

Time to Fly: Reflections on My Last Day at The Coca-Cola Company

I am writing this on a plane to somewhere, thinking about retiring from The Coca-Cola Company after 21.5 years. That's almost 8,000 days, 192,000 hours, 40% of my life working for one employer. I resolved to stay at Coke after job-hopping across different companies (e.g., AmSouth Bank, Ralston Purina, Dale Carnegie Training, and Hershey Chocolate).

A friend told me that once folks become part of the beverage industry, they typically stay. But staying long-term with TCCC was always uncertain. I've often compared working at TCCC to being a member of Congress. You're up for re-election every two years, and once elected, your campaign starts all over again. I've experienced 11 re-organizations averaging about one every two years. I've been mapped into roles, involuntarily relocated, and displaced. Some positions were an absolute joy and others not so much. Often, the work experience came down to the relationship with my manager, the work environment, and the job I was assigned. I've worked with and for some terrific leaders. I've also worked for some tyrants. Maybe like you, I modeled what I saw in the great ones and learned what not to do from the deficient ones. Leadership is better caught than taught.

My career never defined who I was or am. Honestly, my veins don't run Coke red. My priorities were different than most. I put my faith and family above all others.

I always wanted to perform well and deliver results. For about half of my time at TCCC, I was focused on myself, my reputation, and my ambitions. It wasn't until mid-stream that God got ahold of me, and I began understanding that people

matter more than performance. Sure, results are significant, and winning makes everything better; I don't take results and winning for granted. But a personal and public transformation took place in the second half of my Coke tenure. I realized that focusing on people, helping them become the best version of themselves, and creating a positive work environment meant more than a maniacal focus on results. Said another way, the *How* trumps the *What*. I learned *how* I operated mattered, and putting others first typically led to solid results. Much of my transformation is captured in my book, [Disciplined Leader](#).

If I'm being transparent, I never ascended to a once desired role, vice president. Sometimes, I look back and sometimes wonder why. But at the end of my career, that's neither here nor there. But I do have a key takeaway. It may seem cliché. Here it is, **position doesn't equal influence**. The higher you go in an organization doesn't necessarily equate to the level of impact you achieve. I didn't need to be a VP or lead an organization to be influential. Many of my leaders empowered me to make sound decisions, solve challenging problems, make positive changes, and deliver results as I worked with and through my teams or cross-functional partners.

As Coke and I part ways, allow me to indulge in remembering a few of my favorite things...

Favorite People: Rick Kehr, Ron Renner, Bobby Lyemance, Michael Mathews, Fran Mulholland, Dawn Kirk, Paula Weeks, Ken Mied, Jim Marvel, John Egan, John Lynch, Emma Budzisz, John Rutledge, Jerry Graves, Bill Harris, Mike Griggs, Kurt Ritter, Red Ashby, Eric Blumenthal, Holly Cunningham (Mattingly), Vic Ragland, Rudd Cummings, Andy Alabiso, Lindsay Adleman, Lori Bates, Bob DeBorde, Tim Leveridge, Joe Gentry, Stephen Gibson, Edwin Gotay

Favorite Places: Istanbul, Moscow (pre-conflict), Toronto, Boston, Chicago, New York City, Martha's Vineyard, Key West, Disneyworld, Universal Studios, Knoxville, Duck Key, San

Francisco, Seattle

Favorite Events: Swan Lake Ballet at Moscow's Bolshoi Theater (pre-Ukraine war), NCAA Men's Basketball Final Four, NCAA Football National Championship, dancing with the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall, countless University of Alabama, Auburn University, and Tennessee University athletic events, LA Dodgers game and seeing Tommy Lasorda in the dugout, and attending the Colorado State University Coke conversion celebration

Favorite Celebrity Connections: Ryan Seacrest, Nick Saban, Tommy Tuberville (only one who remembered my name!), Dennis Franchione, Mike Shula, Mal Moore, Phil Fulmer, Lane Kiffin, Bruce Pearl, Pat Summitt, Derek Wittenburg, 3 Doors Down

Favorite Role: Hands down, Franchise Leadership. I loved working with our Bottling Partners and making things happen at ground level.

Least Favorite Role: I had to throw this one in... Strategic Merchandising Solutions. UGH! A peer once asked, "why would anyone on God's green earth ever want that role?" I attribute turning gray and losing my hair to the intense stress, political posturing, and micro-management I experienced.

Favorite Initiatives: Leading two Employee Engagement Teams (improving leadership, teamwork, and work environment), Change the Landscape (Tuscaloosa low share market turnaround), Fridge Pack Pilot (Alabama was a pre-launch test market), Coke Zero (by far my favorite brand as well), Vault (fighter brand targeting Mt. Dew drinkers), glaceau acquisition (vitaminwater and smartwater), Partnering for Growth (globally scaled team effectiveness workshop), college marketing plans, Brand Partners Summit (brought internal competing brands representatives together), countless sales rallies, Bottling Partner leadership workshops (Reyes and Consolidated), and Design Thinking sessions.

Thanks to my bride and best friend, Carla, and our children, Caroline and Benton. Your sacrifices enabled an enduring and rewarding career. I am so grateful for you all.

Lastly, thanks to Mark Rajewski and the Sales & Franchise Capabilities Team for helping me finish well.

I walk away with my head held high, thankful for my tenure at The Coca-Cola Company, looking to the future, moving out in faith, not knowing where I'm going but trusting God—wanting to follow the call to help people become the best version of themselves and equipping others to become redemptive workplace influencers. Or, in Coke speak, refreshing the world and making a positive difference. I hope our paths cross again someday.

In closing, I leave you with some lyrics from MercyMe's *Say I Won't* (<https://music.apple.com/us/album/say-i-wont/1541075065?i=1541075066>)... The song inspired me, and I hope it does you as well.

Today
It all begins
I'm seeing my life for the very first time
Through a different lens

Yesterday
I didn't understand
Driving 35 with the rocket inside
Didn't know what I had

While I've been waiting to live
My life's been waiting on me

I'm gonna run
No, I'm gonna fly
I'm gonna know what it means to live
And not just be alive
The world's gonna hear
'Cause I'm gonna shout

And I will be dancing when circumstances drown the music out
Say I won't

Not enough
Is what I've been told
But it must be a lie
'Cause the Spirit inside says I'm so much more

So let them say what they want
Oh, I dare them to try

I can do all things
Through Christ who gives me strength
So keep on saying I won't
And I'll keep proving you wrong

Say I won't

Time to fly! All my best and take care.

Cheers!

Preston