

# Matthew Dean

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## Designing Your Destiny

Throughout grade school, Matthew Dean had always excelled effortlessly at mathematics. One can thus imagine his surprise and horror when his ninth grade math teacher recommended him for the second best math class instead of the best. High school had raised the bar somewhat in terms of demand and standards, and the boy's diligence had not yet escalated along with it. Though the packs of football pencils given out as prizes for elementary school math competitions were a thing of the past, Matt found a brand new source of motivation—his own willpower, and his own destiny. Determined, he asked Mr. Burns what he could do to maintain his status in the highest class. "You must ace the second half of this school year," the teacher said. Matt rose to the challenge and excelled with flying colors, and true to his word, Mr. Burns changed his recommendation.

From this experience, Matt drew so much more than just a renewed drive for math, which carried him through to receive his master's degree in engineering later on. Beyond the specific skill, the challenge cemented in him something he had always known in his soul but hadn't actually firmed into a concrete guiding principle. "Nobody's going to give you anything or carry you. You've got to get out there and do it yourself," he confirms. "Putting in hard work pays off, and will change your life in ways you can't imagine." Now the President and CEO of Markon Solutions, a government contracting and consulting company specializing in facilities management and engineering services, Matt could not have gotten to where he is today without this revolutionizing conviction in personal agency.

Markon is a spinoff of MKI Systems, which has since been purchased by L-3's Command & Control Systems and Software (C2S2)

Division. Matt assumed employment at MKI, a full-service professional organization focusing in the needs of the Marine Corps, in 2005 to help diversify the company into the intelligence community market. He started his division as a one-man show which grew to nine team members by 2007 when L-3 decided to purchase the enterprise. The new ownership wasn't interested in an intelligence division, and Matt was not interested in the new ownership, so Markon was born.



When they first spun off, they specialized in providing consultant services to the intelligence community and were earning less than \$1 million in revenues. "I didn't have a long-term vision of what the company should look like or how big it should get," Matt explains. "I just aimed to keep taking that next step to become a little better each month."

In the beginning, hiring just one additional employee meant a substantial increase in the company's size, and was thus heralded as a big success. By the time they reached 18 employees, however, Matt decided to take a more active approach to shaping the company's future. "We asked ourselves, what does reaching for the stars look like?" he recalls. "A one-hundred-person company was a stretch, but we set our sights on that, calling it MARKON 100. We envisioned what that kind of firm would look like in terms of software, support people, office space, investments, training, internal R&D, and strategy." Matt sought out CEOs of larger companies to get their advice and joined Vistage International, a coaching group for CEOs. By 2010, they had grown to around forty employees and amplified revenues to \$7 million, fanning out across industries through the translatability of their knowledge base. Then, in 2013, MARKON 100 became a

reality.

Even before the goal was met, Matt and his team set their sights on the next big milestone, this time set at annual revenues of \$40 million. Again, they developed a concrete vision of what that kind of a company looks like and began aligning all decisions and efforts toward that vision. "I openly speak to all our employees about this goal because it's important that they understand the context of their work," he explains. "And we realize we're not a 15-person company anymore. We have more avenues available to us to meet our goal, like joint ventures, prime and sub-prime relationships, government-wide contract vehicles, and options for selling different products. It's a 'shoot for the moon' approach, and we're excited about where we'll land."

Today, in addition to the intelligence community, Markon serves the State Department, the Department of Defense, the Veterans Administration, and the D.C. Courts. 70 percent of their revenue is derived through facilities, project management, and engineering-related services. Being the professional services company that it is, Markon essentially sells time and manpower to federal government organizations with the goal of improving functionality through the use of professional resources. The feature tool in this arsenal is project management, and Markon's ability to capture key processes and replicate them across subjects has played a vital role in its success. "Our business model has been to serve across government agencies because our method is translatable," Matt explains. "The Army, Marine Corps, CIA, DIA, DNI, etcetera—the same types of skills are valuable across all these markets."

Markon's real value lies not in its method, however, but in its matter. "It's truly our people and culture that set us apart," he affirms. "Just like our goals, our core values underlie every decision we make. We take initiative. We lead with humility. We put corporate integrity before personal gain. Respect for our partners, clients, and employees. We are driven by who we are at our core just as much as we're driven by where we want to take this company."

The fascinating thing about Matt's success is that it doesn't stem from outside influence, but rather from a strong internal focus of control that marked his comportment even at an early age. From his father, he learned a strong work ethic, and from his mother, he learned an equally strong

dedication to family. Throughout his youth, he doesn't remember being pushed or micromanaged when it came to academics or athletics. It was always expected that he and his three brothers should maintain good grades and attend college, but his parents, who divorced when he was ten, did not actively talk about the future. Matt's mother had chosen to focus on her family and her children instead of pursuing her career, and this fact serves as a strong source of motivation in his life and work today. "My mom chose not to take her career into her own hands as a sacrifice for us kids," he remarks. "If I don't take full advantage of the opportunities in my life, I'm wasting what she gave me."

Matt was eight years old when he first experienced failure and, conversely, resilience. He was cut from the travel soccer team, relegated to the ranks of the less-than-stellar athletes of his town's intramural league. To motivate his heartbroken son, his father offered him a dollar for every goal he scored through the season. In his first game, his team won seven to nothing, and Matt scored all seven goals, setting a precedent for the successful season to come. At the end, the coach of the travel team told him he had made a mistake in cutting Matt. "I was proud that I still tried hard, even when things weren't going my way," he recalls. "I got mad, and then I used that anger for motivation to get better."

Matt's large high school had only a varsity soccer team, so the odds of making it were extremely slim, but after his failure as a young boy, he was ready to take his success into his own hands. He had heard that the first two weeks of tryouts consisted entirely of running, so the summer before his ninth grade year, he charted out a course through his town. As the same milestones flew by each day—the corner store, a telephone pole, a street sign—he pushed himself faster and faster. By the time fall rolled around, he was in such great shape that he beat the odds and made the team. "It taught me a lesson I tell my kids, my colleagues, my friends now," he says. "Hard work doesn't always have an immediate payoff, but it always pays off. It's worth doing. I decided it needed to be done, so I did it."

After starting college at Virginia Tech, Matt acquired a job in database building assistance at the World Bank's Facilities Group. "I wore a shirt and tie to work for the first time," he remembers. "It was my first chance to experience

a real office job.” When he graduated in 1991 with an Industrial Engineering Degree, he found the job market somewhat barren. After a slew of interviews, he was finally offered a government position with the Department of the Navy as a program analyst in a cost analysis shop. In this capacity, he served to assist different Navy programs in mapping out current costs and predicting future expenses. This was essentially his entrance into the government acquisition and support world while also giving him first-hand training in the client service environment as he worked to develop relationships with different customers.

Though he would receive frequent accolades on his performance excellence, Matt was barred from promotion because he didn’t have seniority, and he was turned off by the lack of control over one’s own destiny that the atmosphere engendered. Not only had he reached the kind of dead end he had vowed to avoid, but his personal learning and evolution had come to a standstill. “I realized I wasn’t going to be gaining any additional skills after the first five years, and I didn’t like the resigned attitude that the system is the system,” he recalls. “Realistically, I knew I couldn’t change the system, so my only option was to take my career into my own hands.”

With that, he left to enter the Big Six management consulting world through employment at KPMG Consulting, which became BearingPoint in 2002. Throughout his nine years of employment there, Matt served as a management consultant in a wide variety of industries. The experience allowed him to see how many skills can be translated to different markets and environments, honing his insight for his later leadership with Markon. BearingPoint’s decrescendo commenced in the early 2000’s with its transition from a partnership model to a public company model. Aware of the writing on the wall, Matt left for MKI Systems in 2005 before BearingPoint’s collapse and eventual merger with Deloitte Consulting.

When Matt decided to take the path of small business ownership, his wife, Jennifer, supported him every step of the way. The couple has been married since 1991, and her trust and confidence underscore Matt’s own sense of certainty in business. “She’s very passionate about being principled with the right things in life, and that’s certainly influenced the decisions I’ve made

at Markon,” he avows. “She keeps me very morally grounded.”

To most people, the entrepreneurial leap of buying Markon may have been a risky move, but to Matt, assuming control over his future in that way was the surest way to mitigate risk. Always driven by his own internal compass and measures of success, he easily recognized Markon as his true north. “I’m not driven by material gain,” Matt affirms. “Money is just an objective way of measuring how well you’re doing. What really inspires me is winning, and success, and creating an atmosphere where others can be successful. The idea of helping other people win and achieve financial security is a big motivator for me.”

Now, as the company’s past performance record and reference list grows, Matt knows it isn’t the services that make Markon unique, but the innovative approach of each employee. “Our clients aren’t buying the advanced degrees of our employees; they come to us because we have the ability to be leaders and solve their problems,” he explains. “For this reason, I stress leadership throughout the company. We have several leadership development programs to help train our people to take leadership roles within the company, and that cultivates a culture of unparalleled integrity. It’s hard to make decisions that impact other people and not be bothered by their reactions. The more practice we can give at all levels of the company to take on leadership roles, the better.” This mindset showcases the forward-thinking philosophy that drives the enterprise—one of interconnected fates and genuine interest in the success of others. “It’s all about the team approach,” Matt explains. “I truly believe that the best way for me to be more successful is for my employees to enjoy this success as well.”

In advising others along this quest for collective success, Matt urges the kind of openness and awareness that has kept him in perpetual evolution over the years, both personally and professionally. His method echoes what seems to be a current trend in American society toward life-long personal skill strengthening and diversification. “I remember reading an article that explained how, for generations, people thought it was risky to change jobs,” Matt recalls. “But now, at least in our industry, staying in the same job allows your skills to get stale.” So, where his role was once in contracts, security, finance,

business development, and recruiting, he has incrementally yet steadily shape-shifted into the strategist and broad-scale leader he serves as today.

It is safe to assume, then, that the future of Matt's role as President of Markon is far from set or static. In this light, he also emphasizes the crucial part that long-term planning and vision plays in success. "The big thing I've learned recently is that I'm in this for the long haul, and my decisions are reflecting this realization," Matt remarks. "Investment in training, going out of our way to hire good people, getting into new markets even though they may not make money this year – all these are an automatic yes for me now."

Inherent in this recipe success, however, is a certain fascination and will of character. "Be a sponge. Soak up everything," Matt insists. It's how we keep life fresh. It's how we stave off stagnation, keeping the self on a perpetual journey toward betterment. And it's how we put our future back in our own hands, molding something truly remarkable and unique from the raw material of status quo."

Beyond that, he urges young people to

seize every opportunity to take on a leadership role. "Leadership is hard," he says. "You'll fail, but that's not a big deal, as long as you absorb the lessons and maintain your confidence. Being a leader takes practice, and the sooner you start, the better leader you'll be."

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*President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit [www.BernhardtWealth.com](http://www.BernhardtWealth.com) and [Gordon's Blog](#).*

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