

Tony Jeff on Entrepreneurship

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The Mississippi Technology Alliance recently held its third annual Innovators Hall of Fame Awards Gala and eleventh annual Conference on High Technology. At the Gala, Dr. Robert C. Khayat, Chancellor Emeritus of The University of Mississippi was awarded the 2010 Legends Award and Dr. John Bower, Will Primos, and Dr. Bill Rayburn were inducted to the Hall of Fame. In addition, Hybrid Plastics, Mad Genius, and SkyHawke Technologies were recognized as emerging, high-growth ventures to watch. At the Conference, Jim Barksdale shared about his new venture Spreadnetworks and Bill Rancic, the winner of the first season of NBC's "The Apprentice" shared his about his journey as an entrepreneur and his success on "The Apprentice." These events attracted people from around the state who share an interest in technology, innovation, and moving Mississippi forward.

I recently visited with Tony Jeff, the President and CEO of the Mississippi Technology Alliance to get his thoughts on leadership and developing a successful business. Tony is a native of Clinton, Mississippi and graduated with Bachelor of Science in Industrial Engineering from Mississippi State University. He also received a MBA from the Kellogg School of Management and Masters of Engineering from the McCormick School of Engineering at Northwestern University. Tony's career includes leadership positions with Florida Power & Light, General Motors, and Delphi Automotive Systems. In 2002, he returned to Mississippi and joined the MTA as Director of the Mississippi Alternative Energy Enterprise and the Director of the Manufacturing Extension Partnership. He later served as MTA Vice President and C.O.O before being named as President and CEO last year.

Tony's years of experience with global corporations as well as his own startup ventures have made him a valuable resource at the MTA to help with its vision to "drive innovation and technology-based economic development for the State of Mississippi." Tony has worked with hundreds of ventures since being at the MTA and helped companies raise more than \$100 million in private equity.

Tony shared with me that, "my leadership philosophy today is very similar to what it was many years ago in one of my first leadership positions in high school. I try to understand what motivates people and help align them with the organization's goals." One of the key ways he does this is to make sure that every employee has a Personal Business Plan. In these plans, the organization's mission and goals are listed as well as the individual employee's goals. These plans are very helpful to align the organization and to provide a measuring stick for performance.

"I am a proactive delegator," Tony noted, "however, if an issue arises that needs my detailed attention, I will jump in and manage until there is a resolution." Ken Blanchard in some of his bestselling business books teaches leaders to be flexible in their leadership styles using what he calls "Situational Leadership." Great leaders like Tony know how to adapt and respond to the needs of their organizations in different situations.

Having worked with so many entrepreneurs, I was curious about Tony's perspective on the secret to success in business. Without hesitation, Tony emphasized that, "Commitment is #1. You have to give your business 100% and relentlessly pursue your goals; otherwise it is very hard to be

successful.” He also referenced the Joan of Arc style of leadership and courage needed to succeed in a new business.

Whether myth or reality I don't know; however, it is said that Joan of Arc when, at age 17, was leading the French knights into battle and they came upon a great walled fortress. She turned to one of her generals and said, "I will lead the way over this wall." The general replied, "None of these men will follow you." Joan of Arc replied, "I won't look back to see if they're following me." We will always have naysayers around us. Even our own self-talk and doubt can betray us. I have similarly noted the confidence and perseverance that it takes to succeed against the odds.

As Mississippians, we are fortunate to have talented homegrown individuals such as Tony who have chosen to deploy their time, talents, and energy into making Mississippi a better place. If you aren't familiar with what is going on at the Mississippi Technology Alliance, I would encourage you to check it out and learn about some of the exciting things going on in the world of technology in Mississippi.

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