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THE BOSS

Stepping Out on My Own

By DAVID L. STEWARD

I was in my early 30's, a senior account executive, getting ready to receive a trophy for salesman of the year. I was making it into the Federal Express sales hall of fame. Fred Smith, the founder of Federal Express, was there.

The trophy was an ice bucket; my initials were on it. I looked at it and said, "This is great." Then I looked inside and there was nothing there. That was a defining moment for me. It was the symbolism. It was just like, "Atta boy, get back out there and get them again."

They raised my goal for the next year. I worked so hard, and now my goal instead of being 100 was 150. Put that carrot out there a little farther. I thought at that moment that I didn't want to wake up at 70 or 80 and wonder why I didn't do more.

Right after that I began the process of looking for a company to buy. I didn't have any money. I had a mortgage, two kids and a wife. We were living paycheck to paycheck with all the trappings that hold you close to a job.

I knew a gentleman who was 65 who had a consulting firm outside of Kansas City, Mo. I convinced him to sell me the business, which did auditing and reviewing of freight bill charges, for nothing down. It was a step out of working in this bureaucratic setting of corporate America and going out on my own in 1984. At Federal Express, I was making about \$65,000 a year and had a car allowance and an expense account. I was king of the hill. All of a sudden, I was starting all over again. Dealing with banks, lawyers, etc. Before, all those things had always been there for me. The infrastructure was there. Now I had to develop it and create it.

Within a year or so we started making money. I was a pretty good salesman. During the struggles, the one thing I remember was the continued support from my wife. I was running up phone bills and did all kinds of things to begin the process. When times were bad we bought food with credit cards. We had bill collectors calling. We maneuvered through this together.

My mother always said, "You can do anything you want." She kept instilling that in me and my seven brothers and sisters. That helped, being that I was the only African-American male in my high school class. I lived on the other side of the tracks, literally, in a town called Clinton, Mo. There were situations of racism. At the theater, blacks could not sit downstairs. I was part of integrating the public swimming pool in the 1960's. A group of us decided one day we were going to go swimming. Nothing happened. No resistance. We just went and jumped in. I was around 16 years old, 6-foot-5 and a basketball player, getting to be known as a pretty good athlete and a kid that got along with everybody.

Being in industry, gosh, if you can't change you'll get run over. As an African-American, I

think the way I treated others affected how people treated me. If people do attack you in certain ways, you can focus on it and be vengeful in your approach or take the high road — get over it. If they didn't do you bodily harm, it won't affect you.

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