

Satterwhite's leadership starts with helping others

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Satterwhite on entrepreneurship

- **Keep learning:** Satterwhite attended a September luncheon featuring a keynote speech from Clay Mathile, former owner of The Iams Co. Among the takeaways: Learn to think more and act less.
“I’m still learning about how to have a better balance and incorporate exercise for thought, and incorporate reading for thought, and incorporate listening effectively for thought.”
- **Start with the end in mind.** Think through what success looks like.
“A lot of times we leave companies thinking success looks like hanging a shingle, having a title, or even creating revenue. And that’s not necessarily success. I really challenge (entrepreneurs) to define this: What are you trying to accomplish? What is the end goal?”
- **Talk to other entrepreneurs,** and spend more time talking about their failures than their successes.
“If you can learn about the things that went bad during an entrepreneur’s journey, that’s more helpful than the things that went well. You can always imagine the good, but often times never imagine the bad.”

If Carl Satterwhite is indeed the most admired African-American entrepreneur in the region, as one prominent lawyer says, he’ll be the last person to notice.

That’s because Satterwhite, president of RCF Group, is too busy focusing on helping other people, the way he says the local business community has helped him.

He says his leadership story starts with unsung heroes who created a new business environment following Cincinnati’s 2001 riots to “make the playing field even, fair and equitable to make some things happen” for minority firms.

These champions for change, as Satterwhite calls them, include the law firm Dinsmore, which lent its intellectual and financial capital to help create the Minority Business Accelerator, an economic development initiative run by the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber.

They include Procter & Gamble, Cinergy – now Duke Energy – and MetLife Insurance. And then there are individuals including the late Ross Love Jr., who initiated the Cincinnati Community Action Now (CAN) commission to address racial disparities following the riots, and Scott Robertson, chairman of RCF Group. It was Robertson who gave Satterwhite strategic advice at which Satterwhite still marvels. More about that later.

Satterwhite has made giving back part of his own strategic plan, whether it’s serving nonprofits or mentoring young entrepreneurs. The Abercrombie Group in November recognized him as a Man of Honor in its annual salute to African-American men in the region.

“He genuinely wants other people to enjoy as much success, or even more success, than he’s had,” says Calvin Buford, a partner at the Downtown law firm Dinsmore. “He’s driven, and yet he’s extremely humble. He’s been that way since the moment I first met him, and he hasn’t changed one bit even as he’s achieved more success and notoriety.”

Business, personal roots in Cincinnati

For Satterwhite, Cincinnati’s transformation is more than business. It’s personal. He grew up here, met his wife

here – high school sweethearts, married almost 30 years – and raised two sons here.

He studied stationary engineering at the University of Cincinnati, where he learned to maintain and operate a wide range of equipment. Along the way he picked up expertise in fields including heating and air conditioning, plumbing and electrical training.

He was a parking attendant for The Kroger Co., and also worked as the maintenance mechanic at the Vernon Manor Hotel, which today serves as offices for Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

In 1985, Procter & Gamble hired Satterwhite to work in facilities management. His wife, Dawn, already worked at P&G and pushed him to accept the offer. The company taught him how to manage people, processes and the difference between innovation and invention.

“That really opened my eyes to a lot of opportunity to bring some sophistication to a space that was really just seen as grunt work that had to be done,” he says.

Satterwhite spent 15 years with P&G. In 1999, he was confronted with the choice so many entrepreneurs face: leave a stable job with an established corporation or ignore the urge inside to strike out on his own and create something bigger than himself.

“I fought it. I did not want to be an entrepreneur in my flesh, but something in my spirit said you have to try this,” he says.

From startup firm to joint venture

With help from his wife, who had already left P&G, and a few other employees, Satterwhite started Infinity Services Inc. in 1999. The Satterwhites used money from P&G's profit sharing program to fund the business, which provided services including furniture installation, and warehouse and dock operations.

Satterwhite grew Infinity to a company with 35 employees and \$2 million in revenue. Its first client was Globe Business Interiors, an office furniture supplier where Scott Robertson was the chief executive officer. Satterwhite first worked with Globe while he was at P&G and knew about the company's inclusive approach to business partners and customers.

But he wasn't prepared for Robertson to tell him that Infinity had to grow, even if it meant taking on customers that competed with Globe.

“I've never heard anybody say that since, and I counsel with a lot firms. There's always the sense that if I've helped you, your allegiance must be here,” Satterwhite says. “From Day One, he said you will not be successful if I'm your only customer. So I immediately went to work for his competition at his encouragement.

“That's why I say in many ways he's my hero. He was a different kind of business leader.”

The two firms entered into a joint venture in 2003 to create River City Furniture. The company's businesses include commercial furniture, architectural interiors and facilities services.

It was the first joint venture facilitated by the MBA, a program that was created to allow minority-owned companies to grow more quickly so they could be viable candidates to service large corporations. Dinsmore helped structure the new company and guide it through the minority business certification process.

“It had all the ingredients for success. They've actually probably exceeded people's expectations,” says Buford, a

corporate lawyer who at the time of the joint venture was serving as the MBA's director.

Success in business, now giving back

Last year, RCF generated \$58.8 million in revenue.

Its work includes outfitting Downtown's Great American Tower at Queen City Square with 1,800 work stations for Great American Insurance Group employees. Its clients include P&G, MetLife and Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

"I would say that if a vote were taken today in the African-American business community of the most admired African-American entrepreneur, I think Carl just might win hands down," Buford says.

For his part, Satterwhite is focused on serving others.

Satterwhite's board memberships include the South Central Ohio Minority Supplier Development Council, Dan Beard Council/Boy Scouts of America, the Cincinnati USA Regional Chamber, United Way of Greater Cincinnati and Downtown Cincinnati Inc.

He's also mixing in mentoring for his fellow entrepreneurs, and started Executive Straight Talk, a minority CEO roundtable for established minority corporations in Cincinnati, Dayton and Columbus.

"For me the measurement of success is not what you get, it's what you give," says Satterwhite, who is 50.

"To be able to give back to the community because of what you've been given, that's the whole holistic story."