



Aim high

Former fighter pilot applies military lessons to business

STRATEGIES SECTION B

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Strategies Ideas For Growing Business

Section B

Aim High

Former fighter pilot applies lessons learned in military to small and mid-sized businesses



Cleared for takeoff: Following a stint in the U. S. Air Force, where he piloted jets, Mike Gomez went on to work for the world's largest aircraft manufactures.

By Tom Barry
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Mike Gomez was an aerospace engineer for the U.S. Navy, flew trainer jets in the Air Force, and then held high-stakes sales and management positions for some of the world's largest aircraft manufacturers.

Over two decades, Gomez conducted business on over 20 countries and racked up roughly \$5 billion in sales of military airplanes.

Today, as president of Decatur-based Allegro Consulting Inc., the 48-year-old Gomez applies lessons learned in those international arenas to help the owners of small and mid-sized businesses achieve sustainable long-term growth.

Just as relentless focus is needed on the military front so is it needed in business, Gomez said.

"An owner must analyze the environment, define goals, craft a

Gomez will discuss growth strategies on July 16 at the Georgia Tech Global Learning Center. The free seminar will last from 7:30 a.m. to 9 a.m.

comprehensive strategy, ensure that everyone is on board, and finally execute to that strategy with precision."

Trouble is, most owners don't come close to doing that, "Ninety percent of

them don't even have a plan, which means they're winging it and going down paths they shouldn't," Gomez said. "It's like being in a sailboat without a rudder in the middle of the Atlantic. The winds are going to blow

you somewhere, and you could just as easily end up in Finland as in South Africa. A good plan will get you to your destination in a straight line."

Gomez's own career has hardly been rudderless. After earning an aircraft engineering degree from Western Michigan University, Gomez became a civilian aerospace engineer for the Navy and then spent four years in the Air Force, flying T-37 and T-38 trainer jets and tutoring other pilots.

Being a pilot was a lifelong dream of Gomez, but the long-term signs

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weren't auspicious. The Air Force was downsizing and some pilots were headed to desk jobs.

Leveraging both his engineering and flying credentials, Gomez in 1986 joined McDonnell Douglas as a system safety engineer, then eventually came to lead business development activities for the giant manufacturer in Israel, Japan and Kuwait, among other countries.

Highlighting his tenure was the \$2.5 billion sale of F-15 fighters to Israel in 1994, ending a five-year pitched battle with incumbent Lockheed Martin Corp. and its F-16 fighter.

Gomez went on to serve as F-151 program manager for The Boeing Co. (which merged with McDonnell-Douglas in 1997), where he had profit-and-loss responsibility for a \$2.5 billion program to manufacture and deliver 25 F-151 fighters to Israel. More than 1,300 Boeing workers and 300 sub-contractors worked on the program.

From large-scale to small-scale-from the military to defense contracting to small-business operations - the fundamentals have universal application.

"you realize quickly that success comes from surrounding yourself with bright energetic people, and that you empower, inspire and motivate them to achieve the outcome you envision," Gomez said. "A leader monitors progress as well as the continuing changes in the environment, and makes slight course corrections where necessary."

Gomez later directed Middle East business development for Lockheed Martin Aeronautics, handling all strategic fight and transport aircraft sales initiatives for the region. While at Lockheed, he also realigned F-16 marketing and related strategies for Poland helping win a \$3 billion fighter contract over British, French, and Russian rivals.

Prior to starting Allegro in 2005, Gomez served as vice president of business development for Hupp Aerospace/Defense, a New Haven, Ind.-based defense logistics company. In his two and a half year there, annual revenue grew from \$8 million to \$35 million.

Gomez speaks with almost missionary zeal about growing businesses. First and foremost, he says, a company must craft a well thought out plan for the future, something usually overlooked among the myriad day-to-day details of running a business.



Stakes are high: Mike Gomez, center wearing the white shirt, discusses airplanes with the-Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, far right.

"It's the absolute No. 1 thing on my list," said Gomez, who believes 80 percent of smaller companies don't come close to realizing their potential. "Businesses need a long-term strategic plan for three to five years out as well as a tactical plan for the next year. It's amazing (but) people spend more time planning their vacation than on how to run their business."

As a pilot, hours of planning went into each mission, Gomez said.

"You plotted out on a map where you were going, what points you'd reach to get there and what the topography would look like. You didn't just strap yourself in the plane and fly."

An effective plan need not be the size of the proverbial telephone directory, Gomez said. A single page will suffice. "If you can't read it [quickly], then no one will read it, and it will never be used."

Such plans he added should be consulted regularly.

Smaller companies also fail in another big area he, said. "They don't have clear, defined roles and responsibilities for their key employees, and they fail to hold people accountable regarding goals they have set for them."

"Maybe the owner's buddy is the head of operations," Gomez said. "Well, the buddy may have been qualified when the company was producing 30 widgets a month, but now that it's producing 300, he doesn't have the background for the job."

Gomez said a business owner also must thoroughly understand the company's core competency and not get bogged down in unrelated,

unproductive areas, a common mistake. Similarly, the CEO must act like a CEO, and not like a manager.

"Most owners are so busy putting out fires that they fail to look at the log-range picture," Gomez said.

Dan Clark, owner of a 20-employee printing company in Ann Arbor, Mich., recently implemented a growth plan created with Gomez's help. Dollar Bill Copying rang up steady profits for years but lately has had to grapple with rising competition and a rapidly changing marketplace.

"We have to change our culture to deal with a lot of things we didn't have to deal with five or 10 years ago," Clark said. "Planning is probably the biggest thing."

Clark said Gomez brought "a dose of reality" to the company during the weeks long planning process. Four months into the makeover, Clark is encouraged by the results.

"I'm not going to tell you it hasn't been difficult," he said. "It's been very difficult. When you deal with people in a small business and some have been with you for quite some time, there's a loyalty side that's challenged. Because if they can't change the only thing you are left with is to replace them."

John Kelly worked with Gomez when he was a consultant with Lockheed Martin, following a career in the U.S. Foreign Service including stints as U.S. ambassador to Lebanon (1985-89) and Finland (1991-94).

"Mike's a terrific salesman - hard-driving and very thorough," said Kelly, who lives in Conyers and teaches at Georgia Tech's Sam Nunn School of

Allegro's Consulting's Mike Gomez offers business owners these 10 essential elements to achieve long-term sustained growth:

- ▶ Develop a plan, both strategic (three-year) and tactical (one-year), then operate according to the plan.
- ▶ Hold yourself and employees accountable. (Fire underperformers, if necessary)
- ▶ Behave like a CEO, not a manager.
- ▶ Understand your core competency and nurture it.
- ▶ Develop a targeted sales and marketing campaign.
- ▶ Retain a good chief financial officer, and build relationships with financial institutions before you need them.
- ▶ Make good hiring decisions. Develop clear job descriptions and performance expectations.
- ▶ Provide exceptional customer service. No excuses.
- ▶ Know your competition.
- ▶ Be willing to use outside expertise (legal, marketing, etc.) when needed.

International Affairs. "He took a very serious approach to figuring out who the economic decision-makers were in the government."

Kelly recalled Gomez's labors on a multi-year campaign to sell C-130J transport planes - built in Marietta - to Kuwait.

"[Ineffective] salesman just sort of say, "Our plane is good and you really ought to buy it," Kelly said. "That's a parody - it's a little more sophisticated than that - but American [aircraft] all are good. Mike figured out who within the Kuwait government would make the decisions, which is a fairly murky thing to do. He knew those people or who could get to them with a persuasive message. He did a lot of homework."

To date, Allegro Consulting has been a one-man consulting operation. But Gomez wants to eventually bring in a finance expert and a marketing/branding specialist.

"That will be when I've met the growth goals I've set for myself," he said.

Seems like the man has a plan.