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Kirby Mallon of Elmer Schultz Services: 5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Became a C-Suite Executive

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As *part of our series called "5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Began Leading My Company" I had the pleasure of interviewing Kirby Mallon.*

Kirby Mallon is the owner and president of Elmer Schultz Service, a third-generation family-owned business that provides service, parts, and installation for commercial cooking and refrigeration equipment. The company is a leading Authorized Service Agency in the Philadelphia region with offices in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware.

Having held virtually every position within Elmer Schultz, Mallon brings a unique perspective to the company's daily operations. A solutions-minded small business owner, he is in the trenches every day with his management team and employees.

As owner and president, Mallon is laser-focused on the company's long-term vision for growth. Under his direction, the company has an engaged culture in which employees are considered fellow collaborators. Mallon encourages transparency, with everyone working together toward common goals. Elmer Schultz employs new technologies within the industry and provides ongoing, hot-in-class training. Mallon runs the company alongside his wife Amber, who acts as head of operations.

With over 30 years of broad industry exposure under his belt, Mallon has continued to give back to various organizations. As a member of Vistage Worldwide, Inc., he participated in peer-to-peer executive coaching for CEOs and business owners. He has also served as a member of the National Service Cooperative and is a proud member of the Commercial Food Equipment Service Association (CFESA).

Mallon was recently elected to be president of CFESA. Prior to this, his eight-year tenure on the board included serving as a vice president for two terms, acting as co-chair of the membership services committee, acting as head of the task force to raise funds to build CFESA's World Headquarters and Global Training Facility, and serving on a number of panels representing CFESA, such as the HX Hotel Experience trade show in New York City. He also represented CFESA at two recent Meetings of the Five Families, an industry think tank between CFESA, Foodservice Consultants Society International, the Foodservice Equipment Distributors Association, the Manufacturers' Agents Association for the Foodservice Industry, and the North American Association of Food Equipment Manufacturers.

In addition to attending a trade school, Mallon obtained his bachelor's degree in business administration from Merrimack College in New England. He and his wife currently live in Philadelphia's Art Museum Area.

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Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series. Before we dive into our discussion, our readers would love to "get to know you" a bit better. Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you started your career?

What is it they say about finding something when you're not looking? I met my wife in 2007, who became my life partner as well as my business partner. She has had a robust career in the C-suite as well, prior to joining me to run our company together full-time.

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Do you have a story about how that was relevant in your life?

"Fix your course on a star and you will navigate any storm." — Leonardo da Vinci

As a sailor and avid sport fisherman, I love this quote. Stay true to who you are, stay focused, and you will weather what life throws at you. Our company, Elmer Schultz Services, survived 9/11, the great recession, and now COVID. We did so in the various examples below.

Is there a particular book that made a significant impact on your leadership style? Can you share a story or an example of that?

Who Stole my Cheese by Ilene Hochberg where the premise is don't expect people to hand you things, don't be afraid of change, create your own future.

What do you think makes your company stand out? Can you share a story?

Yes, you are only as good as your last service call. The majority of our technicians are Master CFESA Certified (www.CFESA.com) allowing us to provide resolution from the first call. We average an 85% first-call fix. Interesting story: One of the best Italian restaurants in the entire country is located in Philadelphia. The Executive Chef called me personally on my cell phone. It was Friday afternoon at 4:45. Panicked, the chef could not get the pasta maker to work and they were opening in 15 minutes with a full house. I quickly diverted the closest technician who was on his way home. At the same time, I assessed the situation based on the specifics of the issue and personally drove parts I suspected might be needed over to the restaurant. We troubleshot and replaced the defective part getting the unit up and running in 14 minutes total…one minute before they opened the doors. I am proud of this story because this chef will be a customer for life. As the owner of the company, you can never stop adding value.

The road to success is hard and requires tremendous dedication. This question is obviously a big one, but what advice would you give to a young person who aspires to follow in your footsteps and emulate your success?

First, make sure you love what you do. Listen and observe from your peers. Make mistakes and learn from them.

Often leaders are asked to share the best advice they received. But let's reverse the question. Can you share a story about the advice you've received that you now wish you never followed?

Don't get too close to your employees. While I strongly agree with maintaining boundaries and a professional environment at all times, I do not agree with running a company like a robot. I want my employees to feel comfortable coming to me, or a member of my executive team, if they are having issues that are affecting their work. Bottling these types of things does no good, and it often compounds the problems.

You are a successful business leader. Which three character traits do you think were most instrumental to your success? Can you please share a story or example for each?

Be fully transparent. The pandemic was a great exercise in this — we were very transparent with staff from day 1 of the shut down that it was our goal to ensure no one was laid off/furloughed or lost benefits.

Instead of telling people what to do, show them what to do. I like to think that I radiate passion for the CFESA mission and that our team picks up on that and takes pride in what they do.

Getting your hands dirty working with your staff goes a long way. When I became President of CFESA, I went through the vast majority of our training so I would be well-versed in our educational programming. I learned alongside our technicians and got their respect in turn.

Ok, thank you for that. Let's now jump to the primary focus of our interview. Most of our readers — in fact, most people — think they have a pretty good idea of what a C-Suite executive does. But in just a few words can you explain what a C-Level executive does that is different from the responsibilities of other leaders?

At Elmer Schultz, I set the course and vision for the company. I hire the best people I can find, compensate them well, trust my managers and executive team, and do not micromanage. I get in the weeds when needed, overcommunicate often, and I am honest when things are looking good or bad. I am a solutions-minded small business owner and CFESA has been a wealth of support over the years.

Now as president of CFESA, it is much of the same. I lead my board of directors to be as effective as possible for the membership. I am also trying to grow our membership. The key to this growth is exposure. So I am again overcommunicating whenever possible.

What are the "myths" that you would like to dispel about being a CEO or executive? Can you explain what you mean?

We're all human. Everyone has stuff. Be kind. I try to be as understanding and accommodating as humanly possible. If someone needs to leave mid-shift because their kid is sick, I'm more than OK with that. If someone loses a family member, I tell them to take all the time they need. I'm not a stickler boss that forces excellence, rather I treat my staff with kindness and respect. In turn, I find that they work harder and more passionately.

What are the most common leadership mistakes you have seen C-Suite leaders make when they start leading a new team? What can be done to avoid those errors?

Hubris is the kryptonite of effective leadership. Be humble. It's not always easy, but it should be a muscle you continually work. Getting the right people in the right seats involves change. This is one I struggle with. Change is not easy. Sometimes the right choice is the easy choice. Most of the time it's not.

In your experience, which aspect of running a company tends to be most underestimated? Can you explain or give an example?

Managing cash flow and inventory. Knowing your financials. These are not fun aspects of the job, but they are important. Eat your vegetables first. Do you know what's fun? Driving a forklift.

One day, many years ago, my girlfriend (now wife) asked, "What is the owner of the company doing driving the forklift?" The answer was that it was fun. If I want to have fun these days, I go fishing.

Ok super. Here is the main question of our interview. What are your "5 Things I Wish Someone Told Me Before I Began Leading From the C-Suite"? Please share a story or an example for each.

Be available. My team knows they can reach me at any time, day or night. Because we are in the office less, the physical constraints of 8 a.m.-5 p.m. are gone. What we have lost in terms of aspects of in-person chatter, we have gained in more efficient communications. But I still try to get in some chatter.

Embrace Skype. Sometimes you need to see who you are talking to and the facial expressions that come with them.

Know the hierarchy. Text is fine. Email is fine. What is not fine is when they are in the place of a call — when it NEEDS to be a call or in person. We still do in person and we should. Know the appropriate means of communication.

Listen. Those of us that are great at over-communicating, sometimes have a hard time listening. Listen to your customers. Listen to your people.

Be kind. Don't lose sight of the fact that we're in a one in a 100-year pandemic. Remember The Outsiders? Things are rough all over. We're all human, and we're going through this together. Everyone has stuff. Be kind.

In your opinion, what are a few ways that executives can help to create a fantastic work culture? Can you share a story or an example?

Create achievable goals and reward the team when they're met. Cash is not always the answer. Have a catered lunch for the team and give them individual recognition and praise when a job is well done. As we are part of the hospitality industry, the pandemic has been tough. A compliment will cost you nothing and can be even more valuable to some.

You are a person of great influence. If you could start a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)

My wife has been repeating the same wish since the pandemic started:

That people will put down their phones, get off Facebook, ditch the digital courage and trolling, and go see their friends, hug the people they love, etc. It's hard to describe to a young person BE — Before the Internet or before the iPhone. But there was BC (Before Corona) and there will be AC (After Corona). I hope AC is a reset to our communications.

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www.CFESA.com

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Parveen Parwez, Mr. Activated
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