

FORMER AIR FORCE MASTER SGT. LOVING LIFE AS FRANCHISOR IN COLORADO

BY JEFF DUNLAP

U.S. Air Force veteran and Stratus Building Solutions Master Franchisor James Van Dyke of Colorado Springs, Colo., wasn't always as effectively managerial as he is today.

He credits training received in his 20-year Air Force career and, also, a "very demanding commander" with sharpening his skills so he could perform superbly as a military management efficiency expert – skills that helped prepare him for successful management of the commercial cleaning franchise operation he owns and operates today.

Van Dyke was born in Sheldon, Iowa, in 1947, after his father served as a U.S. Army Air Corps flight engineer in Casablanca, Morocco, during World War II. The younger Van Dyke grew up in Iowa, Colorado, and California until drafted by the U.S. Army in 1966 as the Vietnam War was escalating.

But Van Dyke wanted to join the Air Force, so he applied and scored high on qualification tests. Six days before he was due to report for Army duty, Van Dyke was accepted by the Air Force and he soon reported to F.E. Warren Air Force Base (AFB) in Cheyenne, Wyo. There, he met his wife, Lynda. The couple has been married now for more than 40 years.

Van Dyke, 63, fondly explains how Air Force training helped prepare him to ultimately become the successful owner-operator of a Stratus Building Solutions commercial cleaning franchise with dozens of unit franchises whose owner-operators serve building owners and property managers in Greater Colorado Springs.

"After Warren AFB, I had a wonderful five-year assignment at Hickam AFB in Hawaii," he says, "where I learned a lot from a very demanding commander who, for some reason, took a liking to me. He was Lt. Col. Gene Leupp, and many airmen didn't like him because he was a tough, 'no-nonsense' commander. But he taught me a lot about business, technical writing, productivity, and administrative systems, which served me very well. Although I didn't know it at the time, this became a foundation for running the franchise business I have now.

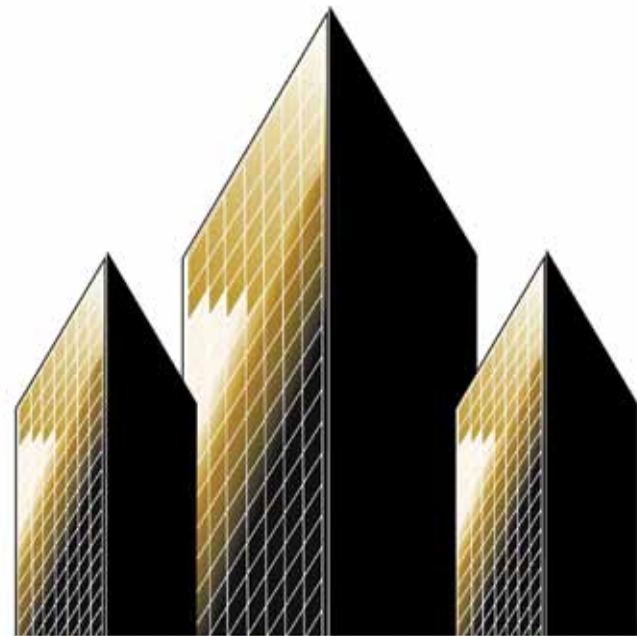
"I use everything that Col. Leupp taught me long ago in operating my business today," says Van Dyke.

At Hickam AFB, and later at Peterson AFB in Colorado Springs, Van Dyke recalls, "I exercised a style of management of leading by example, and treating my staff as I would want to be treated. I found that style to be most effective in that it fostered tremendous loyalty and a desire to 'go the extra mile.' My staff members felt compelled to do great work because they wanted to, not because they felt they had to.

"In addition to skills I'd learned from Col. Leupp, I learned management theory in a college course at Community College of the Air Force, where I studied human relations and learned two types of management approaches: Theory X and Theory Y. Theory X stresses that workers must be coerced and forced to work, whereas Theory Y feels that, given the right person for the job, fostering pride and loyalty will



be self-compelling for the worker and a much higher degree of productivity will be achieved. Theory Y always worked for me. Today, in dealing with my franchisees, I practice the very same theory, along with the Stratus Building Solutions service credo 'Your Success is Our Only Business,' which fits perfectly with my management style and my beliefs.



STRATUS

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"The skills I learned in the Air Force have proven most valuable in running my franchise by streamlining administrative systems and keeping costs under control."

Several years before he retired honorably from Air Force duty in 1986, at age 39, Van Dyke began thinking about pursuing a second career. "I began looking for a business to buy. I investigated several businesses in Colorado Springs, but I didn't find anything viable. That's when I started thinking about franchises."

The upside prospects of owning a franchise intrigued Van Dyke. The question: What kind?

In 2006, he met with a professional franchise consultant in Denver, who interviewed Van Dyke and conducted personality tests to determine the roots of his business interests, as well as his management skill set, financial interests, compensation goals, and other factors.

"After evaluating my business personality profile, he told me about Stratus Building Solutions and referred me to the company." With hundreds of different franchises available in the United States, why did he choose Stratus Building Solutions?

"Primarily it was the philosophy that Stratus CEO Dennis Jarrett and President Pete Frese imparted to me regarding franchise owners when I met them. Dennis and Pete made it known to me that the primary reason they started Stratus Building Solutions was to implement a positive culture of expert training, support, and continuous help in growing each franchisee's business. This positive approach is what sold me on Stratus and, without a doubt, it has worked for me. My franchisees and my staff are proud of the company they represent; they are well trained; they know they will get help when needed; and most importantly they are proud of their work. That is what sets Stratus apart from all other franchised cleaning companies.

"I opened my doors to Stratus Building Solutions of Colorado Springs on Nov. 1, 2006, and officially started operating on Jan. 1, 2007."

What early challenges did he encounter? "It was a struggle at first, as starting any new business is," Van Dyke recalls. "It is difficult to get those first few cleaning contracts since you have no referrals to give. But our presentation was great – we are selling quality, integrity, and consistent service. We service all cleaning customers including offices, schools, medical, industrial, restaurants, retail, and more. Our philosophy is: 'Let's find a way to do it, rather than a reason why we can't.' Then the unit franchise sales and client contracts started coming in, which provided cash flow needed to keep things going. I kept working to build a monthly volume that would result in more profits. That day came and life is good – and we are still growing."

What does he enjoy most about operating his own franchise? "The independence," asserts Van Dyke. "After building this



business, I can now enjoy the freedom of taking two weeks to celebrate our 40th anniversary and not be concerned about problems when I come back. My staff is the greatest! They are loyal, hard working, and they want to grow this business as much as I do. The financial rewards are fantastic. The business plan that Stratus provides really works and that spells success for all."

Van Dyke's operation has grown exponentially since 2007, and in five years, he hopes to triple his billings. "When we reach that goal," he says, "We'll establish a new goal!"

He applauds parent company Stratus Building Solutions because, "In every way, the support has been stellar. It is positive, never negative. They advocate staying with the business model, and the Stratus model works. Whenever my business has fallen, it has been because the model wasn't being followed. When we get back on the plan, things go back up. Starting a new business is not easy, but having the support from Stratus has made a difficult endeavor a lot easier. If the support was not positive, I doubt that I could have done as well as I have.

"I am 63 going on 50," Van Dyke says. "I am very active, a hard worker, and I don't look or feel my years. Being at retirement age, my future goal is to carry this business into my retirement and be able to step back and eventually have someone run the business for me completely. This business definitely lends itself to that goal. However, I enjoy being part of this operation so much that I don't plan on retiring until I'm in my 70s."

"This is a rewarding business. The good thing is that dirt is recurring and someone has to clean it up. There are not many businesses as recession-resistant as this one, and not many that offer the financial rewards not only for the master franchisee, but for the staff and the unit franchisees. I have some unit franchise owners who are making fabulous incomes, and I'm proud to have created that opportunity for them by helping them establish their own businesses."

Van Dyke still credits Leupp, the no-nonsense commander, for his business success. "I will always remember what he did for me."

Editor's note: Author Jeff Dunlap is a writer in St. Louis, Mo. To see James Van Dyke's website, visit www.cleanstratus.com.