

It's Easy As Dell

by iPriority

Don Collis is the Vice President of International Financial Relations for Dell Computer. He joined Dell 15 years ago as its first CFO when the company was only three years old. At the time, there were only 318 employees operating on the original \$1,000 investment of Michael Dell. Today Dell employs about 40,000 people.

Tell us about your personal and professional background.

We were in Cleveland, Ohio, where I was working for the original John D. Rockefeller Standard Oil Company, although BP owned the majority of the company. I was living my business dream: I was an officer in a Fortune 500 company and was experiencing all the financial rewards that go with that. I had a beautiful wife and two delightful small children. Life was idyllic, the way I had always dreamed it should be.

I had some very aggressive objectives in life that were centered around the financial as well as things like respect and image. I had achieved much of that by being a Fortune 500 corporate officer and enjoying an executive lifestyle. But I felt a sense of emptiness at achieving many of my personal goals at an early age and that brought on a lack of any sustainable joy and peace to my life. My successes seemed to have a shelf-life of vegetables.

Those momentary project successes were satisfying for a few days or weeks, but they didn't bring any permanent joy or long-term sense of significance. There was a sense of shallowness and emptiness to our lives. I remember standing in the front yard of my house one night and saying a prayer.

After that, a strange set of events happened. My position was eliminated and I was sent to London to become Vice President of Finance, a huge promotion. While in London, BP purchased the rest of Standard Oil and fired all the executives, including me. But they gave me a year's salary as a severance package. We moved back to Texas thinking we could surely find a dozen jobs in a year. But I went twelve months without one job offer and my interview with Dell was on day 366.

Why did Dell hire you?

Dell was looking for a CFO and a recruiter set up an interview with Michael Dell. I was skeptical because the company was so new. My observation was: 'This is a great concept but Michael's a college drop-out working out of his garage. I am a 35-year-old business executive.' But after I met Michael that first time in 1987 I knew the company was really going somewhere. Elaborate on some of the unique pressures you faced in a fast growing start-up company.

We were just a few people trying to assemble the cart while it was rolling down the road at break-neck speed. We were growing at over 50% every year. One year we more than doubled in revenues from the previous year. We were doing \$60-\$70 million a year in revenue but had never gone externally for financing. We were desperately short of cash while trying to build a sales model, technical support, and all the needed administrative infrastructure. It was long, long days, seven days a week. The only thing I would regularly take time to do is go to church.

What kind of toll did that take on your family?

Eventually my wife became bitterly lonely. She went to a marriage counselor and explained the situation. He said 'Do you think your husband would come join us in this discussion?' She convinced me to go with her to see him. He helped me to see that by being away so much of the time I had left her frustrated and lonely and hurt. He asked me, 'Do you really want your wife to feel this way?' I said 'Well, no.' He said 'What would stop you from going home for dinner at night?' I said, 'Well, physically nothing.'

I thought that if I wasn't there at work things were going to fall apart. But I began to see the pride involved in that statement so I said, 'Physically I could get up out of my chair and go home for dinner.' I began to realize that I was not there for those times, like dinner, that would have the greatest impact on a family wanting a husband and a father.

So I began a routine of gathering up my things at 6:00 p.m., even if it was in the middle of a meeting, and going home. I figured I would pull out my work after everybody had gone to bed and finish things up. What I found was that after dinner those things didn't look as enormous as they did when I was in the heat of the battle. After awhile I even stopped bringing my briefcase home. Instead of the day becoming more stressful, it actually became more open. And it seemed like time was multiplied during the day.

What was the end result of all that?

I was the CFO, but over time, it became clear that I needed to step out of my position in order to keep my priorities straight, especially with my family. God took care of the rest of it. [I] moved into a position within Dell that has been the most fun I have ever had professionally. The most significant thing, though, is that ... our family [is] back together.

In addition to your family, how has your faith affected your professional life?

The key to having the right long-term relationship with investors is to have a relationship with them that is based on trust. They have to see that we are truthful with them, even when things aren't going well. I am always honest with my clients. An important key to success for me is to integrate my business practices with my personal beliefs. It has been very natural to live by those standards because they are the ones that [God] is increasingly building into my character.

Also, there is a different model of leadership that is effective in the workplace now than what I saw in my early days in business. That world was rooted in the old thought that the leader makes all the decisions and was always in control. It was a very autocratic kind of leadership style and over time, there developed a very strict corporate culture. You played by certain rules that created a lot of fear in the organization - it was people serving the leader.

Michael Dell never worked for another company and his goal was to serve only one person and that was the customer. That concept created a very different culture. At Dell, teams are successful and the leadership model is one where the company and its employees are subordinate to the customer. We know who we serve; and it's the customer.

The way to serve the customer is to have teams that are free to do the right thing by the customer. And the way to have successful teams is for me, the leader, to help the teams establish the right kind of goals and objectives so they can develop and be successful. And for me to be successful I must help them serve the customer. What has emerged is the concept of a leader that is more of a servant. And one reason that's so effective is because it's a model established by Jesus' life.

What advice would you give emerging leaders as they seek to climb the corporate ladder?

Focus on things that bring lasting significance. Early in my career, I pursued very self centered, materialistic goals. Avoid spending the first half of your career discovering that those don't bring the joy and peace and significance that we all long for.