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The Power of Principle

[Dave Steward Knows the Source of His Success](#)

By Paula Miller-Lester

As corporate scandals continue, Americans search for answers and accountability. A November 2003 survey by America's Research Group revealed that more than 70 percent of Americans believe business scandals could be avoided if CEOs followed principles found in the Bible. David L. Steward, founder and chief executive officer of St. Louis-based World Wide Technology Inc. (WWT), a privately held, billion-dollar company, understands that honesty and fairness are not only the *right* way to do business but the *most profitable* way.

Steward has come a long way from the tiny town of Clinton, Missouri. A look at his humble beginnings helps one more fully appreciate the achievement of growing up in segregated St. Louis to building World Wide Technology into what Black Enterprise identified in 2001 as the largest African-American-owned enterprise in the United States.

In 2003 DiversityBusiness.com recognized World Wide Technology, a premier information technology solutions provider and leading electronic procurement and logistics company in the information technology industry, as one of America's Top Three multi-cultural businesses.

Accolades aside, Steward says that he is the same person today as he was in the turbulent times of his teen years. The same unshakeable faith in God that helped him through the trials of segregation so prevalent in the 1960s is the same thing that sustains him today. As a teenager, Steward's color barred him from the public swimming pool, for-whites-only restaurants, the main floor of the Clinton movie theater, even the public schools attended by white children.

Nurturing parents and grandparents instilled in him the core values of love, hard work, discipline and faith that have guided Steward to resounding success at WWT. "My parents faced harsh discrimination and yet they endured. They were faithful anyway, and they forgave anyway. My mother always told me 'all things are possible through desire, hard work and faith'."

Making a Way Out of No Way

With segregation alive and well in the Clinton of his youth, Steward should have attended the same school as his siblings. However, an historical event changed his course. "My mother reminded my wife of this a few weeks ago. It was 1957 and I was in the first grade – it was also the first year that African Americans would be allowed to go to the white school in our town. There was a lot of rumbling about that. There was talk that the Ku Klux Klan was going to come to town to stop us from going to the school.

"My dad and other black men went to the edge of town to meet them. Even today I think about what these men were willing to risk."

Steward explains that had his father, who held jobs as a master mechanic, a part-time janitor, and a trash collector, lost his job the effect could have been disastrous. "I did not know it at the time but we were poor. There was a time when my dad's shoes were falling apart and my parents had to figure how they could buy him a new pair of shoes. In

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the end, they put electric tape on his shoes so he could walk. If my dad had lost his job then we would have ended up on the wrong side of that fragile line between having enough and poverty. These men took a stand for us because they valued our future."

The scarcity of money in the Steward household was filled in by an abundance of faith. While his family attended church every Sunday, there was one time that stands out in Steward's memory. "One Sunday my mom gave me money to put into Sunday School and as she was handing me the dollar she told me that it was the last one we had. It reminded me of the widow's mite. My mom trusted me to walk past all of the tempting stores where I could have spent the money on candy, confident that I would obey her instructions. More important than her confidence that I would be obedient was her faith that, even if it was the last dollar, God would make a way and we would still have what we needed."

Steward understood his duty to honor the sacrifice his parents made so that he and his seven siblings could concentrate on education in the hope that they would help to change the world. After graduating from Central Missouri State University with a bachelor's degree in business management, Steward's sales savvy enabled him to work his way up the corporate ladder into various senior-level management positions with Wagner Electric, Missouri Pacific Railroad and Federal Express Corporation.

Seeing the Invisible

"In 1983 I was working for Federal Express. It was a great job and, even though I was happy, I asked, 'is this it?' I knew the Lord had something else for me. I knew I had been called to run a business. I had two kids, a wife, and a mortgage – which means I had no money – and it takes money to get into business. I knew that as the cover for my family I had to be there for them but still I began to look for a business that I could buy.

"The Bible says that faith without action is dead. Convinced of my calling I put my faith into action. It's amazing the things God will give you. I knew a man from Kansas City who owned a consulting firm and was getting ready to retire. His company did auditing and reviewing of freight bill charges, and from my experience with Union Pacific I felt comfortable making him an offer to buy his business."

In the absence of manna from heaven, in the form of cash, raining down it would be natural to assume that Steward's next logical step would be to raise funds for the purchase. The assumption would be incorrect. "I bought the company for no money down. I convinced the owner to sell me the company and then I leveraged his assets so that he would get paid over time, and I could provide cashflow for the business. It all came down to trust."

Steward's first business venture, begun in 1984, was named Transportation Business Specialists. The company specialized in analyzing and evaluating overcharges to help rail and air freight companies recoup lost funds. He also began a parallel business, Transport Administrative Services, to counter the inefficiency of tank truck carriers that were transporting goods one-way and then returning home empty. Steward's company matched commercial tank trucks needing one-way freight with clients needing that service, who could thus make shipments at discount rates.

"When I saw how much the railroads were losing for undercharges as opposed to overcharges, an idea came to me 1987 that we should be looking at undercharges – the other end of the equation. I am bold and will talk to anyone so I sat down with executives from Union Pacific Railroad to talk about it.

"Union Pacific hired us to do an undercharge audit of three years' worth of freight bills, which meant that we would manage \$15 billion of rate information for a single client."

With the awarding of the Union Pacific Railroad contract, Steward knew he had to find a way to automate the task. "Your reputation and your word are the two most important things. I said, 'we are going to do this' and I knew we would get it done." Steward says ego never entered the process. "The Bible tells us that a council of many is wise. After all, a man wrapped up in himself is a very small package. I didn't know enough about computers to do it on my own so we utilized the people God sent."



By tying in computer gateways to receive and return information to clients, World Wide Technology was born in 1990.

Many people, black as well as white, argued against Steward's decision to enter the technology arena, questioning his background, his resolve, his abilities, and, despite a knowledge base culled from a career spent in some of America's top companies, his business sense. He proved all of them wrong by focusing his efforts on building a successful business based on precepts found in the Bible.

"I believe you live up to the level you set for yourself and you don't let negative people weigh you down. You have to ask yourself 'what do I really believe?' and then act upon that belief."

Additionally, World Wide Technology has a focus and commitment to "best of breed" manufacturers, companies Steward defines as using the "latest and greatest" technology, whose tools are used by WWT to implement its own systems to improve how WWT does business.

Since founding World Wide Technology, Steward has seen the company grow from seven employees and \$800,000 in sales to \$924 million in sales in 2001 and 450 employees in 2003 with nearly \$1.2 billion in revenue.

Turning Hurts into Harvest

Although the rise of WWT seems almost meteoric, Steward wants to make it clear that there were many obstacles along the path and when it comes to overcoming challenges and rising above bad times, he has lots of war stories to share. One is of the early days of his company's existence when he found himself running through his company parking lot to catch up with the truck driver who had just repossessed his car in order to retrieve his briefcase.

"It was embarrassing to have everyone know that your car has been repossessed and it would have been easy to just give up. But, I had faith in what we were doing. I'm a believer in the unseen, not the seen. "I didn't see this company as what it is was. I saw it as what it would be. What it can be."

Steward has learned to be content regardless of prevailing circumstances. "Things will happen in life that can be painful – but hurt is nothing but a distraction. I tell people that you have to turn your hurts into harvest.

"There was a time when our company was barely hanging on. We had a chance at an Air Force contract that would save the company. We worked extremely hard and put all of our resources into getting the business. Everyone was excited when we were notified that we had made the final cut. We were confident that we were going to be awarded the contract. When we got the phone call that the contract went to the other competitor we were devastated. We sat around, scratching our heads, wondering what we could have possibly done differently or better. Then, we looked at each other and wondered what would we do now?

"I can tell you that God truly makes a way out of no way. I knew that we would be successful and I knew that it really is always darkest before the dawn. Again, faith would not let me give up. In the midst of that disappointment the phone rang and it was someone from the GSA (General Services Administration) asking if we would be interested in a project they were going to be doing.

"The person on the other end of the phone said that although they knew we were small, they had heard wonderful things about us. Not only did we get the contract, but the business we were awarded was much larger than the previous contract we had worked so hard to get. It usually takes a year or so to close on business that large – and we were so close to being on the brink of closing that we would not have lasted that long – instead, the entire process was completed in sixty days!"

Steward says that when challenges come people should be grateful God-given talent and good health and not focus on the glass being half-empty. He believes that tough times is one way that God uses to get you prepared for the next level. "Think about the

process it takes to become a butterfly. When it is ready to come out of the cocoon it has to struggle until it can break out. An observer might want to help free the butterfly, not realizing that what seems life struggle is really nature's way of building up the wing strength the butterfly will need. If you cut the process short, then the butterfly will not be able to fly. No matter what your calling in life, you cannot have a testimony without a *testing*.

Onward and Upward

According to the National Minority Supplier Development Council (NMSDC), America's biggest corporations will spend more than \$80 billion to buy goods and services from minority business enterprises (MBEs) this year. Although minorities represent 28% of the U.S. population, minority-owned businesses represent only 15% of total businesses and 4% of total corporate purchase – a statistic that is not lost on Steward.

"The Bible says that my people perish for lack of knowledge. I have a relationship with Michael Dell whom I met when he came to St. Louis the day after Dell celebrated its 20th anniversary. Dell will probably do \$51 billion in revenue this year. I sat on the board of a publicly held company that was moving from NASDAQ to the NYSE and we went to the Exchange to ring the opening bell. \$13 *trillion* dollars worth of business was transacted that day. We are at \$1.5 billion for this year and will probably generate between \$2.5 and \$3 billion next year. We have done well but we want to do even better.

"The business proposition moving forward is to effect the global economy in such a way that we can do things better, faster, and cheaper than ever before. When this company was named World Wide Technologies back in 1990 people were asking why a small company in Missouri would choose such a name. I spoke those things that weren't as if they were."

Steward also applies the biblical principle of giving in ways some might find surprising. "We're here to serve and put others first. I think serving is leadership, true leadership. There was a piece of business within our company that was worth several millions of dollars and we transferred it to a firm owned by an African-American male."

Since the Bible instructs that we should be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves, Steward was not capricious in his decision. "He earned the business, he had the skill sets, and we knew that the client would continue to get top service."

To Whom Much is Given

For several years Steward and his wife Thelma, who live with their two children in St. Louis, have taught a Sunday School class called "Doing Business by the Book" at Union Memorial United Methodist Church.

Another demonstration of giving is found in Steward's first book, *Doing Business by the Good Book: 52 Lessons on Success Straight From the Bible* (Hyperion), in which he relays his business insights with supporting Scriptural passages and personal anecdotes. "I am not in the book business and this book is only the milk of the Word of God – not the meat. I would rather see people go and get the Word of God for themselves."

Assisted by co-author Robert Shook and supported with a foreword by former President George H.W. Bush, Steward demonstrates how the Good Book translates into good business in easy-to-follow, practical terms.

Since writing the book, Steward says that people tell him 'he's the man.' "I tell them that I'm the man who knows the Man."

Steward's words of advice to entrepreneurs who desire true success: "Let go and let God."