

Announcer:

Leadership is more important now than ever before. The entrepreneurs are the natural leaders. It's time to step up and take control of your business and decide to be your very best as a leader, right now.

Mike Paton:

Hello everybody. This is Mike Paton with the Lead Now Podcast. And today I'm excited to introduce you to Jimmy Rayford's the CEO of Dealers Wholesale. Dealers Wholesale is Indianapolis's leading provider of corporate and home wholesale construction supplies. Jimmy's extensive leadership experience as a former CCO president and senior vice president of business development and strategic marketing sets him apart as an uncommonly disciplined and focused executive who delivers sustainable results. He's a member of the young president's organization, a board member of TCC Gives and the vice chairman of the black alumni board at Notre Dame University. Jimmy, welcome to the show. Thanks for being here today.

Jimmy Rayford:

Thanks too. It's my pleasure.

Mike Paton:

Great. Let's start by giving me a little, two minute history of your leadership journey up to, and including your role here at Dealers Wholesale.

Jimmy Rayford:

Sure. That's my first foray into leadership. I go way back when was in high school sports. Fun fact, I was the first nine senior captain of our high school football team. As a junior, I was the first non senior. I think that was kind of my first foray into leadership.

Mike Paton:

What high school?

Jimmy Rayford:

Oh, thank you for asking what my high school and where my South Carolina home of the Wolverine.

Mike Paton:

I thought that I noticed not an Indianapolis accent.

Jimmy Rayford:

[inaudible 00:01:46] and then kind of from there started my career out as engineer with IBM and after, a few years with IBM, I became a supervisor of technicians and direct labor, which was a really awesome first assignment for me, kind of went from there to eventually managing, the engineering team at IBM and send me an SEI as a team of about 20 industrial manufacturing and test engineers. The interesting thing there was, I went from being, I managed a group that I used to be a part of that was unique and fun, but some challenges in that as well-

Mike Paton:

I'm going to make a note and make sure we come back to that a little bit later. Thanks for sharing that.

Jimmy Rayford:

Yep. And then from there became a plant manager or a director of operations for Danaher corporation in, Westchester, Pennsylvania. The interesting thing about that was pick a Southern key and stick him in West Chester, Pennsylvania, which is about 45 minutes South of Philadelphia. And let's say we have some cultural differences I had to work through there-

Mike Paton:

Well, especially in a manufacturing plant, right?

Jimmy Rayford:

Exactly. Union planting [crosstalk 00:03:04] from there, I actually came out of management. I had been pretty much operations my whole career. I went and did some marketing roles, went back and got my MBA from Notre Dame, all prepping me for my first general manager's position. Our division president for division, for Belden corporation. He had four different division presidents role at Belden for a couple of years. Then I wanted to get a taste of the world outside of large public companies. I joined strategic materials, glass recycling company based in Houston, led their sales team and then joined dealers wholesale in January of this year as CEO.

Mike Paton:

Cool. Where'd you go to undergrad?

Jimmy Rayford:

Clemson.

Mike Paton:

A Clemson. You're going to be a very interested observer Saturday evening, if I'm not mistaken, don't Clemson and Notre Dame play each other this weekend?

Jimmy Rayford:

We do. And I'll irritate it all on my, Notre Dame brethren by saying it's a pretty easy call for me on my rooting interest on Saturday.

Mike Paton:

Well, you're an engineer. If you're looking at the odds, I think you're the smart money.

Jimmy Rayford:

I don't know. We got our quarterback out with COVID. We've got a few other key players out on defense. I'm a little nervous.

Mike Paton:

Well, I'm going to Ohio state guy, [crosstalk 00:04:29] I'm nervous. I'm sorry about that. I'm nervous. No matter what, I think you're the smart money. Let's just leave it at that. Tell me about the first time in

your life you saw someone lead or the idea of leadership became clear to you. What was the situation? Who was the leader? And what did you see in them that made you understand that leading was going on?

Jimmy Rayford:

That's an interesting question. I can't say I've thought about that a lot, but I've been pondering it and I grew up around a lot of women. I'm a mom's boy, right? I grew up, at my mom's feet spent a lot of time at my grandparents' home with both my grandmother, and my grandfather. I don't know if it was, if I thought about it that way at the time, but really just seeing leadership almost through the lens of those women and how it had to take on almost a quiet leadership. It was less about being vocal and, pounding your chest and saying, you are the leader and more about your actions and getting things done and kind of being the glue that kind of holds everything together. I probably think about it that way.

Mike Paton:

Oh, what a great answer. I got chills thinking about that. What about in sports or in business? What will your first recollection of watching someone lead what was that? What did that feel like?

Jimmy Rayford:

I think in sports, this was probably my freshman year in high school. I was in the junior varsity team and our varsity team that year was outstanding team, probably one of the best teams we've ever had in the history of the school. We were a very, very small one, a school. And what I saw in that team was really shared leadership. All the guys had grown up together. I mean, they operate it as, a single unit, no team that I had ever seen up close and personal, and it was really shared leadership with a high degree of accountability. No one person stood above the rest and it really hailed each other accountable. Just that level of accountability that I saw from that squad stuck with me.

Mike Paton:

It is sure easier to be a leader amongst leaders who take personal responsibility and aren't afraid to challenge one another when things aren't going well, which takes an awful lot of pressure off the real leader of the organization when we're all accountable. That's a , great comment. Bring us up to speed with your you've had the luxury of working in some very big sort of corporate organizations as well as entrepreneurial companies. First of all, I'd love you to describe Dealers Wholesale to us. The listener really gets a handle on the company you're running now. And then I'll ask you some questions about how you lead in that vibrant entrepreneurial company versus what you've seen in corporations.

Jimmy Rayford:

Dealers Wholesale we've been around since 1963. We are a company of around 75 employees up until four years ago. It was a family owned company. And then, was purchased by private equity owners Firefly about four years ago. They kind of have already gone from that transition from being family owned to PE owned. And then obviously we went through the transition with me earlier this year, kind of taking over in the leadership capacity. We are a mixture of in-house kind of direct labor assembly people from warehousing operations. And we have quite external force as well in terms of our installers, our drivers and service folks. And they're more of, traditional project managers, accounting, estimator sales front office team.

Mike Paton:

And what's your typical week look like as the CEO of that organization?

Jimmy Rayford:

In terms of-

Mike Paton:

What do you do? How do you spend your days and hours? And if there is such a thing as a typical week, what might it consist of?

Jimmy Rayford:

I think one of the things that I like about this organization and this size company is that, the variety that I get in a typical week, we have an operate off a pretty good structure. I have, one and a half staff meeting on Wednesday hour and a half staff meeting on Thursday, because I'm sitting , in an acting role within the organization as well. I spend quite a bit of time one-on-one time with all of my direct reports. I have a same page meeting with all of my direct reports on a weekly basis.

We can get that one-on-one time to make sure that we're aligned. I also, and this is an area where I kind of have to try to make sure that I'm balanced. I try to spend as much time out in production as possible. Self-critical on that one because I think I should be, I can do a better job of that less than a lot of my time, really on the alignment piece, making sure that the organization is aligned around our priorities, if there's a big obstacles standing in people's way, making sure that I can work with them to remove those obstacles. This is how I spend a great deal of my time.

Mike Paton:

Let's talk about alignment a little bit. That's a word a lot of leaders throw around and I always want to ask a follow-up question, which is what does alignment mean to you and how do you make sure it's there?

Jimmy Rayford:

I think alignment for me is shared priorities. It's being on the same page on what the priorities of the individual or the department of the division, of the company and having everyone in the company aligned or on the same page with those priorities and the way I seek to make sure that we have it as first of all, be vocal about it. Right. Don't keep it a secret. Right. Let's just [crosstalk 00:10:47] give it some air. , make it visible. And then I use a lot of my same page meetings almost as a constant checkpoint on the alignment and then having good score cards so that we can measure our progress.

Mike Paton:

All right. And then, you your experience here, in an organization with 75 people and then you've worked with, for some really big organizations, have you seen, there's a difference between the way leadership and management works in a big company versus an entrepreneurial company?

Jimmy Rayford:

Depending on the culture of a bigger company. I think in a bigger company, it's just more opportunities to hot out. I mean, you can skate for a long time before it catches up to you in a small organization like ours, the pulling your weight and not getting the things done that we need to get done. It's not going to

take, a lot of time for that to rise to the surface. That side is just the ability to quickly make an impact on the bottom line of the organization is where I see the big difference.

Mike Paton:

Back to your journey. Do you sense that from an early age, you always knew you were going to be a leader and you've been intentional about that or is it something that just kind of happened to you and you woke up one day and here you are leading and you needed to get good at that?

Jimmy Rayford:

I think it kind of happened to me. I was on one of a, of a late bloomer, I think when it comes to a leadership, primarily because as a child, I was unbelievably shy, as a child just extremely introverted so much so that what happens a lot of time with introverted and shy kids that people attach intelligence. Intelligence to that, in a negative way. It took me, a lot of years to kind of break out of that shell and think I'll always, self-confident kind of from my [inaudible 00:12:45] and worldly standpoint. There was always, a fire in the belly, but it, took, a little bit of time for me to be a little more outward in, showing that and being a little more vocal. It was a gradual thing for me, for sure.

Mike Paton:

What did you do or what happened that helped you gradually become more vocal about your leadership style?

Jimmy Rayford:

I think a part of it is I think, the more accomplished you get in some ways, the easier it becomes when I went from high school and I always did well academically, but, in a really small, high school. I would have never admitted at the time, but in the back of my mind, I'm sure there was a seed of when I go to Clemson and my freshmen chemistry class is larger than my entire high school. Do I really have this stuff? Right. And I would say, in undergrad, I kind of, once I got my feet underneath me and kind of settled in and really started doing well academically, and that's just started building up that confidence more and more, and it kind of start also allowing me to be maybe more of a risk taker than I was early on. And it just kind of started building on top of that.

Mike Paton:

That fear of being wrong or failing in front of a group of people you don't know, particularly well is a powerful de-motivator for people standing up, and advocating for themselves. For sure. When you get past that fear, some good stuff can happen for sure.

Jimmy Rayford:

Yep. Absolutely.

Mike Paton:

Tell me about the best leader you ever worked for or with.

Jimmy Rayford:

I think the best leader I work for, and it's actually a pretty interesting story because I've worked off and own with him and for him for probably 20 years. I first started working for him in 1998, six months out

of college. I joined the organization a division IBM, unbeknownst to me was about to get sold. I had a great first man manager, a guy by the name of Mark who felt terrible about putting me in that position. He arranged for me to have, a full day of interviews in research, triangle park, North Carolina, with, seven managers. And over the course of that day, an eighth manager got added to the list and he was the last person I spoke to that day, a guy by the name of Dennis and Dennis was the only one that made me an offer.

I started working with him at IBM for 1998 and worked with him off and own, for 20 years. I've got to see Dennis over that 20 year stretch and the level of consistency that I saw for him over that 20 years was amazing. What was great from my things that took away from Dennis was he was, first of all, he was really about results in terms of, of achieving results and stay true to your commitment. But he was also really heavy on the, people side, investing in people, promoting people.

Dennis was the type of person where, when I had opportunities that led me to leave the company that we may have been at together, I always felt comfortable with being able to have those conversations with him because at the end of the day, his concern for me was at a higher level than what I happened to be giving, providing to that organization. He would always kind of give me advice and counsel coming from what, he thought was best for me and not best for himself, because in some ways in sometimes, I kind of left him stranded. I think that balance of being really hardcore results focused, but also being invested in the people is something that I took away from him.

Mike Paton:

Well, it sounds he made you feel he genuinely cared about you.

Jimmy Rayford:

100%.

Mike Paton:

And what was the stuff he did because this is what our listener needs to hear as regularly as we can repeat this. What are the things Dennis was doing that made you feel that way?

Jimmy Rayford:

I think it was, he allowed me growth opportunities, right? There was always just sometimes his thought on whether or not you believe you're ready for something or someone else believes you're ready for something. And it was a part of me that says, I don't know if anybody's ready for anything new until they do it. And it's a difference between being ready and being prepared or oftentimes I wasn't ready, but I think I was prepared and Dennis was always allowed me to have those, growth opportunities, which in many ways were, opportunities to fail and learn from those failures. He pushed me quite a bit.

I mean, you could, [inaudible 00:00:17:49] Dennis, I have worked for 15 years together. You could come to a meeting and you would think that man, Dennis didn't really like Jimmy gal. He didn't let me off the hook and he can allow our relationship to let me off the hook. He gave me growth opportunities, but at the same time he held me accountable and we kind of developed, improvement plans together.

Mike Paton:

It sounds like he was really good at both building your confidence in trying something new and kicking your back when that would push you beyond your comfort zone as well to, help you accomplish more than maybe you thought was possible or were able to do on your own. Is that fair?

Jimmy Rayford:

Yes. Very fast. Plenty of sleepless nights before a, operations review with Dennis the next.

Mike Paton:

And to, imbue in you, the caring of his opinion, I, speak to a lot of people who are not satisfied with their leaders or managers. And one of the things they'll say is I don't really care what his or her opinion is. And in making the people that report to you feel like their job is doing work that's as good or better than they expect is a really powerful leadership attribute for sure-. What let's examine the flip side of the coin, because I'm guessing in your career, you've seen some less than stellar leaders and managers to, without revealing names. If you prefer not to give us a story about the worst leader you've ever seen, or the worst kind of leadership behavior you've observed.

Jimmy Rayford:

I was thinking about this from pretty hard, and I've actually been very fortunate throughout my career that I've had really good leaders. I think probably more so than the worst leader, I would say probably maybe the worst leadership moment stands out to me from a guy that I actually believe was a pretty good leader, but I think it was, it was a bad moment. I had resigned from one company and was going to a, new company. And I had a meeting with my second line manager. And at this point in time, there was tension between these two companies, because it was one of those things where, a big executive had gone from one company. Now, all of a sudden you start seeing people drift over. Because I knew there was quite a bit of a tension, I didn't want to really get drawn into it when I resigned.

I didn't say, where I was going, but I think clearly people knew that I was going to join the other organization. He called me into his office and I figured, this is just going to be a hate to see you go. And, but I wish you the best of luck meeting. I'm kind of prepared, for that. And he was unbelievably angry and, kind of almost demanded for me to tell him where I was going and who I was going to work for. Right. Kind of slapping hands on the table. And at one point in the meeting, we both stood up, we were, voices raised kind of back and forth to each other and he chalked it up is just being passionate about people. And I can see that, but I think, if I were him, the way I would have handled it differently is, if you care about someone and someone has come to the determination that they have an opportunity outside of the organization that they want to pursue, you should honor that.

That's kind of when, how I got him to calm down in the meeting, I basically said that, with all the blood, sweat and tears up, putting this organization for me to leave, you must know that I really believe that this, other opportunity is one that I want to pursue. I think that was just one where he put, maybe his interests and the interests of the company and maybe the competition between the two organizations at a higher level than my own personal interests.

Mike Paton:

Oh, it sounds like he took your leaving personally and that manifested itself in him not showing up as his best self that day, that you mean by not a great leadership moment. And that that's a very common theme on this show is when it's about you, you're not leading and managing as well as you could be if it were about the team or the people that work for you. Good lesson to remember there.

Jimmy Rayford:

I've carried that one forward. And just, we kind of half ago, I got put in a similar position on the other side of the table where the finance leader for our organization, basically, resigned to go pursue something that he thought was, cannot pass it down opportunity. My immediate reaction is if you're excited, I'm excited for you. We'll figure out, how to find a great replacement for you, but, I fell embrace you and congratulate you on the opportunity.

Mike Paton:

Good for you. And again, isn't that what leadership is, is taking learning moments in your life that maybe you didn't handle as well as you'd like or other people didn't and turning them into improve behaviors yourself. I want to go back to something you mentioned earlier, because a lot of listeners tuning into lead now wanting to be better leaders and managers are in the early stages of their management careers. And in your first leadership role, you're often leading and managing a group of people that used to be your peers. And it's ironic because that transition is probably one of the hardest transitions you'll ever need to make as a leader or a manager. And you mentioned that earlier. Tell us about your experience being promoted from a group of peers and all of a sudden having to, manage them instead of be their colleague.

Jimmy Rayford:

It ended up being one of my best experiences because it was a really good team. We were all kind of, for the most part, younger engineers in our, career. We had a pretty good work hard, play hard, mentality and has some have some great relationships. I think when I look back on it, the thing that was most important for me was, authenticity. I mean, these folks had been around me for, years in some cases. For me to get a new assignment and the first day kind of show up in the office as a brand new different person, just because I had gotten a title would have been the absolute wrong thing to do. I think just continuing to be authentic in my personality and in my style, didn't give them a reason to, treat me any differently. It's a little bit a threading of the needle, right. I had to learn that, in that capacity, I couldn't go with everything. If we went out, I couldn't be the last one to close it down. Just kind of recognizing what those subtle boundaries became important.

Mike Paton:

Did you have any moments where, you started getting sucked into complaining about the man and realized you were the man?

Jimmy Rayford:

Exactly, [crosstalk 00:25:10] talking about management, right? You're part of this black box called management.

Mike Paton:

Tell me about TCC Gives, tell me about the organization, your role there and why it fills your soul.

Jimmy Rayford:

I'm on the board of TCC Gives. And what we essentially do is we provide cell phones to abuse survivors. Domestic abuse survivors, often times the phone becomes a control tool for the abuser. They, kind of

give it and take it away and use it as a tracking mechanism. We partner with shelters and other organizations to provide mobile phones to survivors.

Mike Paton:

That's great work. That's great work. How long have you been affiliated with the organization?

Jimmy Rayford:

A little less than a year. It's still pretty new.

Mike Paton:

Cheers to you. And that group of humans doing vital work for the community. How about your role at Notre Dame?

Jimmy Rayford:

This was a interesting one because that's saying with everything is this happening in society right now and on the topic of diversity inclusion and equity, it's a very active time for the hear for the board. We're doing everything recruitment efforts and putting more energy and initiatives around trying to recruit black students to come to Notre Dame. I'm on the one of the big pieces of work that I've been doing right, is with the Fraser Thompson scholarship.

Say it's a scholarship program and we have, four grants and we're coming out with three different scholarships and just working with the alumni and working with the administration to make sure that those scholarships kind of meet the legal requirements in terms of, how we select recipients. And now we've gotten that done. Now it's more about promoting the scholarship. And then we're also now with trying to work on trying to also kind of bring the alumni together and still, you explore ways to build that community even further. There's quite a bit of work that we've taken on as a board, but it's really a fulfilling.

Mike Paton:

There's a lot of work to do regrettably in this area, for those of us who want to contribute to that effort and make a difference positively to create equal opportunities for all. What do you think leaders who want to help? And aren't sure where to start, need to do?

Jimmy Rayford:

This has been a consistent question. I feel like I get asked a lot these days and I'm, appreciative of the question. I think the first thing is, I think we all know that it's just all with action, right? I mean, it's a target rich environment as they say. I think there's a tendency to spend so much time discussing the perfect way and the philosophy of how to spend it time and spend the energy and not enough time on just making kind of and direct action. I mean, there's a thousand organizations out there to be, partnered with. I was an inroads intern in, is a business organization that provides training and, and scholarships for minority students. I ended up interning with IBM for, two summers and IBM hired me for time after I graduated from Clemson. Sponsor inroads intern, there's a thousand different ways. But I think the biggest thing is, just taking a bias for action and doing something.

Mike Paton:

Quit posting on social media and go do something. I love it, Jimmy. That's so good. So, so good. All right. Last question for you before we formally wrap up what an amazing leadership journey, I appreciate your sharing that with me with no holding back. I want you to go back to the very first opportunities you had to lead and remember how weird that felt, how scary it was to the leader, listening that wants to show up as his or her best self every single day. What's the single most important advice you think they need here?

Jimmy Rayford:

People first, if you put your people first, if you position your people and do everything you can do to set them up for success and invest in them, I mean, you'll, you'll build a team that you have to hold back. For me and my style and this style, it doesn't work for everyone. I think the first thing you got to do is maybe be authentic. I mean, I would rather work for an authentic jerk than a fake nice guy any day of the week, but for me, it's people first.

Mike Paton:

Thank you. I couldn't say it any better myself. Jimmy, you've been most generous with your time. Your insights are super valuable and you're a very interesting human being. And I appreciate the opportunity to get to know you more. I also know you've fulfilled our obligation, which is to help make leaders better every single day. That's what the lead now podcast is all about. Before we let you go tell the listener who wants to learn more about Dealers Wholesale you, or the causes that you care so deeply about where should they go to learn more?

Jimmy Rayford:

I think you can go to our website dealerswholesale.com. You can check out my LinkedIn I list, all the places that I volunteer on my LinkedIn page and I'm relatively active on LinkedIn. I would invite anybody just to connect and love to have a conversation.

Mike Paton:

Awesome. Thank you again. What a great pleasure.

Jimmy Rayford:

Hey, Thanks.

Mike Paton:

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