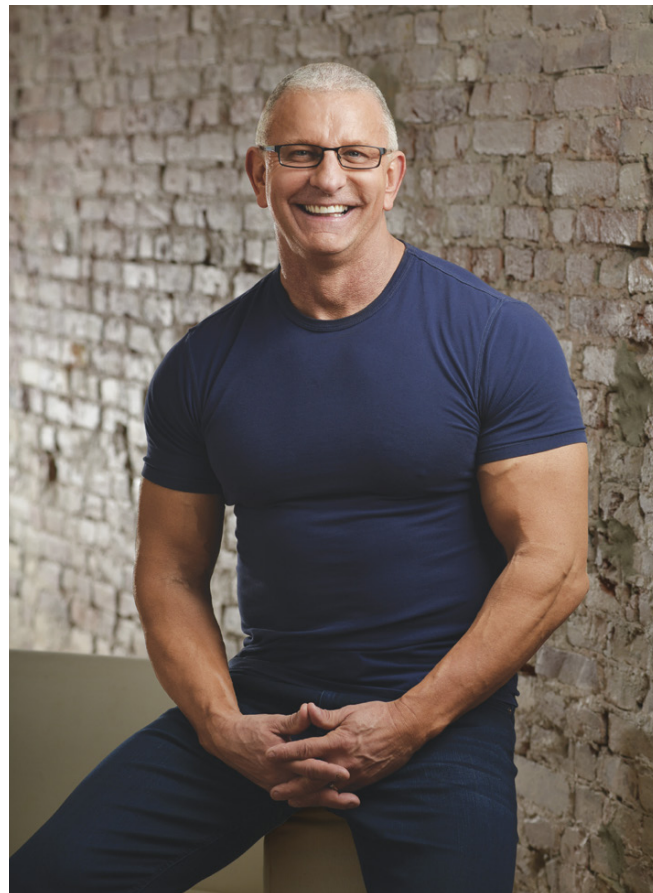


# Mission: Possible

ROBERT IRVINE TRANSFORMS HIS TELEVISION SUCCESS AND PASSION FOR SUPPORTING VETERANS INTO EMPATHETIC LEADERSHIP IN BUSINESS.

BY GWEN GRAY



**Y**ou probably know TV personality Robert Irvine from his appearances on hundreds of episodes of the Food Network's *Restaurant: Impossible*, in which he swoops in to help failing restaurants turn their business around in 48 hours. Or maybe you've seen *Dinner: Impossible*, where he must serve dinner under a set of potentially catastrophic conditions—say, creating a meal for 250 Rock & Roll Hall of Famers in just nine hours.

But do you know Robert Irvine the entrepreneur? This is the man who runs the energy bar company FITCRUNCH, a craft distillery, the prepared foods brand Robert Irvine Foods, a restaurant at the Pentagon, a magazine, a clothing line and the Robert Irvine Foundation, a vast philanthropic operation with programs benefiting his fellow military

veterans (he enlisted in the U.K.'s Royal Navy at age 15). Irvine's enterprises employ some 7,500 people, and whether he's working on a new product launch, hiking through the Scottish Highlands alongside veterans, in the kitchen trying to help a restaurant owner find a path of redemption or consulting for *Fortune* 500 companies, the TV personality and the entrepreneur have some things in common: a set of leadership philosophies Irvine turns to time and again. He details them in his book *Overcoming Impossible: Learn to Lead, Build a Team, and Catapult Your Business to Success*. Not surprisingly, many of his trusted principles echo the highly structured, teamwork-focused tenets of military life. But Irvine has broadened his approach in recent years, with empathy holding a place at the top of the list when it comes to leadership success.

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COURTESY OF THE ROBERT IRVINE FOUNDATION

## LEARN TO LISTEN

"When I started in business, it was really my way or the highway," Irvine says. "And even on TV, I was very harsh because I had two days and 48 hours to fix somebody's problems. And over the last, I would say, 10 years, I have started to do something.... It's called *listen*," he says with a chuckle.

It used to be that, when he had a business idea, he'd write it down and issue instructions to team members the next day. Now, he pauses to pass his ideas by trusted colleagues. "I throw it upwards," he says, "and say, 'Hey, guys, what do you think of this?'"

It's part of a more connected leadership model that Irvine has been championing lately. Because of his one-on-one work with distressed restaurateurs, servicemen and women, struggling veterans and people from all walks of life, he has come to see how personal circumstances can affect work performance.

He explains, "If employee No. 7,500 can't feed his family, and I don't know about it, and they're working for me, that's an issue.... I have to know what's happening with all my people all the time, so they can do the best job and be the best person they can be."

"I'VE GOT ALL STALLIONS IN MY STABLE. I DON'T WANT TO HOLD THEM BACK. I WANT THEM TO WORK AND COME UP WITH IDEAS AND BE FREE, AND I THINK THAT'S WHAT MAKES US SUCCESSFUL."



**SALUTING OUR HEROES:**  
The Robert Irvine Foundation serves up gratitude and support for veterans.

### STAY DEEPLY CONNECTED

When you have as many irons in the fire as Irvine, he says you must lean heavily on your employees and have exceptional trust in your team. He notes that he initially found this to be a challenge in the business world, where it can be “every person for themselves” versus the military’s “one-for-all” mentality in training for life-or-death situations.

He finds that trust begins with hiring the right people. Once you have a solid team in place, defining a common goal and staying in close communication are key.

“I’ve got all stallions in my stable,” he says. “I don’t want to hold them back. I want them to work and come up with ideas and be free, and I think that’s what makes us successful.”

While Irvine requires a profit and loss statement from each of his top executives every evening to help ensure things are running smoothly in every business, he’s learned that successful leadership is not about barking orders.

“There’s a difference between a leader and a boss. A leader will show you what to do. The boss will say, ‘Oh, go move that box over there to there’ and walk away. I will say, ‘Hey, I want to show you what I want.’”

### FIND A GREATER PURPOSE

Irvine admits that he used to be a bit hesitant to put the Robert Irvine Foundation front and center when it came to talking about his business endeavors, worried it would sound off topic or too focused on his own interests. But then he realized that employees and customers alike share a desire to be part of a bigger cause.

The power of connecting and supporting veterans through the foundation hit home recently on a visit to the beaches of Normandy, France, with a group of WWII veterans. After sharing a meal, they brought the veterans onto Omaha Beach, handed each a rose and invited the servicemen to share a few thoughts.

“I have to tell you, the moment was unbelievable for me,” he recalls. “Because they started to talk about things they’d held inside for 80 years.... That’s, to me, the power of food and the power of the foundation.”

With a portion of revenue from each business going to the Robert Irvine Foundation, they are able to serve thousands of troops and their families at events, tour with the USO, help build adaptive homes for disabled veterans, donate electric wheelchairs and create small-business incubators, along with a growing list of programs that help veterans in need.

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“Everything we do has a purpose, and the end purpose is the foundation,” he says.

With three new television projects underway on major networks, a newly launched clothing line called Terra Arma, and tech products in development to help modernize the military’s dining systems, Irvine is excited about what the future holds.

He says, “Business opportunities come every day, right? When you get to a certain point, people throw things at you. But what gets me out of bed every day is making a difference in somebody else’s life.” ◆

**GRAY IS A TRAVEL-OBSSESSED, COLORADO-BASED WRITER COVERING LIFESTYLE, TOURISM, REAL ESTATE, FOOD AND THE ARTS.**