

BUSINESS & CAREERS



Tribune photos by MICHAEL SPOONEYBARGEI

TEAM PLAYERS

At Advanced C4 Solutions, running a healthy business means catering to clients and employees.

By TED JACKOVICS
The Tampa Tribune

The three principals who created Advanced C4 Solutions Inc. in 2002 clearly understand teamwork.

Hugh Campbell, the president of the company, is a West Point graduate. The two managing partners, Norm Abdallah and Dwight Stephens, served as a U.S. Air Force officer and U.S. Army noncommissioned officer, respectively. All three are combat veterans, working with and relying on others to complete a mission.

These days, they parlay their military backgrounds and experience with companies such as IBM and Intermedia Communications Inc. to provide telecommunications engineering services to the military, government and private-sector companies.

Although AC4's work involves projects such as the design, installation and operations support for information technology and intelligence systems for joint military programs, the corporate philosophy is quite simple: Instill and reinforce a sense of pride and ownership in employees' everyday activities.

The 50-person company, whose employees are spread out from the Middle East to Tampa, could grow to more than 100 employees this year. The three leaders recently shared their thoughts on starting and operating a small business.

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HUGH CAMPBELL,
PRESIDENT, 40

Tips for starting a company:

1. Pick good partners.
2. Do your homework.

"I always had a plan to participate in the military-industrial complex in some form or another. One of my former soldiers contacted me after I had served for 10 years and said 'Sir, you really ought to think about joining this organization,' which at the time was Intermedia Communications Inc. in Tampa.

"That transition was easy. Then we started this company. In the technology field, it is very, very rare to have strong leaders who are technically savvy. You may have a strong technical person, but that does not make them a manager, a supervisor or a leader. I think about that as we expand: How do you provide leadership and guidance?"

"The way we are organized, Norm and I are concerned with the next deal and growing the business. Dwight — we call him our headquarters commandant — he's responsible for running the business day-to-day. That setup is probably a good reason for our growth.

"We are not pretentious; it is not our style. We end our weekly staff meeting presentations with the same last line: What are our goals and objectives for the year? The very last bullet is always about appreciating, challenging and rewarding employees. If you can do that, everything else can take care of itself."



NORM ABDALLAH, MANAGING PARTNER, 38

How to advance your career in a team environment:

1. Understand that there's probably more that you don't know than you do.

2. Relationships are often more important than know-how. "With the military, they have one switch. We know all about a thousand switches. It's like they have a hammer and go to find a nail. We show up with bag of tools to solve problems. We understand what the communications sector has to offer and what the best interests of the war fighter are, and we bridge that gap.

"The way you did it yesterday is not way you do it tomorrow. You know full well every deployment will be different, every network architecture will be different, and you must stay in touch with the leading edge of technology."

"It's funny, one day I show up in uniform and I'm a hero. I'm trusted. I'm a professional. The next day I show up dressed as a contractor in civilian clothes, and all of a sudden there's a generic mistrust.

"It is very difficult to balance good business decisions with what's right for the war fighter. We know what really needs to happen, and this may not be the best business decision. For us being small, we have the latitude to make business decisions on a regular basis to support the war fighter that we hope will dispel any mistrust and be good in the long run for us."

DWIGHT STEPHENS, MANAGING PARTNER, 44

What's important in managing a small company:

1. Prayer

2. Retain a sense of humility along with a thirst for knowledge. "As an enlisted man in the Army, I always had an eagerness to freelance things outside the box, which initially caused me problems when I was a private. I went up through the ranks and got some opportunity to have some responsibility and learned to love teaching.

"Being on the enlisted side of things, I was involved in more of the hands-on dealing with folks, motivating them to get the most out of them to implement plans from folks above me and my peers.

"But there is so much you can learn from folks you are placed over, getting that feedback, allowing a private or a specialist day-to-day input on how they are going to perform their jobs.

"As we mature this company, we get farther and farther removed from the things we are accustomed to doing and farther geographically from our people. We have to rely on our talent to be observant. We stay accessible to our people 24-7. ... It's just the way I was raised — be nice to people."

