

Attendees Apply Winning Concepts To Their Companies

Leadership often results from finding an approach best suited to a company's unique personality. *By Martin Romjue and Lexi Tucker, LCT editors*

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. — If you want to know how operators successfully run their companies, you'll find a showcase of best practices among Summit attendees. This year, LCT editors took some time out from the three-day event agenda to talk with operators one-on-one about how they manage staff and lead in an era of tech disruption.



Barry Gross,
vice president
of business
development, Reston
Limousine, Sterling, Va.:

The veteran industry executive has cultivated a management approach honed at several large fleet operations around the nation.

Macro-management: "In terms of my style, I tend to be much more of a coach than a disciplinarian, the idea being we want our people to be as prepared as possible. We want to give them the tools and support to feel they're best prepared so they can focus on delivering the service. When there are problems, we want them to feel free to think about solutions and then we can discuss the results after the fact. One of the things I say to my people is whatever you do, have a plan. Don't let me see an incident report where we forgot about something or we overlooked it or we just didn't pay attention. Give me an incident report stating the action we took. If it didn't work out, then we can coach on that and determine what would have been the better course of action."

"Training and preparation are the two biggest things, and at that point you trust your people to make good decisions. I have this analogy that leadership and operations can be kind of like holding on to a cube of Jello. You can hold a cube of Jello in your palm with no problem, but when you squeeze it, it starts to go through your fingers and out of your hand. So, it's a weird analogy but I think it's most apropos. So if I'm constantly micromanaging my people and squeezing the life and decision-making out of them, ultimately we're going to have problems because people will be hyper tense."



Selim Aslan, president,
MIB Worldwide
Chauffeured Services, San
Diego, Calif.

Teamwork: Selim Aslan describes his leadership style as "compromising"; he prefers to listen to his employees and start a dialogue.

For example, he describes the process of choosing the logo for his business: "There were four finalists we decided on, and we chose the winner together as a company," Aslan says. Oddly enough, they all decided on the same one.

Aslan empowers his employees by educating them and letting them make decisions on their own. "My staff automatically knows they can offer discounts if it's a customer who uses our services constantly. They don't have to ask me because they know the boundaries."

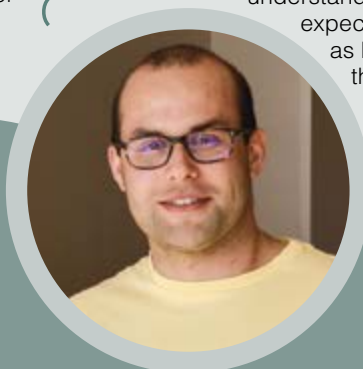
Zappos is a company he admires because of its great customer service. "Their philosophy is 'you've got to make the customer happy.' Everybody knows there's one goal, and it's to keep the client happy." He also names Tesla — not only because of their attitude toward innovation, but because of CEO Elon Musk's work ethic. "He failed so many times, and he always got back up and he's still trying to do new things."

Aslan is involved in his community and on the board of the San Diego Young Leaders association (a subgroup within the city's Chamber of Commerce). He talks to attendees at every meeting, educates them on TNCs, and even offers them complementary services after some of the events so nobody uses Uber or Lyft.

Nick Boccio, fleet manager, Buffalo Limousine, Buffalo, N.Y.:

Steady presence: Nick Boccio leads in a calm, calculated manner. He doesn't believe in flying off the handle or saying something without thinking it through first. "I would say seek first to understand, and then seek to be understood. That's what my Uncle says, and it sums up how you have to consider what a person was thinking while they were doing something and why they did it," he says. "If I can't even begin to wonder, then obviously my response will indicate that, but if I can say, 'Well, you know what? This person has a point,' I'll react differently."

As a manager, Boccio empowers his employees by understanding their capabilities so he doesn't expect too much of any one person. "I think as long as you enable them to enjoy what they're doing, don't create a hostile environment, and encourage them to explore positions that interest them, no one will dislike coming in to work every day."





Mike Barreto, COO, Eagle Chauffeured Services, Upland, Pa.:

Rebuild with respect: Mike Barreto recently took over another company, so his leadership style has centered on rebuilding it from the inside out. "It was hard for me; it wasn't like I withdrew myself to the point where I wasn't talking to anybody, but I wanted to make sure the company was running properly," he explains.

With employees used to working under a different leader for 15 plus years, Barreto understood he couldn't just tell them they were doing things wrong and change overnight. "You have less of a chance of retention once new policies come in place. So, I try to be as disciplined as possible as to how I release information, and how I was able to get people to understand the vision we're going towards."

Barreto wants his people to be free thinkers and gives them what he calls "the 180 view." If there's a problem or issue, he wants them to understand what ownership is like and let them make decisions; but he also tries to help them see why he acts in a specific way.

He credits Tim Rose (of Flyte Time) as a mentor who taught him a lot about how to manage people. "He doesn't look at anyone as a stat on a payroll sheet," Barreto says. "You have to consider what you need to do to put your employees in the best position to succeed."

Barreto tells his staff to not come to him with a problem, but also with a solution they think is best. "It might not always be something the person at the top agrees with, but at least it shows you they care about the bottom line."

The most difficult obstacle he has overcome in taking over Eagle is setting up proper processes. "I've had to really be a puzzle maker to be able to fit the pieces together where they were falling short and rearrange it so everything fit, and that was the biggest challenge that drew me to do this company."

Eagle was once a very large, strong operation in the region. "It was in the ashes, but there's still something great there — it's just a matter of doing the right things to make it grow and rise up out of them."



H.A. Thompson, founder and owner, Rose Chauffeured Transportation, Charlotte, N.C.:

Customer service:

"One of the things you have to understand in any business, especially in the service business, is how do you treat the customer? How you treat the employees is how they treat

the customer. So you have to create respect. And a lot of people in our business have a tendency not to respect the chauffeurs. They respect the vehicles and the equipment sometimes more than the chauffeurs. And you've got to build respect and trust between the employees and the chauffeurs. That's so critical, and it takes a long time. We didn't have it for a long time and we're really coming full circle now. It is so important, because our product is hospitality. This is a high service business. And I don't think a lot of people who have limousine and transportation companies realize the level of service.

"We have driver meetings and I read [emails] to them. Then we talk to them, and sometimes if they drop the ball, I bring them in and talk to them about it and say, 'Hey, what happened?' You know, 'Why did you do that?' And when they're hired, we talk about this. The driver is the whole company when they're out. They're everything. They are the pipeline to the company. This is why if you do it right you don't have to advertise. Like a killer restaurant that has awesome food and servers. They don't have to promote because you get an experience. Then they come back in the door."

Harry Dhillon, owner, Ecko Transportation, San Jose, Calif., and two-time LCT Operator of the Year Award winner:

Employee attention:

"I'm very involved with employees and understand what can be done to make their lives easier. I give them incentives on a quarterly basis, such as \$50 gift cards. I have not overloaded any employee in the office or on the road with work that can stress them to a point where they miss something very critical. The quality check system we have in place gives them the power to back up their work and give 100%. For chauffeurs there are incentives for spot time; whichever driver is making the most spot time will get a gift card at the end of the pay period. We have a fleet manager who does spot checks on them, and anyone who scores best in the pay period also gets another incentive. That gives them a reason to be there before the pick-up time, to keep their cars clean, and to keep the assortments such as sanitizers, newspapers, and magazines in order because they know that if they get spot-checked and it's 100%, they'll get a gift card at the end of the pay period."



Evan Blanchette, CEO, VIP Global Ultra-Premium Chauffeured Transportation, Miami, Fla.

Focus: Evan Blanchette describes his leadership style as being swift and direct. He doesn't sugar coat things, and makes sure to convey to his team the details they need to succeed. "I don't usually micromanage, but I do when I need to until things are running smoother,"

he explains. Clarity is the key to ensuring there's no miscommunication. "Everyone's very clear on our vision and how we do things, and it resonates through the company."

President Donald Trump is a leader he admires because he's focused and makes things happen. "I see myself in some of his struggles as far as being the underdog. People counting you out, let's say. But if you just stay focused and consistent, things will eventually work through. And I think that's what he's shown."

Rising from zero and establishing the company's credibility was Blanchette's biggest challenge when he started his business four years ago with one car. He'd build a department and then pass it along to someone he could trust to manage it. "I didn't start with a lot of money; I started with \$10,000, one car, and a cell phone, and just grinded through it."

Nick Kokas, vice president of business development, Brentwood Limousine, Macomb, Mich.:

Team of rivals: "I'm a firm believer of not surrounding myself with yes men or yes women. I don't mind someone who may have an opposing view or idea. I think it creates dialogue. It creates new insight and ideas. I think when you surround yourself with a bunch of yes people you limit your potential and creative thinking within an organization. So we have discussions among ourselves where we'll sit around at a table and throw out ideas at each other. That even includes the chauffeurs. We'll ask them for their feedback and what they like and don't like. And we really take those things into consideration. It also gives our staff a sense of unity, inclusion, and creates a better team environment."

Difficult decisions: You have to look at your company almost as a living, breathing entity. What do you have to do to keep that thing healthy? Sometimes you have to make tough decisions. And so during those times, we downsized. We right-sized the fleet and renegotiated with many of our vendors. That includes insurance. A lot of people think, 'Oh, well. Insurance is something you really can't negotiate.' Not true. We've been with our insurance broker for over two decades, so we have a great relationship with them. But I think many people put their pride in front of the well-being of the company. You should be willing to swallow your pride and really look at the company as a human being and take care of it. I think it's one way to go through difficult obstacles."

Jeff Wright, owner, Pinnacle Car Services, Rogers, Ark.:

Wright has 81 employees, including about 50 chauffeurs. He's had to evolve staff from a small operation to one that does \$4 million per year in revenue.

Empowering managers:

"If it's day one and you're wearing every hat in the company, there isn't anyone to empower, and there's more micromanagement. Then you start hiring a few associates. The first person I think you want to get on board and empower to do things is either a bookkeeper or somebody who has the potential to be a CFO. It's easy for an operator to manage everything else, but you need somebody else managing payroll and making sure all the car payments and finances are done correctly — payments being made on time, cash flow being correct. As you get up to \$350,000, \$400,000, \$500,000 in sales revenue, you must have that bookkeeper/CFO in place."

The second position you can empower would be someone in operations who can take some of the items off your plate. It should be someone you can train, trust, and then ultimately empower to run all of operations. And then additional people from a support standpoint such as a human resources director who can handle everything from hiring to unemployment claims to training. Anything that falls under HR you should empower someone else to do for you full-time."

Cory Zucker, EVP sales/marketing, VR Worldwide, E. Elmhurst, N.Y.:

Growing responsibility: Cory Zucker describes his personal leadership style as stern but fair. "I try to look at the other person's thought process and what they did that I don't agree with. If there's some merit to I say, 'Okay, I see why you did it that way, but this is the way to do it.'" He then explains why in detail, so the person fully understands.

"If you just tell them they did it wrong, they shut off. You want people to be receptive. I feel explaining it in fine detail helps. If you're going to do something, do it right. Don't try to patch it temporarily like a Band-Aid...fix it so it stays that way long-term."

Empowering his employees boils down to giving them as much responsibility as possible and not limiting their abilities.

He wants them to feel they have a role in helping build the company and are not just another cog in the wheel. "The simplest thing you can do that many overlook is just acknowledging them and telling them they did a great job. Thank them for the extra effort they make to help you out."





Nick Lopez, VP of operations, and Todd Roberts, president, JACO Limousine & Transportation, Louisville, Ky., Cincinnati, Ohio, and Knoxville, Tenn.

Communication commandos: Nick Lopez and Todd Roberts are rarely seen apart, and while their leadership styles may differ, their belief in the power of teamwork doesn't. Lopez believes leadership is based on training and helping people understand what's expected of them.

"Every day I work to hold people more accountable as they become more aware of the context of what we do. You can never be upset at somebody if they don't know what to do, but when they're trained and they know, they're expected to do things a certain way," he says.

A difficult obstacle the two have faced in business is running the company in three different markets, but they've been able to do it by being experts in communicating. "We're so heavily involved, and since we're always together, we're able to meet demand and expectations because our line of communication is so good; we're always able to get a hold of each other and solve things pretty quickly," Lopez says.

The basics of what operators do is turn employees loose in \$100,000 plus vehicles and leave important people in their care. Therefore, your staff is always empowered. It's up to operators to put competent people in place and provide them with the proper training.

"We let them know they're in charge of their trips so they have an owner's mentality in everything they do. You have to instill that belief and thought process in them, which interests a lot of people when they are being hired because they've not had that kind of ability before," Lopez says.

Nadeem Ajaib and Rabia Patel, Icona Global, London, U.K.:

High-end humility: Serving the ultra-high-net-worth global VIPs, they must take more of an "OCD" approach to business: Check and recheck all details and anticipate all client needs.

Nadeem: "When you deal at the highest end, royalty and A-list celebrity status, you can have as many layers of trained managers as you like, but often they want to reach out to the owners and operations director at any time of the day or night. Sometimes it has a lot to do with security as well because often we're not disclosing the names of the clients even to our chauffeurs and staff. We're using pseudonyms at times because we can't afford to leak out details of specific itineraries, as they're often mobbed by paparazzi, so it's very intense for ourselves."

Rabia: "I find very wealthy clients will want personal attention. So even if they're happy with a comped ride, they'll want you to go a little bit extra and make sure the owner of the company calls them back so they feel valued. Any time of day or night, I will do that. . . I don't mind humbling myself, going down on one knee to any client. At the end of the day, they're paying for a service and I'll do whatever it takes."

Ajaib and Patel admire Richard Branson, the worldwide famous founder and CEO of the Virgin brand. They cite a story of Branson getting down on one knee to ask a former client to return to Virgin Airways.

Nadeem: "One thing about Richard Branson is he started his business with a phone call in a pub, one of those old red telephone boxes in London. He never had a telephone in his house, so he went to a public telephone box and set up a meeting with somebody he called. He dialed that number and the person answered. So he's gone from very humble beginnings and a fairly impoverished background to being at where he is."

Rabia: "I think he's a brilliant person. He really looks after his employees, he spends a lot of time with them, gets to know them, and they will always stay with him."



"Training and preparation are the two biggest things and at that point, you trust your people to make good decisions. I have this analogy that leadership and operations can be kind of like holding on to a cube of Jello. You can hold a cube of Jello in your palm with no problem, but when you squeeze it, it starts to go through your fingers and out of your hand. So if I'm constantly micromanaging my people and squeezing the life out of them, and their decision-making out of them, ultimately we're going to have problems because people are going to hyper tense."

— Barry Gross



Michael Brinks, owner, American Luxury Limousines, New Orleans, La.:

Cooperative competition: In a town known for conventions and group outings, Brinks sees competitors as an asset to leading in a market.

"When I look at the market, I've always been able to appreciate competition and see value in working with your competitors. If everybody works together and ends up getting better...then that leads to the success of everything. If you assume you have a pie of 100%, and if a given company has 20% of that pie, in order to increase to 22%, you have the choice of taking from someone else or working together to increase the pie. Because if the pie goes up to 110%, 20% of the market is like 22%. The bigger the market gets, the better it is for every company."

Michael and Marcelle Brinks of American Luxury Limousines.



John Paraoan, assistant VP/brand manager, West Suburban Limousine, Winfield, Ill.:

Can-do attitudes: Paraoan uses the acronym TRIP to describe the foundations of his leadership style: Teamwork, Responsibility, Integrity, and Professionalism. “None of us can do it all by ourselves, so my leadership style is to be approachable to our team as well as our customers. There’s no question or issue too big or small they can’t come to us with.”

His company has implemented a feature called “Rate My Ride.” This enables customers to provide feedback at the end of a trip. “Our goal is to, within 24 hours or less, immediately respond in a professional manner. If they touch base with us, whether it’s through Yelp, Facebook, email, or even a phone call, we want to be there for them; I don’t think TNCs take their customers as seriously as we do.”

Paraoan wants his company to foster a “never say no” attitude among employees. “You want them to think in terms of ‘let’s find out how we can do it. Maybe it’s a no now, but it might be yes in the future.’ That starts with hiring the right people.”

To find the right person, you have to hire slow and fire fast. “Recognize the positive and/or negative influences in who you are looking to hire. You may have to go through a coaching and probationary period, but you need to make a decision quick before that type of negativity or inactivity creates the wrong type of atmosphere.”

The biggest obstacle Paraoan has seen is changing the company culture to handle today’s sales pressure. There wasn’t as much competition in the past, so employees didn’t have to work as hard. To prevent a laissez-faire attitude toward business, he ensures staff feels comfortable discussing issues with one another and acting as a team to maintain prestige. They must realize everyone is working toward one goal: Creating a successful company.

“One of the things you have to understand in any business, especially in the service business, is how do you treat the customer? How you treat the employees is how they treat the customer. So you have to create respect. And a lot of people in our business have a tendency not to respect the chauffeurs. They respect the vehicles and the equipment sometimes more than the chauffeurs. And you’ve got to build respect and trust between the employees and the chauffeurs.”

— H.A. Thompson



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Michael Fogarty, CEO, Tristar Worldwide Chauffeur Services/Americas, Boston:

Info-driven delegating: As an executive at one of the world's largest ground transportation companies and former president of the Taxi Limousine & Paratransit Association, Fogarty maintains consistent quality through a detailed reporting system that allows him to delegate and focus on priorities.

"I'm a metrics driven leader. Fortunately, I have a really strong team of tenured managers, many of whom have worked for me for more than 10 years. This management structure enables me to focus my time and business development in any problem areas that arise. We have a tremendous reporting system that enables our team to keep an eye on the health of the business, quickly diagnose business issues, and work collaboratively to resolve them. These metrics also demonstrate successful sales and marketing efforts, so we can quickly double down on what's working. I love frontline employees who step up and resolve customer issues on the first call. We will always stand behind this person's efforts to satisfy our customers. I also mentioned we are a metrics driven organization. I tend to leave my team alone to do their jobs. We all understand what the key metrics we need to achieve are, and we share these with all involved to deliver on these goals. If we need to support any area of the business, I work with my managers to assure the resources are deployed."

Jeff and Laura Canady, co-owners of CLT Express Livery and S.C. Express Chauffeured Transportation, Charlotte, N.C., and Aiken, S.C.:

Hands on & hands off: The Canadys practice a leadership balanced by knowing when to pay close attention and stay on top of matters and when to empower employees to solve problems.

Jeff: "I am always hands on. I follow up all emails and with dispatchers, communicate with our mechanics every morning, our South Carolina office, and out motorcoach office. We educate and re-educate staff. I'm there and they can always get in touch with me when they have to."

The co-owners make sure clients or prospective ones are only asked questions once, and not subjected to a phone tree or multiple transfers requiring them to re-explain the reasons they called.

Laura: You want to have that personal touch. . . . We empower all our team to make decisions on reservations. We give the staff the tools needed to handle conflicts and resolve them. They can do a 10% discount if they are negotiating rates. It gives them ownership and they know they are part of the business." **LCT**



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