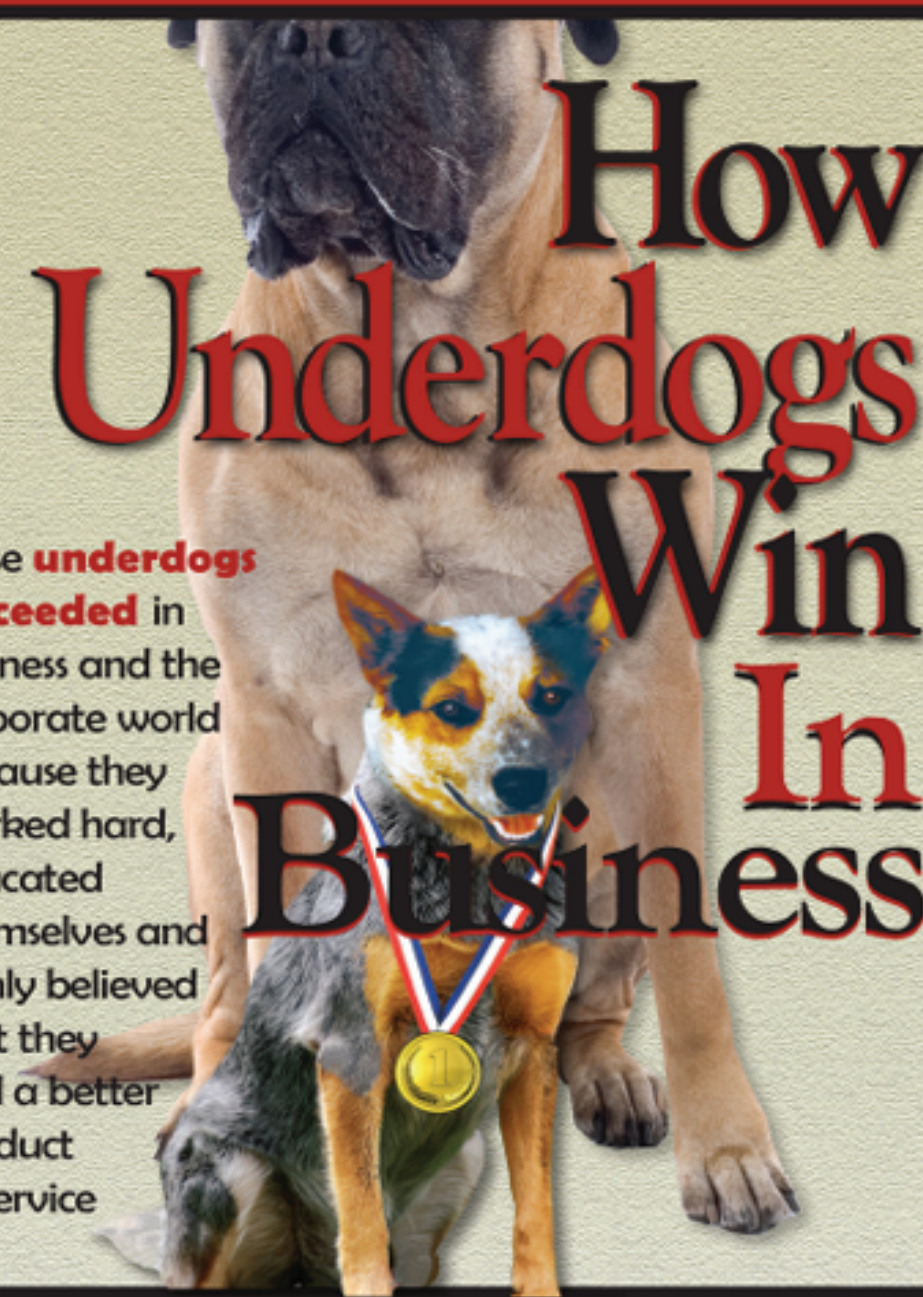


Bama Cos. ♦ Cobalt Boats ♦ Greenway Electric ♦ High Touch



How Underdogs Win In Business

These **underdogs** **succeeded** in business and the corporate world because they worked hard, educated themselves and firmly believed that they had a better product or service

Leon Trammell

Hiller Inc. ♦ Mullin Plumbing ♦ Solomon Corp. ♦ Tramco

How Underdogs Win in Business

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These eight underdogs succeeded in business and the corporate world because they worked hard, educated themselves and firmly believed they had a better product or service.

By Leon Trammell

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About Leon Trammell

VOLUNTEER WORK

- Past Chairman of the Board of Kansas World Trade Center
- Board Member of World Trade Council of Wichita
- Regional Vice Chairman, Board of Directors of United States Chamber of Commerce
- Vice-Chair of United States Chamber of Commerce, International Policy Committee
- Member of United States Chamber of Commerce Council on Small Business
- Member of CEO Transatlantic Business Dialogue (TABD)
- Member of President's Export Advisory Council, 2006-2008
- Board Member of the National Association of Manufacturing

WASHINGTON

- Lobbies Congress in Support of Renewal of the most favored Nation trading relations with China yearly.
- Testified before the House Trade Subcommittee in Support of Normal Trade Relation status to China on March 4, 1999.
- Testified before the House Committee on Ways and Means in Support of Permanent Normal Trade Relations to China on Feb. 16, 2000.
- Testified before the House Trade Subcommittee in Support of the Chile/Singapore Trade Agreement on June 10, 2003.
- Testified before the House Committee on Small Business in Support of the Crane, Rangel, Manzullo DR/CAFTA on Sept. 10, 2003.
- Testified before the Senate Committee on Finance in support of U.S.-Peru Trade Promotion Agreement, on June 29, 2006.

EXPORTING AWARDS

- Export Achievement Award, 1994 & 2004, given by the World Trade Council of Wichita
- Exporter of the Year for SBA's Wichita District Office, 1993
- Exporter of the Year for SBA's Region VII, 2004
- Kansas Governor's Exporter of Year, 2004
- President's "E" Award for Exporting Excellence, 2005
- U.S. Chamber of Commerce TradeRoots International Leadership Award, 2009

*“Life’s greatest game is
your occupation.”*

Leon Trammell
Founder of Tramco Inc.



The Underdog in Us All

An Introduction

My business and Sam Riffel’s couldn’t be more different.

Tramco Inc. makes conveyors, shaping steel and plastic into equipment that keeps grain elevators and ports running smoothly from Duluth to Dubai.

Sam’s company, Coffee Time Inc., made coffee, providing brews and brewing machines that kept employees running smoothly in workplaces all over Wichita, Kansas.

Sam and I did business for decades, with locations just blocks apart in an industrial stretch north of downtown Wichita.

Sam died several years ago, and I attended my friend’s funeral. I heard of Sam’s lives, of his passion for sports, of his love of family.

I heard how Sam began Coffee Time as a sideline to building planes at Boeing.

I heard how Sam filled thermoses with coffee and hauled them to offices to jump-start workers’ days.

How Coffee Time grew to the point Sam quit pounding sheet metal and took up coffee full time.

How the business evolved from brewing coffee into supplying the machines and coffee so employees could make a fresh cup anytime.

How Sam built a multimillion-dollar company that provided well for his family.

And in Sam’s story, I heard my own, one where grinding coffee and forming

steel share many similarities.

It's about nurturing ideas and improving products and services. It's about working hard and improving your greatest asset, yourself. It's about growing, prospering and surviving.

It and the other business stories in *How Underdogs Win* are ones others can learn from. You don't have to start your own company like I did with Tramco. The lessons apply just as well to people climbing someone else's corporate ladder through smarts, dogged persistence and hard work.

One of the motivating factors for men and women who succeed in business is that they see themselves as underdogs. The odds are against them — they're poor, from the "wrong" country, race or gender, it can be most anything — and still they succeed. They work hard, educate themselves and firmly believe they've got a better product or service, a better way of doing things.

The stories of Hiller Inc. and Bama Pie and Solomon Corp. and the people who founded and lead them are interesting. They provide specific insights about learning and growing a business and ensuring its survival. From their stories and the others in this book, I think readers can come to believe that "Hey, that could be me. I could do that." Because you can.

Your occupation doesn't care if you're fat or bald-headed. What counts is your performance above the shoulders, where creativity and drive are the great equalizers. If you approach your occupation, your greatest game, with 90 percent of the enthusiasm you put into your hobby, you will be successful.

I grew up on a small dairy farm in northwest Arkansas. With 10 or 12 cows, it wasn't a big operation, but it provided for our family of seven. Milking cows with my father and brothers morning and night, day in, day out taught me a lot about hard work but not much about prosperity.

My talents didn't lean to the classroom — the world outside the classroom interested me more. Though I didn't much like milking cows, my ability to judge them proved my best shot at a college education.

During my senior year, I won the Arkansas State Dairy Judging contest and a chance for a University of Arkansas scholarship in animal husbandry along with it. A local bank offered to match the \$500 scholarship, if I agreed to work as a farm-loan banker after graduation. A trip to the National Livestock Exposition in Chicago was part of the contest prize.

Chicago's tall buildings, big-league Comiskey Park and Wrigley Field, the Field Museum, the Lake Michigan sailboats, all opened my eyes to the world of possibilities. Chicago was my version of Gay Paris; you could no longer keep me down on the farm.

Home from that Chicago trip, I decided I didn't want to pursue a career in

animal husbandry. I didn't know exactly what I wanted from life, but it was more than dairy farming could provide.

Making my way to Wichita, where aircraft factories were building bombers for the Korean and Cold Wars, I worked first for Boeing and eventually for Ross Industries, a flour miller. There, for 13 years, with on-the-job training and engineering courses I pursued, I honed my gifts — the ability to see geometric shapes in my head and to craft and assemble machinery.

At Ross, I became a project manager and learned to manage people and work with contractors on capital improvement projects. I discovered that the area did not have contractors knowledgeable in cereal food processing construction. I was teaching these contractors what we expected of them and as a result of this teaching experience, I came to realize this was a niche I could pursue. At the same time, I was slowly realizing that the American Dream — and that's too narrow, as people all over the globe dream it — of owning my own business could be mine.

If you have reached that point in your career, the point where you've apprenticed, learned your business and are ready to climb to the next level, then read on. Or, as Calvin Coolidge's time-tested quotation puts it, PRESS ON!

How Underdogs Win is written for people who aspire to move beyond their comfort zone, not for the person who puts more into weekend softball games than into his or her career. It's for the person who has become so indispensable to their company that no matter the times, you will be needed under all economic conditions.

No doubt, it won't be easy, as studies say less than half of new businesses survive five years and less than three in 10 survive a decade. And if you're climbing someone else's corporate ladder, you'll likely face heavy competition

PRESS ON!

“Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan Press ON! has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race.

President Calvin Coolidge

for your goals of success and personal satisfaction.

Those who are truly successful recognize their talents and find work that suits them. Those who are successful also recognize their weaknesses, that they don't know about purchasing, about drafting, about accounting, that they don't work well with people, and go about educating themselves to fill those gaps or hire people who can.

They pursue the education or training necessary to become capable of doing the job. They put in the 50, 60 or more hours it takes. They do the job well and exceed expectations. They ask for more and more responsibility. They compete at the highest level against other businesses smaller and larger. They listen to their customers and do business by the golden rule, treating others as they want to be treated. They know that if they organize the company better and think more strategically about a problem, they can produce a better product or service.

Many of these steps and qualities are sketched out in the Blueprint for Success that's tucked into the center of this book. It's a shorthand way of sharing the lessons learned by myself and the other businesspeople in these pages.

Running through this blueprint, this road map, is one essential quality to building a company or career: To achieve and maintain success, you must never stop believing you're an underdog.

We are all underdogs in some way, and if we work with that mind-set, we will succeed because the competition — the big dog — becomes complacent. It's the big dog's overconfidence, the arrogant belief that they don't need to keep evolving and working hard, that leads to their eventual shortcomings.

To prove the point, try to think of a company that's lasted a century, that hasn't been bought out, merged with another company or bankrupted.

In 1979, more than 12 years after I started Tramco, I was invited to Moscow to give a technical paper on grain handling. A reporter for TASS, the Soviet newsgathering agency, chose me to interview because I was the only business owner giving a paper.

The reporter grilled me about Tramco's conveyors, asking questions that made it clear he was well prepared. But his last question made it clear that a reporter working in a closed, bureaucratic society could not grasp one of the fundamental reasons American business is so innovative.

"How many competitors do you have in the United States?" he asked.

I thought for a few seconds and guessed 20 to 30.

"Wouldn't it be nice if you were the only provider of chain conveyors in the United States?" the reporter replied.

No, that's the last thing in the world that would be good for me or my business.

If Tramco was the only company in the United States you could buy a chain conveyor from, I'd come to work about 11 o'clock, maybe, and I might stay for an hour, then go to lunch or home for the day. If you called me about the delivery of your machine, and you got just a little smart with me, I'd kick you all the way to the bottom of the list.

No, a lack of competition is the last thing I'd want. Without it, I wouldn't have to run like a son-of-a-bitch to stay in first place and life's greatest game, your occupation, wouldn't be anywhere near as much fun.

During my four decades in business, I've traveled to every corner of the United States and the globe. Met premiers, sultans and Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Won export awards from state and federal governments. Participated in the TransAtlantic Business Dialogue with CEOs of some of the United States' and Europe's largest, most respected companies.

I've crawled all over conveyors, competitors' and my own, looking for better ways to make the product. Hired many men and women, and painfully cut them loose when survival depended on it. Had my Mercedes, an airplane and a Flint Hills ranch that I love. But even in the best of times, I've never stopped fearing that I could lose what I'd built and the opportunities it provided.

One of the reasons I haven't is because I've always had the mind-set of an underdog.

First up in the book is my story, including lessons I've learned and experiences I've gained traveling the globe selling conveyors. Then, in the pages that follow, others share their stories, of their successes, their failures and how they kept at it to get and stay on top. They're interesting stories of interesting people, of underdogs. Just like you.

Leon Trammell
Founder, Tramco Inc.
Wichita, Kansas

“I developed a persistence. I didn’t do it overnight.... When I reached that level, then I think nicer things started happening.”

Leon Trammell

Always Moving Ahead

Tramco Inc.

November of 1950, there I was in northwest Arkansas, with no specific plan for the future except wanting more from the world than dairy farming.

War hung over the heads of young Americans like myself, as North Korea invaded that year and drove South Korean troops and their American allies into a corner. I expected to be drafted and would gladly go if called.

After Election Day that fall, with so much unsettled, my brother-in-law asked if I’d like to go to Wichita, Kansas, to find work in a “defense factory.”

Getting work was easy at Boeing, which was building B-47s, the first jet bomber. I took and passed the Army pre-induction physical, too.

My path still uncertain, I bounced back and forth between Wichita and Arkansas. The Korean Conflict ticked along, but the Army cleared up one uncertainty when it rejected me because of stomach trouble. Years later, my stomach problems were diagnosed as lactose intolerance — allergic to cow’s milk.

Settling in Wichita for good, I went to work at Kansas Milling, a flour milling company, in 1954. The work reinforced a few things I’d learned about myself, about skills that would guide me in years ahead: I enjoy installing and connecting equipment and can visualize things geometrically. For instance, if I’m sitting in an office, I can visualize whether and where the desk, the sofa, the chairs and so on will fit. Then I can measure and prove it.

Starting in Kansas Milling’s packaging department, I soon became a low-level supervisor. Maintenance though, interested me more because it meant building things. So I asked my supervisor, Frances Roe, for a transfer into the maintenance department.

“Come back and see me in about two weeks,” he told me. “I’ve got something in mind.”

Two weeks later I learned Roe wanted me in the spouting division, where flour is transported from milling to packing. However, he wanted someone

capable of doing their own drawing and pattern development, and he gave me books on drafting and developing geometric patterns.

At night, after getting off work, I would study three or four hours because it was exciting and I knew it could elevate my career.

Roe transferred me after I'd completed the course, and I worked in that department for 13 years.

My supervisor appreciated my motivation, drive to learn and willingness to take on responsibility. The job was enjoyable — I had a knack for it — but somehow I knew I was working, working hard, toward something bigger.

After becoming project manager, I oversaw capital improvements to the mill and developed expertise in designing and installing air-quality control systems. Ross Industries, which bought Kansas Milling, was hiring outside contractors, and I was teaching them how to do their

work. And that got me to thinking.

A lot of people want to be in business for themselves, me included. I had always thought that was the American Dream, but an English friend told me that it's a World Dream, not just an American Dream.

Pursuing a world of dreams

The dream tugged at me, egged on by unexpected sources.

This guy we'd hired to do some painting was impressed by some of the things I could do. "Why in the world are you working here?" he asked me. "You should be across the street at the soybean processing plant. You could be a contractor there."

So I met the soybean plant's superintendent, who was receptive and asked

Tramco Inc.

Founded: 1967



Business: Produces conveyors and other bulk-material handling equipment for cereal processing and other industries. Products used in all 50 states and 56 foreign countries.

Employees: 135 worldwide.

Headquarters & Facilities:

Based in Wichita, Kansas; has its main manufacturing facility there, with another sales and manufacturing facility in Hull, England.

By THE NUMBERS

me to take measurements for some equipment and give him a price. Every few days for a couple of months I would go over and he'd say, "Measure this and give me a price."

The orders didn't come, though. I started believing I was chasing my tail. Then, one day the superintendent ordered everything I had given a price on. Here I was, not fully ready to declare independence, saddled with doubts and a contract, without even a place to build anything.

But I had one advantage, a long lead time on the contract, as the superintendent didn't need the equipment until "shutdown," the annual time milling plants close for several weeks of modifications.

"A lot of people want to be in business for themselves. I always referred to it as the American Dream until an English friend of mine told me that it is a World Dream."

Leon Trammell

Shoving doubts aside and putting on my project management hat, a plan came into shape: Keep my flour mill job, secure a shop and build for the soybean mill after hours.

Garland King, my supervisor at Ross Industries, and I worked

well together and deserved to know about the side business and have a chance to raise objections if he had any.

"No, as a matter of fact, in a few months, we'll probably slow down here," he said. "Anything I can help you with, machinery or something, I will."

With that blessing, Tramco Inc., a craftsman-run job shop, opened on March 19, 1967, in a \$15-a-month tin building in Wichita. To build parts, I hired fellow craftsmen to work evenings after finishing their regular jobs.

They were happy to come out and work four hours anytime I needed them. They were very supportive of me opening my own business — friends were always glad to help out and I desperately needed them. One friend loaned me his pickup for six weeks, and another let me borrow his welding machine until I could buy my own. We would work maybe one night or every night until we got the project out.

For several months, I plugged away at my regular job and the new venture. But my conscience festered, as I thought I was shortchanging my day job and the supervisor I respected. With Memorial Day coming up, I decided to spend time with my family. Before I headed out for the holiday, I confessed to King that I didn't think he was getting 100 percent from me.

“I can’t tell it,” he said.

Disagreeing, I told him that I was going to think on it for a week and decide to either close my shop or leave Ross Industries. So back to Arkansas I went, back to my father, who I knew might reinforce my inclination to chuck Tramco.

My dad loved and enjoyed life as much as any man I’ve ever known. But my dad always had a cloud over his head when it came to exploring and trying new things. He looked on the dark side of everything.

So I shared with him what I had been doing and how much money I had been making on the venture, that it was far more than I was earning at Ross Industries. I think there was a part of me that wanted him to tell me, “Son, you better go back and take care of your basic job; it’s safe and secure.”

“Your brother is making a living here with his small business in a town of 7,000,” he said. “In a town as big as Wichita what would you have to do to keep your doors open?”

I’d calculated that I needed to sell 32 hours a week of time at \$6.50 an hour and that’s what I told him. After looking at the numbers, my father concluded: “You can do it.”

Leaping without a safety net

Back in Wichita, I gave my notice to Ross Industries.

As Tramco’s sole proprietor, I was on my own and busier than heck. Each night, part-time workers would make parts and the next day I would install them at the soybean plant, my only customer.

That busy routine continued until October when I heard the words that would rattle any new, small business: “The two projects you’re working on is all the work we will have for a while.”

The news drove me home early that day with a new feeling: discouragement.

LESSON LEARNED

One worthy approach to starting your own business is to ease into it slowly by keeping your day job and working part time for yourself.

Leon Trammell, at the start, worked in the flour mill by day and built equipment for a soybean mill at night, hiring fellow craftsmen to help as needed.

Chapter 2

I was out for a long time; I don't know how long. When I finally awakened, I found myself dressed in a blue-dotted hospital gown. I was lying in a hospital bed with, I noticed, both side rails up. On my right hand, there was an attached finger clip with wires that led to an overhead monitor that kept beeping. I was disoriented somewhere, but where? The question nagged at my mind: where was I? Wherever I was, it must have been law enforcement that had cuffed my left wrist to the side rail. Just then, a doctor came in, my first clue.



Click here to unlock

He had a large head with black, wavy curls and an oval-shaped face with a long, bony jutting jaw. His jaw had a dimple in the middle that reminded me of Kirk Douglas. He stood next to my bed on my left side.

I didn't know what to expect.