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Wanted: Zeal for leadership

It's necessary to have when you're the boss

By Debra Williams
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Former Army Lt. Col. Carl Cockrum faced a difficult choice when he decided to retire after 22 years — accept an attractive job from a defense contractor, or sink nearly \$100,000 into a franchise to open a business.

He chose the latter, and he's never looked back.

"At this point, I really would have to be hard-pressed to even consider going back to work for someone else," said Cockrum, whose McLean, Va.-based CertaPro Painters now employs more than 50 and nets well into six figures each year.

"The freedom of being able to run your own business and set your own objective is great. I enjoyed all those years in the military, but I was always working for someone else. Someone else was setting the

standards and the schedules. You're constantly asking, 'Mother, may I?' It's the same thing in the corporate world," said Cockrum, whose tours included one as defense attaché in Sri Lanka.

Cockrum is living what is often called the new American dream — owning your own business. For many people, the chance to create your own opportunity and choose your own destiny as your own boss has replaced home ownership as the ultimate reward.

But anyone setting out to own his own business should know from the start that it takes long-term commitment, hard work — and above all — a passion for the job. You may be able to handle the 9-to-5 grind if you're not wildly crazy about a product or service and your role in making it. But when you're the only one determining your success, you must love your business.

"You have to have a passion for your business because you're the only one [who's] driving it," said Rolf Gruen, senior vice president and general manager of Lee Hecht Harrison, a career transition and outplacement firm based

in Woodcliff Lake, N.J.

Cockrum gets up early every day, usually even earlier than his military career required. Seven years after opening his franchise, he has a staff to help with sales and to make sure his painting crews are meeting the standard he expects. He reviews the work of his four full-time managers. He crunches numbers, talks to prospective customers and plans the company's future as well as runs many aspects of its day-to-day operations.

"When you first start out, [you do] everything," said Cockrum. In fact, the only thing he didn't do in the first couple of years his business was open was paint.

"You're the estimator meeting customers. You're running the crews and making sure the work is done. You're doing the office work," he said.

Let that be a warning for anyone who imagines running a business as a world where you sleep late and take afternoons off for golf or shopping.

"Often, self-employment looks very attractive on the first blush," Gruen said. "To be self-employed, you have to have a lot of self-initiative. It takes a great deal of discipline and it's a 24/7 job, particularly in the first two or three years."

You handle everything

For many new business owners, the realization that it is indeed only you is a bit overwhelming. Gruen encourages would-be entrepreneurs to think carefully beforehand and decide if this is what they really want.

"You're doing both the selling and the delivering of services. If you talk to an employer about a job, you'll have certain givens. You'll know what the job duties are. Someone else will handle administrative matters, like insurance. When you own a business, you have to handle everything," Gruen said.

Tom Hofer is another veteran who dreamed of business ownership. In fact, when he left the Navy as a lieutenant after five years of service, he was able to get in on the ground floor of Spring Green Lawn Care, now one of the country's top five lawn care franchises. He opened one of Spring Green's first franchises, only to sell it back to the company two years later and join its corporate staff. He's now its chief executive and oversees 100 franchises.

And just like Cockrum, he's never looked back.

"I saw the opportunity to do more in my particular situation. My ambition was to go beyond owning a single franchise. When that opportunity opened, I took it," Hofer said.

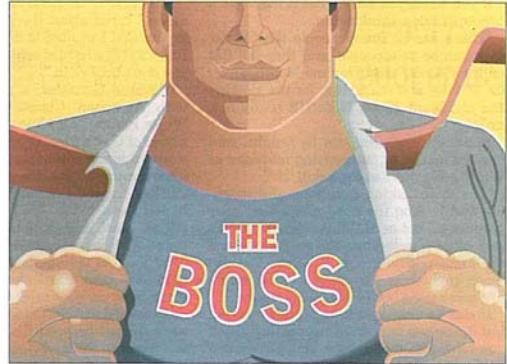


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Hofer thinks the decision to open a small business or pursue rungs on the corporate ladder has to be an individual one based on the circumstances. Many veterans choose franchising based on their need for a less conventional routine, he said.

"There's a flexible work schedule [in Spring Green franchise ownership] that allows a certain lifestyle. We are not a storefront business, and you don't have to be in the store so many hours a day," Hofer said.

The decision to own a franchise or run a large business may come down to a few simple factors, with money being the biggest.

Both the painting and lawn care franchises take about \$100,000 to open, which includes operating capital for about a year. Veterans can turn to several programs that make opening a franchise easier.

■ VetFran, sponsored by the International Franchise Association, assists veterans hoping to open a franchise. More than 200 franchising companies participate.

■ Individual companies have

programs for veterans. Spring Green, for example, offers the Military Assistance Program, which gives qualified veterans a grant to cover part of the start-up costs.

■ Third-party financing is arranged by many franchises. This increases the chances of getting a business loan.

While these options help move veterans closer to business ownership, without decent credit and some cash or collateral, financing a new business will be difficult.

Another factor Hofer encourages veterans to consider is the comfort level they feel operating independently. Most, like Cockrum, will do much of the planning, paperwork and promoting for the first years in business. Even if you open a franchise with support from corporate headquarters, you'll be making many decisions and doing much of the work alone.

"In my case, in the corporate world, you have a staff of people to rely on. When you start your franchise, you'll have us as a support team, but we don't visit your customers or fix your truck," Hofer explains.

For service members who are used to having support personnel, this scenario can be uncomfortable, Hofer said.

"As a franchise owner, you are making a tremendous commitment in terms of time and effort. Our franchises may start out as a small operation but over a period of time it develops into something substantial," Hofer said.

Business ownership as is a lengthy commitment, Gruen said, with business plans written five, 10 or 20 years out.

"It's a long-term haul," he said. "It can't be like 'I'll take this job for a year and see how it works.'"

(For more on running your own business, please see page 14.) □



COURTESY OF SPRING GREEN

Former Navy Lt. Tom Hofer opened a Spring Green lawn care franchise, and is now the company's chief executive.

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