



Tom Steipp
CEO
Symmetricom

At the time of this interview, Tom Steipp was the CEO of Symmetricom where he has been for over 2 years. Prior to joining Symmetricom, Tom was the Vice President/General Manager for Scientific-Atlanta Inc. and the General Manager for Hewlett Packard. He received his BS from the Air Force Academy and his MBA from Purdue University. His hobbies include fly fishing and wood-working. Tom and his wife, Debra, have two grown

children, Mitch and Chris

professional

What are top 3 principles for success in your industry?

I'd say the top three principles for success in our particular industry is to have good products, to have good profit and to have good potential. The products and the profits piece of it is pretty self-explanatory. When we talk about potential ... we're a technology company and people are looking for us to be developing products which will lend to profitability and revenue in the future.

What character qualities do you look for when hiring?

The character qualities that are most important in business from my unique perspective are honesty and integrity, teamwork and potential. The foundation of that, obviously, is honesty and integrity. If we can't communicate with trust, we're really not going to make the kind of progress that we want. This kind of company is built around teamwork. We put together teams of people so you need to be able to operate well in that environment and potential really is not so much absolute intellect or experience, but it's the ability to learn. We don't mind taking on people who have a core set of capabilities, but that can learn in our environment and take ever-increasing responsibility.

What makes a great leader?

I think it's a shared vision. There are people who are able to gather folks around and craft a composite picture of where the organization is going. Common values. We all agree on some limited set of things which we will not compromise one and regular metrics. So it's going into an organization, taking a challenge, creating a shared vision, having common values that we operate under and measuring progress on a consistent basis.

Who are your heroes and why?

I listed a couple on each side. I think one of the heroes on just the United States side was Ronald Reagan, who was the President of the country. He is a person who is, in my time space, I watched him, I voted for him, but he was able to really reach out. He was called The Great Communicator. If you look at the things that I was interested in, in terms of shared vision, I think Ronald Reagan was able to build a shared vision for America that was as inclusive as you're going to be in a country that's this diverse. Second person that I would point to is pastor ... friend of mine ... Ray Stedman. A man who had great impact during the '70s from a congressional stand point. He was an author, he was a speaker, but more importantly than that, he was a mentor of men. Here is an individual who took what he learned in life and poured it into, best estimates, by the time he died, six or seven hundred men who would all stand up and say, "My life was changed by this individual."

What are the 2-3 most valuable lessons you learned in your career?

I'd say the lessons I've learned in my career are number one, build a shared vision. If you do that, then you're all working toward the same set of objectives. Make sure that if you can't build a shared vision, if you're unsuccessful in building a shared vision, leave that job. Or leave the role that you're in. Second, work with people who have common values. All organizations and all people have



different sets of core values. I wouldn't be here saying this set of core values is right, some other set of core values is wrong, but it's important to work with people who have common values. Otherwise you're going to be inhibited. You're always going to be looking over your shoulder. The net result of that would be if you're not in that kind of environment, leave.

What was your worst career decision or mistake?

I don't feel as though I've made any bad career decisions. There have been some circumstances that didn't work out the way that at the time I thought they would. But if I were to sit here today and go back and look at the ones where I was "least successful", two years ... seven years ago ... they actually turned out to be stepping stones towards something that was far more positive than I would have expected and lead me to positions that I probably wouldn't have tried to reach out and get had those bumps in the road not come along.

How did a mentor impact your career?

I have a strong commitment towards mentoring and I guess it stems from two things. I was mentored and disciplined by a pastor, Ray Stedman, when I was 35-years-old. I didn't become a Christian until I was 30. I thought a lot of myself in the early years and it took a Godly man to come along side me and point out to me that there were issues in my life. He was one of the few guys who was willing to do that. If you go to a presentation that I heard, where he talked about what were the three passions of Christ, if you had to distill everything that Christ was passionate about to three topics, one would be saving the lost, two would be teaching and discipleship and three would be acts of kindness for the poor. Each person is going to be drawn more to one of those than to all three. That's a task that none of us could do in total. So given that Christ was really focused on teaching and discipleship and He modeled that for us, I believe it's important not only in the church, but in work. I teach and disciple at work in a different way than I teach and disciple other Christians. But I personally believe that the impact that I can make, both at work and in the spiritual kingdom is through that aspect.

Success has its cost: The biggest one is your "time" that can be stolen from your loved ones. How does one pay that back or balance that? Do you have to lose something to win something or can you have it all and how?

I don't think you can have it all. I once read an article by Tom Peers, who's a well known author and consultant in this area. He wrote a very compelling article saying you can't have it all. You can't be an ultimate success in your business, do all the things you want to and make all of your kid's soccer games. And I would have to say that life is like that. No matter what your position is, no matter what career activity you have, there are more things on your plate than you're going to be able to manage. It's going to be a process of defining what a shared vision is for the people you work with and a shared vision for your family. A set of values that you and your wife and your kids agree to and a set of values that the people you work with. And then going back and measuring those on a regular basis. If your wife and your kids agree on the vision and the values and you understand those and they understand them, then it gives you a framework for making priorities. Do I make this soccer game, do I miss this soccer game? Do I take this business trip, do I delay this business trip? But without that shared vision on both the work side and the family side, you don't have a basis for making the trade offs and somebody is going to be disappointed. With respect to the question about how would I practically implement this, I will have to admit up front that this is a relatively recent process. Five, ten years ago I had not done this. But about three years ago I went through a life change. I sat down and created, based on Bob Buford's book, a life plan which had my vision, my values and a game plan for my life. What I realized in the course of the next three years was it was just that. It was my vision, it was my values. I shared it with my wife, I shared it with my kids, but I didn't build it with them. Recently, within the last year, my wife and I have sat down, and we've created that together. We've even created in high tech fashion a Power Point presentation that we use that we've shared with our children. That has not solved all the problems, but I think it has given us the opportunity to be one step closer to having my priorities and her priorities lined up.

p e r s o n a l



How do you define success? How has your definition evolved?

I define success as a relative, cultural term used to compare me with those people in my sphere of influence. So the key there is it's relative to people in my own sphere of influence and it could be money, power, position, a whole number of things. But it's a relative measure.

What is the difference between success and significance?

In my own life, significance is an absolute measure as opposed to a relative measure. And it's an absolute measure of Tom Steipp against the qualities of Christ as defined in the Bible, in terms of what's important, honesty, integrity, the importance of the individual and those sorts of things. And it's absolute measure. How do I measure up against a set of criteria?

What does balance mean to you? How important is balance to success?

I think balance is absolutely essential. It gets back to the issue again of what's the vision of you and your co-workers on the job. What's the vision for you and your wife and your children at home? Those things have to be balanced. Too much work on one side or too much focus just on your family at the expense of neglecting your job doesn't put you in a good light there, as well. So there needs to be a process of defining what's expected on both sides, rationalizing that, setting priorities and making sure that you spend time on the things that are important. What that also says is that you have to do things that most of us are uncomfortable with which is saying no to good things. And that's probably the most difficult thing for me to do.

How do you deal with stress? How did you used to deal with stress?

Actually I've been trained to deal with stress from my days in the military. The way I do it is probably different from a lot of people. Number one, I exercise. Number two, I pray. Number three, I read the Bible. And number four I talk a lot with my wife.

Have you ever had a wakeup call in your life?

I've had two classes of wake up calls in my life, wake up calls on the professional side and wake up calls on the personal side. I've been fired twice in my life which is a very uncomfortable situation and there was probably one other situation beyond those two when I should have been fired. Now that's been balanced by some relatively positive things from a career stand point, but they do get your attention and they force you to assess personally what did I do well and what did I not do well? What led to this situation? In the case of my family, wake up calls are when you go home and your wife and, or your children give you a look that says, "Gosh, dad, you really disappointed me. I expected this and I didn't get it." And whether it was right for them to expect it is not the important part. The fact is that they had the expectation and when you don't meet it, there's really nobody else you can blame.

How do you define yourself?

I define myself in two contexts ... or actually in a grade of context. One is what's my relationship with the Lord, my God? What's my relationship with my wife? What's my relationship with my children? What's my relationship with the people that I worship with? And what's my relationship with the people I co-work with? And the way I define myself is how do I fit into each one of those relationships? I try to make a plan every year for how that's going to look and measure whether or not am I making the right progress or whether I need to make some adjustments.

s p i r i t u a l

Can you follow Christ and still have a successful career, family and such?

There shouldn't be any question as to whether you can follow Christ and have a successful career. And if that turns out to be a problem, I would go back to an earlier question, what are the driving principles in business and what did I learn? I learned that if I don't have a shared vision with the people that I'm working with and I don't have common values, that I need to leave. If my personal relationship with Jesus got to be at conflict with my success in business, I'm in the wrong job or



working with the wrong people.

How does your faith help you in your professional life?

Faith allows me to be more of a risk taker and to be more willing to look at jobs that I probably wouldn't have looked at under other set of circumstances. And to be willing to accept the outcomes. A very good friend of mine gave me wise counsel at one point in time which was, "Go out, do your best, but then don't seek any feedback on that. Seek feedback on your character, seek feedback on your objectives, but in terms of your personal performance, go out, give it your best shot, close the door and then go on to the next chapter."

How has God /faith changed your perspective on fulfillment, significance and success

It is often stated that a person's walk with God is a process. That you find God or God finds you and that begins a process of maturity. Both in my personal life and in my business life, my faith and my relationship with God has continued to mature so that when I go and do something, and realize that that was a mistake and I could change that the next time that I encounter it.

Is faith critical to leadership or character?

In terms of faith to character in leadership, I think that faith is important in the context of a religious relationship. You define your character based on your belief system. So to the extent that religion or personal relationship provides you with a framework, you can better define your own character. In both a family perspective and a work perspective, people of constant character, even where there are flaws in that character, are easier to work with. Because if you have good character and a flaw, somebody somewhere along the line can come along side you and fix that. But if you don't have a foundation, then your character tends to look different to different people and then you're really not in a position where you can improve over time.

When you talk about faith, do you mean faith in oneself or faith in an external power? How has God changed your perspective on fulfillment, significance and success?

When I talk about faith, I talk about faith in an external power. In a God who I have a personal relationship with and who is the absolute measure that I use in determining whether or not I'm doing the right things or the wrong things. In my particular case, it's the God of the Bible. I believe that He wrote down a very clear vision for my life. I think He wrote down a very clear set of values that I need to operate with. And within that, as long as I'm moving towards that vision that He has for me, as long as I operate within the value set that's there, I've infinite freedom. That's one of the things that I think a lot of people don't have because they don't know what the boundaries are.

What are the costs of following Christ in your career and would you change anything?

That's always an interesting question in terms of what is the cost of following Christ in your career. There were events in my life which I thought were devastating at the time, which kept me up and I worried about and ultimately turned out to be perhaps some of the best things to happen to me. I don't think that in reality there is a cost of following Christ in your career. There are times when I may feel that because I am a Christian and I have a certain set of values that people don't feel comfortable with or they don't want to be around me or, I'm not one of the "in crowd". At the same time, I think those are fleeing moments that cross my mind. In reality, God uses those as specific times to build my character and have not, in the long run, cost me anything in my career.

What is the hardest thing about being a believer in your line of work?

I think the hardest thing about being a believer in my line of work and in particular as being a CEO of company is how I deliver the message about what Christ has done in my life. As the CEO of a company you're in an unusual set of circumstances. As a CEO, if I invited just about anybody in this company to go to church with me or to go to a play with me or an outreach activity, they'd go. But they'd go for the wrong reason. So the challenge from my perspective is how do they see Christ in me without me inappropriately using the position I have to influence them? Because ultimately it's a personal decision they make, not something that I do to them or for them or with them. And in particular being a CEO of a public company, there are some boundaries that I have to set up for



myself that make it very clear that I am a Christian and what my value sets are and that it's clear to people that that's the case, but that I don't cross over the boundary and use my position of influence inside the company in an inappropriate way to influence them. And that's difficult. That balance is difficult for me.

How do you balance workplace demands of 60 to 70-hour weeks, personal life, spiritual life--let alone leadership in ministry and church?

I've worked plenty of 60 to 80 work weeks and I would tell just about anybody out there that I personally was less productive in an 80 hour work week. Not that there weren't things to do, but that I was doing the wrong things. In the job I'm in now I typically will work somewhere between 50 and 60 hours average. That goes all the way from 80 hours to half work weeks. The key to success is not how many hours you put in, but what are the things that you prioritize to go to the top of the list? If I do those things, I find I have a higher degree of success at work and it still leaves me with time for things that are significant both at work and at home and in the church.