

Slow and Steady Wins the Race

College of Business supporter and new CEO of UPS David Abney shares how commitment- and a little perseverance- can really pay off when climbing the corporate ladder.

By Emily Daniels

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average employee stays at each of his or her positions for only 4.6 years. But UPS's new Chief Executive Officer David Abney is not your average employee. Abney began his 40-year ascension from the bottom of the world's largest package delivery company in 1974, as a part-time package loader.

A Greenwood, MS, native, Abney received his bachelor's degree in business administration from Delta State University. While loyal to his alma mater, he is also a strong supporter of Mississippi State University and the College of Business. Abney serves on the Executive Advisory Board for the College, and he has been a recent participant in the Leo W. Seal, Jr. Distinguished Speaker Series.

Prior to taking the reins at UPS, Abney shared what he has learned during his long career with the company and offered advice for those determined to become leaders in the business world.

You began your career with UPS 40 years ago as a part-time loader, before working your way to the very top of the company. What is it about UPS that kept you around for all these years?

DA: There's something about this company that gets in your blood, and it got in my blood early. I went to college thinking I wanted to be a history professor, but not long after I started working at UPS, I realized this was a company that you could stay at a long time and have a good career.

One thing that impressed me in my early days with UPS was that my managers took an interest in me. I've moved eight times in my career, and each time I was presented with new challenges and opportunities. So you have to keep learning and adjusting. That may be disruptive for some people, but I've always found it stimulating.

Do you feel that holding many positions within the corporation has given you an advantage when it comes to understanding and meeting the needs of the business and its employees?

DA: I really think it has. I told a group I was speaking to recently that I thought the moves I made during my career and the different positions I've held were really a 40-year apprenticeship for the job I'm about to take.

I know a lot of people these days move around from company to company, but that's unusual at UPS. A number of people do as I did: They come to UPS and stay their entire career. I think one reason that is so prevalent is that UPS is such a multi-faceted company. We have dedicated teams of professionals focused in a wide range of dynamic industries, including retail, healthcare, aeronautics and small business. So to keep up with our customers – and even stay ahead of them when it comes to supporting their shipping needs – we're always learning, always adjusting.

SonicAir, which is a same-day delivery service we acquired in 1995, is a good example of what I'm talking about. After the acquisition, UPS sent me to Scottsdale, Arizona, where I worked with the founder of SonicAir for a year and later ran the company. That's where I first learned the commercial side of the business. That was also my first exposure to logistics and international operations. I look back on that experience now and realize that's when I made the move from an operations manager to an overall businessperson.

Is there someone in particular who has made a tremendous impact on you as a leader? Why and how did this person impact your life?

DA: *There are so many, but there are two people who really stand out. The first was Ken Nester, another proud MSU supporter. I was the first supervisor Ken promoted when he came to Mississippi as the UPS District Manager. I also worked with him in Tennessee. Ken taught me that each of us has the potential to achieve more than we thought we could. He really showed me that you have to deal with the circumstances that come your way and find a way to be successful. He's been retired 15 years now, and I still keep in touch with him and really view him as a father figure.*

A second person is my wife, Sherry. She is the leader of our family, which is now stretching through three generations. While she was never a leader in the business world, she leads by example on a daily basis, always focusing on others for the good of the family. It's that "servant leadership" that causes people to want to follow leaders in whatever group, organization or enterprise that they are a part of. It has certainly been effective for me in my career and will be even more important in my new role.

What is one characteristic that you believe every leader should possess?

DA: *Leaders need to be great communicators. Of course, they need to be strategic thinkers and have a vision for where they want to lead the company. But strategy and vision are nothing more than words on paper until they are put into action. And since it takes a team of people to do that, leaders must be able to articulate the vision and explain the strategy. They can't do that by simply sending an e-mail or giving a speech. They have to communicate in a variety of ways that ensure their employees not only understand the plan, but also understand why it makes sense and their role in making it happen.*

Of course, communications goes both ways. Leaders also must be adept listeners. The first thing I wanted to do after my new position was announced was to go out and listen to our

employees and customers. I'm now in the midst of a multi-market listening tour. I've listened to our leaders in those markets, as well as the folks who sort and deliver packages, the work that is the backbone of our company. At every stop, I'm learning so much and being reminded of so many valuable lessons.

What is one of the biggest challenges facing leaders today?

DA: *Manufacturers, service providers, really anyone with a customer these days must acknowledge one indisputable fact: they're no longer in control – their consumers now wield all the power. Nowhere is this more evident than in the world of e-commerce, where the power of information technology comes head to head with the growing expectations of the consumer. The challenge is made more acute by the growth of emerging markets, which is introducing a new middle class with newfound buying power around the world. This is a paradigm shift that many leaders find. My advice to them is to resist swimming upstream. Go with the flow and understand how they can meet consumers' expectations in ways that are consistent with their own business objectives. One way that we are working to better understand the consumer is through UPS My Choice. My Choice is one more way technology is helping us give consumers more delivery options. We know they want to track their packages and have the flexibility to manage when and where they arrive. In the age of the consumer, we're relinquishing control and putting it in our customers' and end-consumers' hands.*

What are some of the biggest changes you've seen in the business world over your 40-year career, good or bad?

DA: *Business has probably changed more in the last 100 years than at any other period in history, and I've seen many of those changes during my career. I think you would have to start with technology and the Internet, which has enabled so many innovations and positive disruptions to traditional industries, including my own industry. Thanks to technology, there is not an address in the United States our drivers cannot identify in seconds and map the most efficient route to deliver a package.*

Globalization is certainly a huge change. It would have been impossible 40 years ago to imagine that 95 percent of the world's consumers would now live outside the U.S. or that the majority of the world's newest citizens in the next several decades will come from emerging markets and developing economies. In addition to the magnitude of globalization, it has also been a force for good. As borders have opened following the fall of Communism and global commerce has expanded, the global poverty rate has been cut in half as a percentage of the total population. It's very satisfying to be part of that ongoing transformation.

Sustainability was a word that 40 years ago had a far different meaning than it does for most people today. Back then the people who cared enough about the environment to do something about it were considered part of a fringe movement. Now everyone understands their vested interest in a healthier planet and we're seeing great support for sustainable initiatives in every public and private sector.

I would also add another social issue to this list. For too many years, business did not recognize the potential contributions of women and diverse populations. The change to treat women and minorities equally and fairly has brought untold innovations and diversity of thought to the workplace that benefit customers and improve business performance.

Can you explain the impact, if any, that social networking has made on your organization or you personally?

DA: Logistics is about connecting the world of commerce. In many ways, social networking is being utilized to achieve this same objective. At UPS, it is allowing us to connect to, converse with, learn from and inform our customers more effectively and efficiently. Social platforms help improve business processes such as customer service, recruitment, sales and communication. And more and more, it is helping our employees around the world connect and collaborate to share intelligence, solve issues and create business value. Efficiency, transparency, interconnectedness and collaboration - all are increasingly achieved through social networking and all are essential to the success of business, commerce and logistics.

While not an alumnus, you have been very involved with Mississippi State's College of Business over the years, as both an Executive Advisory Board member and a Seal Speaker. What drove your decision to become involved? Are there any family ties to the university?

DA: My father, Thomas William Abney, was certainly my tie to MSU. While he never attended college, he was a life-long fan of MSU. Some of my fondest memories as a child are the two of us going to football games in the fall. It gives me great pride and satisfaction that the Athletic Tutor Laboratory is named in his honor. I have passed his passion for MSU on to our kids and grandkids, so there have been four generations of Abneys pulling for the Bulldogs!

Gradually, my commitment to the university has extended beyond athletics. I have been impressed, observing the impact the College of Business has had on the lives of many of the students that I have met over the years, and I am proud to be a part of the Executive Advisory Board. Dean Oswald and her team are making a difference and doing some very exciting things right here in Starkville.

What advice would you give someone going into a leadership position for the first time?

DA: The first thing is to be willing to do more than you are asked to do, and be willing to do it to the best of your ability, whether or not anyone is watching. Pretty soon, you'll develop a reputation as someone who doesn't shy away from a challenge, someone who doesn't cut corners and someone who gets results.

The second thing is to work on your relationship skills. Developing good relationships is at the top of the list of skills that leaders need to build and sustain a successful organization. None of us can be effective leaders if we don't learn to motivate and inspire our employees to ensure they are engaged and committed to taking care of their customers.

A third thing I'll mention is flexibility. Sometimes, you don't know why an opportunity has come your way. Sometimes it doesn't even feel like an opportunity when it's first presented! But in our culture at UPS, you say yes and you roll up your sleeves and do your best to learn and adjust to the new challenge and contribute to the new opportunity.

At UPS, there's always a new challenge. That goes for the business and for our people. Our founder, Jim Casey, reinvented the business a couple of times in the early days. First the telephone and then the automobile changed the way people communicated and the way packages were delivered. Our leaders made the hard decisions to change our business model; those decisions saved the business a couple of times in the early days.

We've transformed the company a few times since, adding common carrier service and starting an airline in the '80s. More recently, the disruptive forces and opportunities of globalization and technology have altered our company once again. I think all those changes – each filled with new challenges and opportunities – are a big reason so many UPSers join the company at a young age and just never leave. It happened to me.

As a boy growing up in the small town of Greenwood, Mississippi, did you ever imagine you would one day be the CEO of a major corporation?

***DA:** I've been asked that question a few times recently, and I have to chuckle each time I hear it. Growing up in a working-class family in Greenwood in the '60s, my aspirations weren't nearly that high. In fact, I'm pretty sure my thoughts were probably focused on football and girls, not running a global business.*

*But there's no reason young girls and boys growing up in Mississippi today should **not** be thinking in those terms. Every year, my wife and I come to host an international business symposium, and one of my messages to young people is to stretch their horizons. I tell them that international trade is a major driver of the U.S. economy, that international trade supports millions of jobs in the United States in nearly every sector of the economy and that exports in particular are generating significant new employment opportunities.*

My final message is to always believe in yourself. Do not pay attention to that inner voice, or to other voices that may tell you why you can't do something. Find a way to do it! Commit yourself to be the best that you can be in whatever endeavor you take on.