

Chris Assenmacher

It's About the Team

Imagine being hired by a private investment group to consult on an acquisition that was in a difficult situation, only to have the group ask you to jump out of the frying pan and into the fire: to leave your consulting job and take the helm of the troubled company – to transform a troubled asset into a high-performing company.

That's exactly the decision that faced Chris Assenmacher about six years ago. The result? The company, Carter Control Systems Inc. (CCS), has since gone from being essentially a one-client enterprise with rapidly declining sales to a thriving firm with a diversified and growing customer base, and an expanded product and services offering. "I was brought in at a difficult time, when the private equity firm was trying to decide what to do. Things were not going well," Chris reports. "Ultimately, we decided that it was worth repositioning and moving into new products, markets, and services, and fortunately we've been pretty successful doing that over the past five years." Chris attributes much of the credit for the successful outcome to the people he works with at CCS. "I will be forever indebted to the people who helped the company through the difficult times. There are some long-term employees that have been with the company for ten and twenty-plus years, but everybody just sort of pitched in and rolled up their sleeves. Some people did three different jobs, and that effort got us through a tough period."

It is not surprising that Chris credits the people at CCS with making the company's dramatic turnaround happen; building and leading teams has been a dominant theme throughout his career. "I think I have a very collaborative approach to leadership," he says. "I'm very team-oriented in anything I do, and I think it's important to get everyone on the same page. I welcome input from everybody; I know that I don't know everything and I'm never going

to know everything." As Chris mentions the names of people at CCS who, he says, went above and beyond all reasonable expectations because of their determination to help the company succeed – people from the management to the engineers to the shop – it is obvious that he thoroughly understands the indispensable process of assembling a team around a vision and then empowering them to make the vision a reality. "I'm incredibly amazed at everybody that got us through that period," he says.



That sense of vision and focus came into play for Chris at a fairly young age, when in the sixth grade he set a goal of earning admission into a rigorous private preparatory school not far from his home in suburban Philadelphia. "Honestly, looking back, I don't remember exactly why I wanted to go there, but I knew that it was really important to me. Committing myself to that was an early defining moment in my life."

One of the more significant outcomes of that commitment was Chris's opportunity to take a public speaking class, taught by a man who would become an early mentor, Tony Figliola. "I was a pretty shy kid, growing up, and I decided to take the class. I think it helped me come out of my shell, and the skills that I learned in that class have carried through my entire life. I use them in business every day. Looking back, I think that was an interesting decision that ended up being a fairly formative one for me." Chris subsequently became involved with the school's forensics team, sponsored by Figliola, which gave him the opportunity to compete in public speaking and oratory events all over the country. "We would go to tournaments at places like Harvard and Emory, and you had to keep your grades up and get approvals from teachers to do these things, so it was a unique opportunity." Chris credits this experience with helping him really become comfortable in his own skin. "We were expected to

lead and to mentor underclassmen; we knew we represented the school, and so I think all of that came together for me during high school.”

As time rolled around for college, Chris applied to a number of outstanding universities. “I applied to a few in the DC area, because at the time I had some interest in politics,” he says. He also knew that he would need a combination of scholarships and work-study in order to finance his higher education. “My parents helped, but a good portion of it was scholarships and working.” Chris was no stranger to work, however, because even as a kid at home, there was a clear expectation that if he wanted something, he would have to work for it. “My mom and my stepfather’s approach was always, ‘If you want it, you have to go work for it and figure it out.’ That was the expectation; if we wanted a car, we had to pay for it and pay for the insurance. Working through high school, working through college, that’s just always the way it was for me and my brothers.” Chris ultimately enrolled at the University of Delaware with a double major in business and philosophy. “I got into the honors program, which allowed me to create my own curriculum. I wanted to be a philosophy major, but there just isn’t a whole lot out there for philosophy majors. So, the business side seemed obvious to me as a practical choice.” Going from a small high school with a fairly tight-knit student body to a larger university where he knew literally no one when he got there was a challenging transition for Chris, but one that he managed fairly well. By this time, he explains, he had enough confidence in himself to speak up in class and otherwise negotiate the complexities of campus life. “It was a pretty standard college experience; you go out and have fun the weekends, spend a lot of your time studying during the week. And of course, like almost every kid that goes to college, this was the first time in my life when I didn’t have anyone to cook for me, to do my laundry, and so forth. But I think most kids go through that.”

After graduation from Delaware, Chris opted to backpack around Europe. “I took off and made my way around. I had never been to Europe at that point. It was a lot of fun, and the experience also made me comfortable being by myself. It was a terrific experience.” Chris was there during the summer when the reunification of Germany was taking place, which was especially exciting as a second-generation German-American.

Upon returning to the United States, Chris encountered the unpleasant surprise that getting his first professional job wasn’t going to be as simple as he had imagined. “I thought it was going to be as easy as sending out my résumé and getting the job of my dreams. But in the early ’90s, the labor market wasn’t very good, so it took me awhile to find a job.” Chris’s stepmother actually connected him with a mediation/arbitration organization, and he ended up working for the firm for a period of time. “I had originally thought I wanted to go to law school, so it was an interesting opportunity and those were useful tools to have, even though I didn’t ultimately go to law school.” While working at the firm, Chris started taking graduate courses at Temple University toward a graduate degree in economics. “It was exhausting; I was going to school almost full time and working full time. My friends were going to the beach and having fun, and I was taking classes. I remember struggling with that and asking myself, ‘Why am I doing this?’” He had a goal of getting into consulting work and believed the graduate degree would be the best preparation. Still, it was a tough few years, he says.

Chris’s first job following graduate school was with a DC-area CPA and consulting firm with offices across the country that was looking to grow its consulting business. “They basically said, ‘We’re trying to figure this out and we’ll help you as best we can.’ There were two of us, creating this practice around strategy and IT, which was becoming very big at the time.” Chris and his colleagues managed to build the consulting practice into a significant profit center for the firm, “and I sort of had to figure a lot of it out on my own, which was another defining moment for me, understanding that I could do this and make it work without a whole lot of structure around me.” During this period, Chris met his wife, Michele, and enjoyed the atmosphere in Washington, DC during the Clinton years. “It was the first time I really hired people and created a team. We did some really interesting things, and it was definitely a learning experience.”

Not that everything was rosy, however. Chris recalls the night, during this period, when he first lost sleep due to job-related stress. “I remember the first time I was actually lying awake in the middle of the night and thinking, ‘We have got to find another project! What am I going to do?’” On the other hand, his experiences in this

first job also occasioned another of his defining moments, when an early client came to him and expressed heartfelt gratitude for the services Chris had been able to provide. "I was a young guy, in my twenties, and I still remember this executive thanking me for helping him and his company work through this issue they were having. It made an impression on me, and I think that moment really committed me to taking a certain approach to business and to doing things a certain way."

After about five years at the firm, Chris moved to San Francisco to start an Internet company. "I had this idea around web-based technology for employee benefits that the CPA firm supported, and we went out and found another backer who helped fund the idea. The Bay Area was the center of where all the technology-driven activity was happening at the time. So we started a company out there. We had two investors who gave us a limited amount of capital, and we couldn't waste it. Unlike a lot of startups, we focused on getting cash flow-positive quickly. But, we were spending all of our money on the IT side and not enough on marketing. It was an interesting experience, and I learned a lot, even though it really didn't go as well as I had hoped for me personally." Chris reports that he spent some time "butting heads" with the board of the company, "because I thought I knew better than they did," providing him with what he calls his first "board experience." After about a year and a half with the technology start up, Chris took a job with a Bay Area publicly traded consulting firm in order to help them develop a new practice. "That taught me a lot about how I don't want to do certain things." Still, Chris managed to help the firm build its consulting practice from basically nothing to some \$60 million in sales. "I worked with some great people, and it was a fun and successful experience, in terms of the dollars and cents, but the whole publicly traded environment, with its focus on the quarterly revenue goals—I just didn't really get that."

About four years later, Chris and Michele moved back to Washington, DC, following an opportunity for Michele. At that time, he started his own consulting practice, which he was pursuing at the time the private equity group approached him for assistance and advice with Carter Control Systems.

"They bought the company from the guy who founded it about ten years ago, and it had

some serious issues, in that its primary customer, the US Postal Service, had pretty much stopped buying their type of product." CCS designs and manufactures automated material handling systems and industrial automation solutions. Though it was highly profitable at the time it was acquired, the ongoing changes in technology and communication soon began to seriously impact the Postal Service, leading to declining orders and a revenue drop for CCS. "At the time the company was acquired by the private equity group, the Postal Service had previously been spending hundreds of millions of dollars on equipment and systems, much of it focused on first-class mail," Chris says. But, with the continuing rise of the Internet and technology, the industry landscape shifted significantly. "Revenue declined slowly over a two- or three-year period, and then more dramatically." The general economic downturn in 2008–2009 also affected the business.

"I had done a lot of work with private equity and venture capital firms around analyzing opportunities and figuring out strategies for where to go," Chris says. "And, I think my location [near CCS's Frederick, Maryland, headquarters] seemed like an advantage." So, when Chris came back to them after about three weeks with his recommendations, the equity group asked him to lead the CCS team through its turnaround.

"We needed to reposition into commercial markets, and we had a product that we could fit to other applications. Intelligent automation for material handling systems was not very common at the time, but the people at CCS, because of their work with USPS, really understood how to design systems that allow you to track things wherever they are. They built some software that is really the brains behind what happens in the warehouse, which is critical to the operation of e-commerce companies, or any other distribution or manufacturing facility. Not many people had this type of depth at the time, and this was when e-commerce was really starting to pick up. We were able to figure out how all that needs to work together. There was a real opportunity there, and we had some initial success in e-commerce." Next, CCS expanded into the more traditional distribution markets. "This would be any retail or wholesale company that sells a wide variety of products, where you're working with much larger orders and product sizes—at the pallet and case level. We just started slowly expanding our

capabilities and experience so that we could cover a much wider range of markets." From there, CCS expanded into robotics, which got them into the manufacturing space, including automotive work and medical device assembly. "It has been one step at a time over the years," Chris says, "to get us to the point where we are now able to provide a full array of services and products."

As a result of Chris's strategic leadership and his team's hard work, CCS has more than doubled sales from the year he took over. "I think we're well positioned right now. And we're at the point where growing organically is going to be harder, so we're now having strategy discussions around where we need to go from here." The company's principal enterprise focuses on three areas: post and parcel handling, distribution (which encompasses e-commerce, retail, and wholesale customers), and manufacturing.

Chris's team-focused approach comes through in the advice he gives to young people entering business. "Don't be afraid to step up and be a leader," he says. "In my experience, real leaders in the business world are lacking, and I think a lot of times it's because people are simply hesitant to step up. Also, don't be afraid to make mistakes. That's what life is, and you need to learn from them and figure out how to turn a negative into a positive. And then, I would say that you need to have the right attitude. You need to be accountable to the company and yourself, and if

you're not, you're doing a disservice to everyone. If you're not giving a hundred percent, it's not fair to you or the company."

"I really enjoy working with people in a cooperative environment, and leading the organization to achieve its mission," Chris says, summing up his motivation for why he likes to do what he does. "I've always been fascinated by how a group of people can come together and accomplish amazing things.

"I do it for the people who work with me."

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt

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 and [Gordon's Blog](#).

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