

Intuitiveness Leads to Success

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Sometimes we get time to prepare and train for leadership roles, and sometime it comes when we least expect it. Shakespeare famously wrote, “some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them.” It is interesting how we may have the best-laid plans, but unforeseeable circumstances can take us on a different trajectory in life. In these situations, we have no choice but to sink or swim.

Jonathan Lee, President of Mississippi Products, Inc., never thought he would be leading the business that his parents founded over twenty years ago. In fact, after high school he did not even see himself staying in Mississippi. An outstanding student, Jonathan was accepted at the University of the North Carolina, Chapel Hill. His plans changed, and he came back to his home state and attended Mississippi State University where he was both an outstanding student and leader. He stayed on and earned his M.B.A, and his life plan was to obtain his doctorate in marketing at the University of Alabama.

Right before he was to start school, Jonathan had a sense that the timing was not right. He talked it over with his father and they decided that Jonathan should come home and work in the family business for a semester and start school in the spring. Tragically, his father was diagnosed with terminal cancer that Fall, and Jonathan’s life plans suddenly changed. His mother, who also worked in the business, went home to care for her dying husband, and Jonathan stepped in to run the business. While his plans may have changed, Jonathan found himself challenged and inspired in his new role. He had an opportunity to continue to build on the solid business that his parents had built.

Mississippi Products is a contract distributor with customers throughout Mississippi and even Louisiana. Its customer list includes some of the state’s largest companies including Chevron, Entergy, HMA, and UMMC. Mississippi Products provides “just in time” inventory programs and stockless inventory management services for its customers. Like many other successful companies, Jonathan and his team focus on maintaining deep customer relationships and being an invaluable resource for their customers.

Jonathan’s on the job training has taught him a lot about entrepreneurship and leadership. He shared with me that, “I learned there is a lot of intuitiveness required to be a successful entrepreneur. You often have to make quick decisions with insufficient information.” He also shared that he believes that, “you have to keep the ball moving. You can’t just kick over the same rocks. You need to be creative to find new ways to grow revenue.” We discussed how it is easy to get discouraged and that you have to remain flexible and willing to change as a leader. Rightly so, he believes that as a leader he has a responsibility to make sure that he is thinking ahead for the business to ensure his team can survive and grow in challenging times.

Interestingly, Jonathan emphasized that he has also learned that Mississippi is a great place to live and work. He noted, “Growing up, I did not fully appreciate what a great place Mississippi is to operate a business.” As a leader, Jonathan is involved in numerous civic organizations and is the outgoing president of the Jackson Chamber of Commerce. He also is a key advisory board member

for UMMC's Supplier Diversity initiative. He shared that, "I have enjoyed the opportunity to meet and work with various business leaders. I am excited about finding ways to connect with business leaders to improve the community and take part in the renaissance of Jackson. Jonathan's enthusiasm and passion for progress is contagious, and I am confident that he will be a key part of Mississippi's promising future.

Quick Facts:**President, Mississippi Products, Inc.**

First Job: "When I was fifteen, I took a job at the Reservoir Dairy Queen which was then owned by Flowood mayor Gary Rhoads."

Favorite Business Books: *Who Moved My Cheese* (Dr. Spencer Johnson); *Nuts!* (Herb Kelleher)

Proudest Moment as a Business Leader: "After about two years with the company, I had gotten over my fear of failing in my new role, and I had a great sense of peace and faith that I was in the right place doing the right job. I knew I was right where God wanted me to be. It was a great feeling."

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