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Kirby Mallon of Elmer Schultz Services: How To Communicate With Your Team Effectively Even If You Are Rarely In The Same Physical Space

Interview With David Liu

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David is the founder and CEO of Deltapath, a unified communications company that liberates organizations from the barriers of effective communication

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We are living in a new world in which offices are becoming obsolete. How can teams effectively communicate if they are never together? Zoom and Slack are excellent tools, but they don't replicate all the advantages of being together. What strategies, tools, and techniques work to be a highly effective communicator, even if you are not in the same space?

In this interview series, we are interviewing business leaders who share the strategies, tools, and techniques they use to effectively and efficiently communicate with their team who may be spread out across the world. As a part of this series, I had the pleasure of interviewing Kirby Mallon.

Kirby Mallon is the owner and president of Elmer Schultz Services, 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, best-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 in, our readers would love to "get to know you" a bit better. Can you tell us a bit about your 'backstory' and how you got started?

I moved around a lot as a kid but finished at LaSalle College High School in Philadelphia. I went on to obtain my bachelor's degree in business administration from Merrimack College in New England. As a 3rd generation family business, I held virtually every position within my company before purchasing it from my father 13 years ago.

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Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began 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 in running our company together full-time.

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

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

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

My father told me a humbling story about being taken advantage of (a rarity for him I can assure you). A street paver came to the office and offered to repave our parking lot for a seemingly nominal fee, broken down by dollar per square foot. Upon completion, he returned with an exorbitant bill, calculated as promised. Several lessons: if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is; get it in writing (and understand what you are signing); know the numbers — they never lie.

Ok wonderful. Let's now shift to the main focus of our interview. The pandemic has changed so many things about the way we behave. One of

them of course is how we work and how we communicate in our work. Many teams have started working remotely. Working remotely can be very different than working with a team that is in front of you. This provides great opportunity but it can also create unique challenges. To begin, can you articulate for our readers a few of the main benefits of having a team physically together?

Most authorized service agencies (ASAs) receive and dispatch calls in a war room-like environment. In this setting, everyone can hear what each other is doing and many issues are caught and resolved amongst the team before it ever gets to the customer.

On the flip side, can you articulate for our readers a few of the main challenges that arise when a team is not in the same space?

Camaraderie and morale suffer. Big businesses that are cutting costs, eliminating office space (rent) are not seeing the big picture of what they are losing. If you are judging how effective and happy your workforce is working from home when a city is locked down, your analysis needs to be revisited when life resumes again — especially on a large scale.

We service commercial cooking and refrigeration equipment in grocery stores, hospitals, nursing homes, schools, restaurants, etc. As frontline workers, our company has had people in the offices throughout the pandemic — though we have flexed work schedules and tweaked the office space to incorporate social distancing.

Fantastic. Here is the main question of our interview. Based on your experience, what can one do to address or redress each of those challenges? What are your "5 Things You Need To Know To Communicate With Your Team Effectively Even If You Are Rarely In The Same Physical Space?
(Please share a story or example for each.)

1. **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 am-5 pm are gone. What we have lost in terms of aspects like in-person chatter, we have gained in more efficient communications. But I still try to get in some chatter.
2. **Embrace Skype.** Sometimes you need to see who you are talking to and the facial expressions that come with them.
3. **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.
4. **Listen.** Those of us that are great at over-communicating, sometimes have a hard time listening. Listen to your customers. Listen to your people.
5. **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.

Has your company experienced communication challenges with your workforce working from home during the pandemic? For example, does your company allow employees to use their own cell phones or do they use the company's phone lines for work? Can you share any other issues that came up?

No real issues to speak of — we've been blessed to learn as we go and hone the processes.

Let's zoom in a bit. Many tools have been developed to help teams coordinate and communicate with each other. In your personal experiences which tools have been most effective in helping to replicate the benefits of being together in the same space?

Through these isolating times, we host bi-weekly staff meetings via Skype to ensure a sense of connectedness throughout the team. To manage our inbound requests in a timely manner we use Automated Service by Ascent.

If you could design the perfect communication feature or system to help your business, what would it be?

We have it! Automated Service by Ascent is wonderful for cross-communication and coordination. This boutique technology consultancy delivers specialized software solutions for project automation, containers, and continuous delivery.

My particular expertise and interest is in Unified Communications. Has the pandemic changed the need or appeal for unified communications technology requirements? Can you explain?

Automated Service has provided an aspect of this, but we layer in Skype or GoTo Meetings, Bamboo software for our HR/payroll needs, Traxxis GPS, etc. There's no one-stop-shop for all of our needs in our industry.

The technology is rapidly evolving and new tools like VR, AR, and Mixed Reality are being developed to help bring remote teams together in a shared virtual space. Is there any technology coming down the pipeline that excites you?

Smart kitchens are where we are headed as an industry. They will assist in diagnostic needs, but not replace the need for technicians. In fact, our educational programs have begun integrating pieces of training in the smart kitchen space to ensure our technicians are at the forefront of these developments and can always properly service anything they come across.

Is there a part of this future vision that concerns you? Can you explain?

While it is not a concern, smart kitchen technologies are constantly evolving — keeping us on our toes.

But there is not one situation we put our technicians in that they are not prepared to handle.

So far we have discussed communication within a team. How has the pandemic changed the way you interact and engage your customers? How much of your interactions have moved to digital such as chatbots, messaging apps, phone, or video calls? See above.

Customer outreach has remained virtually the same — they place a call and we dispatch a technician. However, the customer has changed a bit for us amid the pandemic. Rather than working exclusively to repair restaurant kitchen equipment, CFESA technicians have pivoted to also work in hospitals, nursing homes, and grocery stores.

In my experience, one of the trickiest parts of working with a remote team is giving honest feedback, in a way that doesn't come across as too harsh. If

someone is in front of you much of the nuance can be picked up in facial expressions and body language. But not when someone is remote. Can you give a few suggestions about how to best give constructive criticism to a remote team member?

You may not see every facial expression, but some do come through even remotely. In-person, on the phone, online, for constructive criticism the rules are the same: be honest, give examples, have a two-way dialogue, be kind.

Can you give any specific ideas about how to create a sense of camaraderie and team cohesion when you are not physically together?

CFESA Committees have Skype happy hours where they play games like a scavenger hunt. They're a riot.

Ok wonderful. We are nearly done. Here is our last "meaty" question. You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire 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 BI — 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.

Thank you so much for the time you spent doing this interview. This was very inspirational, and we wish you continued success.

Business