

Allen O. Cage, Jr.

The Trust Factor

With the wind rushing past his face, it's hard to say what exactly was running through Allen Cage's mind. As he plummeted those 14,000 feet from the plane to earth, it could have been any number of things.

Perhaps it was one of his proudest accomplishments, or one of his happiest moments—the day he met his wife, the children and grandchildren to which he is steadfastly committed.

Perhaps it was the things that motivate him—the ten businesses he's associated with, and his insatiable drive to identify and fill voids in the marketplace in a way he could never hope to fill the void through which he was falling at that moment.

Regardless of the specific nature of his thoughts, one thread undoubtedly underpinned the whole experience: a sense of trust in the parachute and instructors who led him, and more importantly, a sense of trust in himself. "You have to be confident in your strengths and know your flaws," says Allen, now the founder and CEO of AOC Solutions, Inc. "You really have to be able to look in the mirror and trust in the person you see looking back if you're going to accomplish things in life."

Trusting and knowing one's self can only come after learning who you really are, and there's no better place for such an education than the Army. Allen served 24 years on active duty, some of which he spent in field units and some of which he spent on the business end of the military effort. There were two things he wanted to accomplish in life: to fly and to own his own business. Although he had a private pilot's license when he entered the Army, his time in the service taught him to fly the Cobra helicopter, a two-seater, high cost, high performance gunship that has no autopilot. Allen quickly learned to fly using both his left and right hands and both of his feet, accurately monitoring

instruments, firing systems, and maps while communicating as he flew nape-of-the-earth missions. Relying on his self-confidence, integrity, and leadership skills, he was constantly processing this wide array of information, making solid decisions in a complex, quick-reaction environment.

The Army also taught Allen a wide array of management skills, which were supplemented when he earned his master's degree in contract management and acquisition. "When it comes to leadership, I'm a firm believer in doing more listening than talking. Things get done in a more positive manner by instilling trust and earning the loyalty that comes along with it," he remarks now. "You also have to be willing to take criticism, to answer the hard questions, and to make the tough decisions. Again, it comes back to truly listening to people and trusting that those people are telling you the things you need to hear."

It becomes particularly hard to trust yourself when the risks you take are met with vociferous expressions of doubt from others, and this was certainly the resistance Allen faced when he retired from the Army in 1996 to seek his second life goal—to launch AOC. "Everybody has heard the statistics on how often new businesses fail, and everyone was second-guessing what I'd done," Allen recalls. "Still, I had the support and love of my wife and family, and I knew it was something I really wanted to try."

Near this time, a high-level manager at VISA became aware of Allen's background in program management, contracting, and acquisition. He was able to leverage these credentials to land a contract helping VISA bid on a new procurement in the federal government dealing with purchase, fleet, and travel cards. In the beginning, AOC was just Allen and one employee he had hired out of the military,



followed later by the addition of his brother, a retired mining engineer. Expanding his talent base with 14 professionals bringing a wide-ranging set of skills, the team worked with VISA and its member banks on the rebidding of that contract, and new opportunities cascaded from there.

"In the beginning, no bank wants to give you a loan," Allen recalls now. He remembers the early days of AOC when his friend, a lawyer, lent them one computer, a phone, and some space in the basement of his building. Allen would lug the computer home at night to do more work after sharing it at the office during the day. "You do whatever you have to do," he says. "You borrow money, you mortgage the house, and you make it work."

Though VISA remained AOC's only contract for the first six years of its operation, Citibank observed their platform and eventually signed on with Allen and his team as well. "That's when we started growing the company, picking up federal financial business throughout the late 1990s," says Allen. At that point, AOC began building a web-based reporting system. They shelved the system after it drew little interest in the marketplace, but once they realized they wanted to grow the federal financial offerings, they returned their focus on that platform, and things have progressed nicely since.

Another pivotal contract was won after AOC developed its relationship with Wright Express (WEX), the largest private label fuel company in the U.S. WEX announced a procurement in 2004, and AOC was one out of three companies ultimately vying for that business. "We realized there were opportunities to improve their business processes, so we did our due diligence in proposing solutions for them," Allen recalls. Finally, the business manager said he liked AOC enough to take a chance on them, but it would cost him his job if they didn't perform. With that, AOC won the contract, and WEX enjoyed exponential growth as a result.

AOC went on from there to win several more large contracts, and when Bank of America bought one of their main competitors taking their similar platform off the market, Allen's product became one of only a handful in the marketplace. With that, AOC seized the opportunity to set its sights on developing the next generation of payment solutions. "We realigned our business strategy and hired some very knowledgeable

developers and account managers," Allen reports. "Our goal has always been to stay ahead of the marketplace, which keeps us on the leading edge of technology and the industry."

Though AOC's client base was around 75 percent federal and 25 percent commercial in 2010, they made a conscious decision five years ago to lay a foundation that would enable them to rebalance to 50/50. "The federal space is a great line of business, but each election and change of leadership creates a period of instability," Allen remarks. "That's why we also provide purchase, fleet, travel, and accounts payable solutions to the private sector."

AOC has certainly been an interesting ride, but it accounts for only part of Allen's professional story—one tenth, to be more specific. Though AOC weighs in at 127 full-time employees servicing five Issuers and 12,000 clients and processing close to \$1.5 billion a month on its Encompass platform, Allen's other operations are nothing to scoff at either. Three Delta Systems, which he co-founded, services the acquiring side of transactions in the banking industry. Three Delta Systems and AOC together cover both ends of the connectivity spectrum, and the two platforms process \$3.5 billion a month in accounts payable transactions throughout the U.S.

Another of Allen's initiatives, a company called FEDAC Processing, is a merchant acquirer, and these three operations together accommodate all the needs of business-to-business and business-to-government transactions. These transactions sum up to well over \$25 trillion a year. Allen and his team seek to service the companies in this market by reducing their overhead, increasing their processing capability, and improving their methods in terms of accounts payable and receivable solutions.

In the beginning, Allen leveraged the success of his consulting business with the federal government to fund his other ventures, and all of his companies are sustainable today. His endeavors, however, are not only about identifying and filling needs in the marketplace. By co-founding The YouthQuest Foundation, a non-profit dedicated to providing at-risk teenagers with scholarships that open doors to quality education, Allen also uses his strengths to identify and fill needs within the community. "YouthQuest doesn't contribute to my bottom line, it allows us to give back to the community in

critically important ways," he explains.

These companies have achieved their success in large part because of the common philosophy of stewardship that underlies them. Indeed, AOC and its sister businesses have no investors and no hidden agendas. Their sole concern is to take care of their employees and their clients. "I'm a firm believer that you set your own path and determine your own destiny," Allen avows. "Through strategic planning, hiring the right people, and obviously through a little luck, you define your path and determine your future going forward. You have to take care of people along the way, and you have to do what's right."

These lessons are deeply rooted in Allen's childhood, throughout which he always observed his mother working three or four jobs to make ends meet. His father passed away when Allen was young, so he and his mother worked as a team to stay afloat. "She definitely laid the foundation for my work ethic, for how I deal with people, and for my sense of right and wrong," he reflects. He always held odd jobs to help cover his expenses beginning with a paper route at age 12, and he was the first of his family to attend college. While earning his undergraduate degree, he joined the ROTC and acquired a private pilot's license.

Even throughout his many years of education and military service, Allen never quite let go of a dream he had from childhood. "My mother saved everything I did as a kid—every report card, every paper," he laughs now. "Even when I was in grade school, I always said I wanted to start and run my own business." He never would have achieved the success he's realized today if he hadn't ultimately followed this dream and invested everything he had in its pursuit. Yet he also wouldn't have had the experience and knowledge base necessary to secure this success if he hadn't dedicated himself to learning and absorbing all that he could during his days in the

Army. For this reason, Allen advises young entrepreneurs entering the business world today to fully invest themselves in their chosen path, whatever it may be at the time. "You have to be focused on what you do and have a real commitment to it," he implores. "It doesn't matter if you're doing white collar or blue collar work, there's honor in every profession as long as you're committed and focused on it."

Allen believes that only by applying the trust factor to all aspects of your life can you truly attain the success you're capable of, and he lives to press the limits of this reality in all that he does. "My philosophy is that everybody has the same 24-hour day, so how do you use that time?" he queries. Whether it's snowmobiling, deep sea fishing, or scuba diving sixty feet underwater amidst 250 sharks, Allen's ability to trust himself and those around him in calculated yet substantive ways has allowed him to truly stretch the boundaries of professional success, life experience, and personal growth.

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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](#).

