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GIE 2003: Business Is Combat

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Fight or flight? Business owners play on a battlefield littered with potential customer service traps. Their response in the field can shellshock and impress clients, or send them looking for another service provider.

“Business really can be combat – it’s fast and can change direction quickly,” said Bill Hoopes, GIE conference committee co-chair and past president of the Professional Lawn Care Association of America (PLCAA).

At the PLCAA grand opening session on Thurs., Nov. 6, a full room of industry professionals listened to two fighter pilots’ keys to a flawless execution during a session presented by the Afterburners – a team of 45 men and women fighter pilots who own their own companies or have extensive business experience. George “Gundawg” Dragush and Reggie “Jekyll” Hyde shared success tips in a presentation titled, “Breaking Barriers: Business is Combat.”

“We know the customer, we’ve met our competition and, yes, we have been task overloaded,” Gundawg related, adding that the teamwork and discipline he learned in the air force are applicable in the lawn care field.

“Lose sight, lose the fight,” he added, offering another nugget of wisdom that business owners should remember about their competition. “If you ever lose sight of your competition, you will always lose the fight.”

The Flawless Execution Model Gundawg prescribed starts with defining the mission or objective. Once owners have a plan in place, they can devise a strategy to overcome competitive threats and reach goals, he said. Finally, review the strategy – or debrief – and learn from mistakes.

Video footage of in-flight one-on-one combat stressed the importance of focus and goals – “In a one-on-one combat, there are no ties,” Gundawg said simply, offering these steps to combat:

1. Plan
2. Brief
3. Execute
4. Debrief
5. Win

While many business owners plan and then execute their ideas, a common oversight is the debriefing – a critical step, Gundawg noted. “You need to hash out what worked and what didn’t and walk away with lessons learned that you can pass on to your team,” he stressed. Additionally, involving the team is crucial, Gundawg said. “You can win the battle as an individual, but to win the war, you have to have a team.”



Reggie “Jekyll” Hyde (left) and George “Gundawg” Dragush entertained and inspired the crowd with tales of fighter jet combat.

Planning for success in any business starts with defining the mission objective, he noted. Make sure your goals are clear, measurable, attainable and that they support your overall vision. Next, identify threats – who is your competition? What internal threats exist? And, what are hidden threats, such as regulations or legislation that might require attention in during planning.

“Don’t manage by crisis,” he said. “The ability to adapt to change equals success.”

Then, back to the team. Note the strengths and weaknesses of your employees and where their qualities will benefit the organization. “Know what the members of your team can do to help you win,” he said. “Get to know your company from the bottom up.”

After these steps are complete, prioritizing the plan is essential, Gundawg emphasized. “You need to set the timing for the plan,” he said. “Plan for contingencies – the ‘what-ifs.’”

Of course, these “what-ifs” are inevitable in any plan, Gundawg added. No matter the goal – whether to win more clients or eliminate call-backs – owners will run into blocks. But informing employees of the plan and ensuring they understand and buy into the overall goal will reduce confusion. Here are Gundawg’s suggestions for briefing the team:

- **First impressions** – Set the standard. Start and end on time. Have visuals prepared.
- **Establish the mission objective** – The mission objective must be clear, measurable, attainable and support the overall vision.
- **The time hack** – Set the pace of execution. Determine the timeline for the mission.
- **Weather and environment** – Identify the physical environment, the economic situation and other X factors that will affect the mission.
- **Motherhood** – The standard operating procedures for the mission.
- **The threat** – Physical and mental description of the competition.
- **The tactics** – Focus on the specifics of the engagement. Who, what, when, where, why and how.
- **The contingencies** – Plan for contingencies in all phases of the mission.
- **Conclusion** – Summarize key points. Encourage questions.

During the execution, managers can avoid “task saturation,” or overloading an employee with too many jobs at one time, by using checklists, crosschecking the list and always supporting other employees on the team, Gundawg said. “Task saturation is the silent killer,” he said. “It gets in the way of execution.”

Finally, leading a debriefing session in which employees and managers can openly discuss the execution, its flaws and its successes will ensure an even more successful mission next time, Gundawg added. “It’s not who’s right, it’s what’s right,” he reminded, stressing the importance of dropping title and seniority status at the conference room doors. “What do you need to accomplish to make sure you are in equilibrium?”

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