



## The “3 P’s” a Former Leader at Universal Studios, Mattel and Teleflora Used to Generate Billions in Global Sales

Steve Sanduski:

Hi everybody and welcome to, On Your Mark, Get Set, Grow! I'm your host Steve Sanduski. And our guest today is Cynthia Cleveland. Cynthia is a recognized leader in brand and new business development. And has run five different companies totaling four billion dollars in worldwide sales.

And during her career she has launched thousands of consumer products all over the world. And she's also a coach at CEO Coaching International. And on today's show we talk about her three key ingredients for succeeding in any business. And she shared some great insights here that if you can do these three things well, then you are going to build a great business.

And I want you to be sure to listen to the end when I ask Cynthia who was a leader that she looked up to and why? And it's this why that she looked up to them that I think you're gonna find really surprising and fascinating.

And for all the notes and links to this episode, please be sure to go to [ceocoachinginternational.com](http://ceocoachinginternational.com). And with that, please enjoy my conversation with Cynthia Cleveland.

Cynthia welcome to the show.

Cynthia Cleveland:

Thanks Steve.

Steve Sanduski:

Well, it's exciting to have you here. And one of the things I find very fascinating about your background is that you have run five different companies that total

about four billion dollars in worldwide sales. And so, you've really had a variety of experiences.

And that's one of the things that I really want to go into today is really get an understanding of some of the things that you've learned in running five different companies in five different markets.

So I guess my first question really is, is there any kind of recipe for success in any of these businesses? Did you come across or develop any ideas that were really consistent in terms of how you approached these different businesses that you were leading?

Cynthia Cleveland: Absolutely. That's a very good question. I mean, my recipe for success, and what was interesting is it actually worked with any business. I started with my first business but I found it was always three things that were most important. And I call it my 3 P's if you will.

The first one is really just having a passion for the business, or the product, or the service, for the people you employ. Just being passionate about what you do. That's something you cannot fake. And while I've done many different businesses I've been blessed in that I've been able to be very passionate about all of them.

Second thing and this maybe should be the first thing is profits. No business can survive without sufficient cash. So cash, managing your costs, and your margins, that's really job one when it comes to the business itself.

And the last P, again I think all of these could be first P's, is the people. Because no business survives not even without just a person. There's no one person that does it. But it's really about having a great team. And understanding your own personal strengths and weaknesses as a leader was something that really helped me grow.

And then hire a balanced team and keep improving that team as the company grows. And what happens is the team you start with today, two years from now don't think that same team is gonna get you to where you need to go going forward. And always try to hire the best team for where you want to go, not necessarily where you are today. So those are my three P's.

Steve Sanduski: Okay. So you've got passion, profits, and people. So let's go into a little more detail on each of those three. So the first one passion. A lot of people talk about passion, and you want to be in a business that you're passionate about.

Do you think it's possible that someone can still be successful in business if they're not super passionate about the work that they're doing? Is that a prerequisite? Or is the sign, hey if I'm not passionate about this then I need to leave this business or start a new company that I am passionate in?

Cynthia Cleveland: So I would say most people who are successful are passionate. And it may not be about the business per se, but it's about winning. So it's about people are passionate about some aspect of what they're doing. And in some cases they're passionate about the product. In some cases it's passionate about the people, or the service that they've got.

But I think without really caring about what you're doing whether it's winning or what aspect of it is, then maybe you're just not meant for leadership would be my conclusion about that. People who are passive are probably not your best leaders.

Steve Sanduski: And what about the people that work with you? Is it critical that they're passionate about what they do? And if they're not quite a 10 on a scale of 1 to 10 in terms of their level of passion, how much do you think it is the leader's role to inspire, motivate, and get the team around them to be passionate about the work they do?

Cynthia Cleveland: I think it's the leader's role to choose the best people. You want to choose 10s. And you don't create 10s. I think you can create a great team by giving great attention to the people that you're bringing.

It's kind of like common sense. I've always found you can't teach somebody common sense. They either have it or they don't. You can learn skills but there's certain aspects that people are either driven or they're not.

And so, you want people who are driven in their own particular ways. And they might look very different. A driven financial person might be a very quiet person and not standing on the table and shouting. But a passionate sales person is gonna look very different.

So everybody doesn't look alike, but I think they are caring about what they're doing, and being passionate about what they're doing. Yeah, we want 10s. We want all 10s.

Steve Sanduski: Okay since we're talking about the people here let's move on to that one. How do you identify these 10s ahead of time? Did you develop some type of interviewing process over the course of your career running these different companies? Or what are some of your best practices when it comes to trying to identify these 10s and hire them?

Cynthia Cleveland: You know the best way to tell if somebody is gonna be a 10 is not what they tell you but they've actually done. Have they had big accomplishments in the past? Are they here making excuses to you? Are they here telling you about the great things that they have done?

And I don't mean chest pounding kinds of things. But the best predictor of the future is the past. So if somebody has been successful in the past, then I think that's a pretty good predictor for the future.

Steve Sanduski: And do you have any other like go to interview questions where you make it a point that whenever you're interviewing someone that you maybe have one, two, or three questions that you always want to make sure that you ask them? Because you've determined over your experience that these are the kinds of questions that really get to the heart of whether this is someone who really has performed in the past and could be a 10.

Cynthia Cleveland: That's a good question. I think the other part of being a 10 is you can be a great individual performer. But I will also look for how do people win as a team. So how did they work as a team leader and as a team player? And I will ask for those kinds of examples. And how were you in a situation? How did you behave in a difficult situation? Can you disagree without being disagreeable?

These are also traits that I think are really important of leadership. Can you give me an example of how you worked with and developed somebody? And what do they look for in people? And what's the most difficult situation they've been in?

So I look for are they willing to share with you here are my high lights and my low lights. Everybody has failed. It's not about failing. In fact, if I met somebody who said they had never failed I probably would not want to hire that person because they're just lying.

So it's how you come back from the failures. And we've all had them in life. So are you honest about who you are, what your strengths are? Do you have some self awareness? I would say that's a really important thing.

So can somebody tell you themselves, heres what's great about me. And heres what I'm not? And so self awareness is a huge factor especially when you start talking about people in the C Suite. Because then it moves from individual performance, to having the ability to motivate others and build their own teams in a sense.

So how are they as team players? And how are they as team leaders? Because the higher up you go, the more the people you surround yourself become important. I always try to hire people who are better than I am at whatever they're doing.

Steve Sanduski: And then how about assessments? Do you use assessments in the interview process? And if so, what kind do you use? And how much weight do you put into those types of tools in the interviewing process?

Cynthia Cleveland: I do use assessments. At CEO Coaching we use DISK and I find that's an incredibly helpful assessment in order to kind of get a feeling for who the person is. And it too helps people understand both their strengths and their potential blind spots because everybody has got them.

And so I think both seeing how people react when you look at your own blind spots. Can they look at their own blind spots? Can they tell you maybe what they're working on personally? You want the kind of person, and maybe this is answering your earlier question again, I look for life long learners. I look for people who aren't satisfied with whatever the status quo is.

I want people who are eager, and interested in the world because whatever the world is today, it's gonna be something slightly different tomorrow. So how do they adapt to change? How do they deal with knowing that things are gonna be different tomorrow than today?

So those are all qualities as well. And I think assessments are a great tool to help you understand yourself and then the others that you deal with as well.

Steve Sanduski: So you mentioned blind spots.

Cynthia Cleveland: Yes.

Steve Sanduski: And you mentioned self awareness earlier, so I'm gonna put you on the spot here.

Cynthia Cleveland: Sure.

Steve Sanduski: Hopefully you don't mind.

Cynthia Cleveland: No.

Steve Sanduski: As you look back on your career, what was a blind spot that you had that you had to get pointed out, or you had to become self aware about? And then, how were you able to overcome that blind spot?

Cynthia Cleveland: Well one of my worst business blind spots and I won't mention the company exactly, but I was working with a company. It was the first time I was working with a company that was venture capital backed. And I was told, and I was kind of naïve. I was told there was enough cash to last a year and a half. And within six months, I had to be out raising cash.

And so that was when I learned the lesson, cash is king or queen. Whatever world we want to live in. And it was a very, very hard lesson. I did manage to raise the cash. But if you don't have cash, you don't have a business.

Your options just become so much more limited. So I am now a firm believer in cash is something that is an absolute essential for any business. So making sure you have that in order is a big thing.

Another blind spot for me, I will tend to believe the best in people. I believe the best until somebody shows me otherwise. And I've been fooled from time to time. And I don't like to think that I have totally changed. But I radar goes up a little more quickly when something doesn't match what somebody says, and somebody does. So I've become a little more weary.

Steve Sanduski: Okay, well I appreciate you sharing that. Now, what blind spots have you noticed in other people? Have you identified any common blind spots that you see with people in the C Suite?

Cynthia Cleveland: People are very driven and often. And that's a good thing. But the other side of that is that they sometimes miss things. And you can be driven in different ways. Like I could be driven on the side of the business for the results and so forth. But I can totally miss the people stuff sometimes.

And so, if I'm that kind of a leader, and many of us are, the people issues can just bite us you know where. And so you have to be cognizant that its not just business results. You need to make sure that you've got a team that's working well together. And so it's like your strength on one side, is almost always your weakness in another.

Steve Sanduski: Okay, and that third P was profits.

Cynthia Cleveland: Yes.

Steve Sanduski: And you touched on that here just a moment ago. So I'd love for you to share any other ideas that you have in terms of what you do as a CEO, as a leader of the company. How closely are you monitoring cash? Is something that you look at on a daily basis? Is there like a certain report that you look at? Do you do cash forecasting? How do you actually manage the cash situation, or at least monitor it so that you don't get business in a box?

Cynthia Cleveland: Yeah, I would say I'm more of a monitor than a manager that way. One of the first things I do because I know who I am, is I hire the best financial person that I can. And that's usually my strongest number two person because I want somebody who is ... I'm more of a big picture, visionary kind of person.

But I want somebody who's the opposite of me and who is in the weeds and is looking at every single balance, every single account receivable. Looking at how many days we're getting turns. Looking at all of those things.

So I would say my best offense there is a bit of a defense in understanding that, that is not who I am. And so making sure I have the best possible person in place for that.

Steve Sanduski: Well this next question I want to ask, just kind of leads into what you talked about there. You said I want to hire a really top CFO. Maybe this is kind of hard to answer. Maybe it's gonna differ from business to business, depending on the growth trajectory that you're on.

But is there a sequence that you find in terms of when you hire people? Like do you first hire a top sales person and then you hire a top financial person, and then a top marketing person, and then a top op's person? Is there any order that you typically see when it comes to building a fast growth business how you fill out your C Suite?

Cynthia Cleveland: That's a good question. And I think it is a little bit dependent on the business and what's driving it. You know, most businesses, without sales there is no business, there is no cash to manage. So you have to start there. But some businesses are also very marketing driven. So, if that's the case then perhaps you find a combination sales marketing person, or that becomes higher on the list. But very soon on, you better have somebody to manage that cash as well.

Steve Sanduski: Great. Okay so as I mentioned earlier, you've run five big businesses in five different areas, five different industries. And so, how did you approach those? So when you're going from industry A, company A to industry B, company B, how did you make that transition?

And as a senior leader, what were the key things that you were thinking about, looking for and doing in those first let's say 60 to 90 days when you transitioned to a new company? And would it be fair to say that whatever you were doing there, is that applicable whether you're going from one company to another?

Or whether let's say you in the same company but maybe you're launching a new product line that requires some new skills or some new understandings of that particular part of the industry?

Cynthia Cleveland: Okay, well I guess one thing that I've always done no matter what the business is, is I want to learn the business. I need to learn the industry. And sometimes it's very different. So when I moved from Carnation which became Nestle, then to Teleflora, they were different businesses so I had to learn an industry.

The business itself I actually sat down with all of the direct reports, and actually went to the point of listening to customer service calls, going on visits with sales people, and spending time in retail locations there because those were all new to me. And then talked to employees at all levels.

One of the things I've found in every position is when you're in the top seat, the people who are talking to you don't necessarily tell you the same kinds of things that people who are on the front line will.

Sometimes people on the front line are a lot more honest. And I like to ask everybody for their opinions or ideas for improving the company because you never know where a great idea is gonna come from.

And point 2 is really understanding your senior management team and how they function. And for that, that's where I'm a big believer in assessments and doing team assessments. In the same way you do a self assessment. Then take your team, sit down with your team and go through an assessment process.

And it's not just for them, but it also helps you understand where your blind spots are, where your holes are. But helping people understand each other has been one of the most effective tools to creating a stronger team because the creative person will understand perhaps that the finance person isn't just trying to be difficult. It's just how they view the world, or vice versa. So I've found that to be a very great 60 day tool.

Also, just have the team together to really look at where are you headed. And I like looking at smaller portions of time. What's your 60 day plan? What's your 90 day plan? Look for some quick wins.

What can we do together as a new team that shows that you're taking the company forward in a positive way? Hiring the absolute best person that you can. Hiring somebody who is a proven success.

And then the last one which I'm guilty of not always doing as most CEOs are is when tough decisions need to be made, don't delay. I mean you'll never meet a CEO I bet who doesn't say when they fired somebody that they did it too soon. Most of us will give people the benefit of the doubt and will wait until it's probably too late.

But when a tough decision needs to be made, usually people know. And if it's other kinds of tough decisions, I've had to close down distribution centers, and do different things that were very tough decisions.

And waiting does not help and it's a natural tendency to wait and try to look at every other option first. But the business is better if we make the tough decisions in a more speedy manner.

Steve Sanduski: Well you gave me five good ones there. So let's unpack those a little bit.

Cynthia Cleveland: Sure.

Steve Sanduski: Maybe go into one or two of them in a little more detail. So the first one you talked about was just really learning the business, listening to the customers, talking to the employees. Have you found when you do that, do you tend to learn more from talking to the employees about the business? Or do you learn more by talking to the customers?

Cynthia Cleveland: You know, it's like that old fable of the five people around the elephant and each one noticing something different. I think you need all of it. I think you get one perspective from going to an industry even for example. Your employees will tell you something that was interesting.

I found the customer service people often gave me the best feedback on products that we were developing because they would hear the complaints from customers. They would hear more so than our sales and marketing people things that weren't quite right. So I found they were always very helpful for that.

And then in the case of Teleflora we had florists who were customers. So actually talking to the florists and understanding their business actually led us to new business ideas for that business.

Steve Sanduski: And is that something that you recommend senior leaders do on a regular basis forever?

Cynthia Cleveland: Absolutely.

Steve Sanduski: Yeah.

Cynthia Cleveland: Forever and ever because you'll be in touch right now. But a year from now you won't be so whether its attending the industry conferences, meeting your competitors. I'm a big believer in there are times you can collaborate.

And you can definitely learn and staying up on technology trends. I'm just a big believer in continual learning through life. And whether that's the business that you're in, the business that you're looking at, there is always something more to be learned.

Steve Sanduski: Okay. And then another thing that you mentioned here was about bringing the team together to develop some concrete plans. And you also talked about how you like to do 60 day plans, and 90 day plans, and get some quick wins.

So what does that look like? Are these formal sit downs? Do you put together like a strategic plan as well? When you come into a new business do you typically start with a strategic annual plan and then you break that down into quarterly objectives? Or how does that planning process work when you move into a new business?

Cynthia Cleveland: Yeah exactly. I mean it used to be people used to do five year plans. And now I think everybody realizes its kind of a joke. The world is just moving too quickly. So I think a solid annual plan with quarterly updates, and quarterly goals so you can see if you're going to reach your end goal at the end of the year.

And if not, you know everything short of death can be recovered from. You live and you learn, and you move on, and you adjust, and you keep adjusting until you get to where you need to go.

Steve Sanduski: And how frequently do you go back to those plans and review them? Is that something you do on a quarterly basis? Do you do that on a monthly basis? A weekly basis? Tracking metrics? How does that typically work?

Cynthia Cleveland: I love it if you can get your metrics down to a weekly basis if possible. Or at least have some goals. Are you getting close to being able to reach that? Sometimes there are steps before you see the end result as the metric.

But you know, in some businesses it'll take a certain amount of calls before you actually close a call. Do you have those leading indicators that are showing that you're going to get close to your goals? So look for those leading indicators. And there will be aspects of along the way check in points on all of it.

So I think it's breaking it down so you know that you're making progress. And I find it motivates people. People want to win. Nobody wants to come to work and feel like we're not winning, or we're not making progress. So I find people like it when they understand that they are making progress. And it's just great to feel like you're getting good results.

Steve Sanduski: It sure is. Now in the different businesses that you've run, have you come across any metrics that are consistent from company to company? Whether it's something like revenue per employee, or something like that, that might transcend any business that you're in? Is there any one or two go to metrics that you've identified?

Cynthia Cleveland: I mean sales is always your number one but breaking that down then into what leads to sales and that can be different from company to company. But there are typically leading activities that lead to that.

Whether it's sending out a certain amount of emails, a certain amount of calls, a certain amount of meetings. And that varies by business. But there are leading indicators that will help any business figure out if they're gonna reach their sales goals.

Steve Sanduski: Okay. And so, you've given some good ideas here in terms of your learnings from these different businesses. Are there any other examples of tough business learnings, or exciting business learnings that you've gathered over the

years from these different businesses that you've run that you think could be helpful here for our listeners?

Cynthia Cleveland: Well one fun one was actually at Universal Studios. One of my jobs was to look at building our international markets. And we had a system of agents. And so it started out as a project where we looked at, at what point did it make sense to move from an agent to a dedicated office?

So we looked at the benefits of pros and cons of a wholly owned office versus agents. And ultimately opened up dedicated offices in Asia, Europe and Canada. And it was just a very fun process to look at how things work outside of the domestic market to get a more world view.

And I find a lot of the businesses that I work with now, one of the ways that they can expand their sales is by understanding world markets. A lot is untapped if you're just in the domestic market.

There are often times ways you can expand exactly the business that you have by entering into new markets. So that was fun and again it was new learning for me. And there were some times it didn't make sense.

There were times we realized that it made more sense at that moment to stay with an agent in a territory. But then we had to figure out ways, how do you motivate an agent, who by its very nature is not your sole employee to do a better job for you than for their other clients who are in sort of the same boat?

So it's always interesting to me to look at the challenges and what motivates people, and what makes the world go round. And the more I've gotten involved with global businesses, the more I have enjoyed and appreciated some of the differences of different cultures, and different opportunities around the world. So that was a fun one.

Steve Sanduski: So is there maybe a step by step process that you typically go through when you say, "Okay we want to expand internationally?" Is there a typical roadmap that a company follows to really figure out exactly how to do that? Because every country is different in terms of their rules and regulations, and ways that they do business. So is there a few steps that you typically go through when you think about expanding internationally?

Cynthia Cleveland: Yes. I would say first, you have to look at your own products or services, where they're made and who the market is because that will then lead to some different decisions. A fairly typical first step is to go to English speaking countries.

So going to the UK, going to Australia, going to New Zealand, those are usually the lowest hanging fruit because the packaging requirements are similar. At

least people are speaking the same language. You don't have website issues. So that's usually the first step.

And then after that it's really market by market. You know China has become such a huge market. It's a challenging market. And there are some companies that I've worked with where we've made the decision not to go to China because of the IP issues that we have with getting knocked off.

And there are other companies where we've made a totally different decision. So it really depends. And some countries, you have to look at the tariffs. You have to look at the duty. It's a little complicated but it's well worth the effort in the end because if there's a limit in how much you can grow in the states, sometimes that limit just totally goes away when you expand.

Or you can look at what other kinds of product lines could you sell to your US customers. I love expansion in many directions. And so is there something that you have in your companies product line or in what you're doing that you could leverage better or expand in a new way and that adds to sales for your company as well? A lot of companies can be rejuvenated just with coming in with a pair of fresh eyes looking at the business.

Steve Sanduski: And when someone is thinking about expanding internationally, are there any caveats that you would say, hey you've gotta make sure you watch out for this?

Cynthia Cleveland: Well as I said, some of the copyright infringement is a huge issue. Duty is number one. I mean if you're gonna have huge duty, or tariffs, or issues, financial issues like that, and your product is problematic that way, it often times just is not worth it. So those are some of the biggest first road blocks.

And then do you have the ability, are there people that you've found who represent those? Sometimes we would opportunistically take on an agent because they covered a territory that we didn't have covered.

It goes back to the same three things. I mean, can you find the people who will then represent you? Because you're not gonna be able to be all over the world unless you're an internet business, in which case you can.

Steve Sanduski: Well, why don't we switch gears here.

Cynthia Cleveland: Sure.

Steve Sanduski: And you are now a coach at CEO Coaching International. So what attracted you to the organization? And what are you hoping to achieve by working with clients?

Cynthia Cleveland: Well it feels like a very natural transition for me. I've found I was doing coaching in my current consulting business. And so I was already kind of doing it. And so

when I met Mark, and Chris, and some of the guys, and we were talking and went through my background and also talked about this, I felt like it was just sort of a very natural next step.

I'm also enjoying being on boards. And as a board member you are running the day to day business. So when we talked about what was involved they said, "Well its kind of 1/3 consulting, 1/3 coaching, and 1/3 also listening and being a person that people can bounce ideas off of."

So that combination appeals to me because I really care about the people involved in business. I have a passion for making money. I like that a lot. And I love seeing the results. I'm now at a point in my career, I've done a lot of exciting things. It actually gives me joy to watch somebody else learn and grow, and be successful themselves. So it kind of felt like right time, right place.

Steve Sanduski: Excellent. All right, we're gonna jump into a few rapid fire questions. But before I do that is there anything else that you want to share that we haven't talked about yet?

Cynthia Cleveland: No, I'm good.

Steve Sanduski: All right. Well you've been a great leader for multiple businesses so I'm curious, is there anyone that you have looked up to as a leader that has had a great impact on you?

Cynthia Cleveland: Actually the first CEO that I worked for at Mattel his name was Glenn Hastings. Was an incredible leader. And what I really respected about him is if you met him at a party, the first thing he would not tell you is, "I am CEO of Mattel."

He would say, "I'm Glenn Hastings and I work at Mattel." So I've admired sort of the leaders who are not totally full of themselves in a way that often we can be. So that kind of servant leader who is there but is part of the company as well as leading the company.

Steve Sanduski: So someone who has humility.

Cynthia Cleveland: Humility, that's the best word for it.

Steve Sanduski: Excellent. All right, how about a leadership trait that you think tends to bring success.

Cynthia Cleveland: Drive, that whole drive and passion. In the DISK world it's the D. People who have high D it's not like somebody who doesn't have high D cannot succeed but many of the best leaders do have a high desire for results.

Steve Sanduski: Okay. And I'm gonna start a sentence here, and I'd like you to finish it. And the sentence begins with, what I know to be true is.

Cynthia Cleveland: What I know to be true is, I will always be working. I love to work.

Steve Sanduski: Yeah die with your boots on.

Cynthia Cleveland: I am going to. It gets me up every morning. I just love what I do. And I plan to continue to do it until I am not around anymore.

Steve Sanduski: All right. Well, we hope you're around for a long time.

Cynthia Cleveland: So do I.

Steve Sanduski: All right. Well I think we will wrap it up there. Well Cynthia I really appreciate it. Great conversation. And Thank you for sharing all your great insights.

Cynthia Cleveland: Thank you Steve. You have a great radio voice. You know you have a future there.

Steve Sanduski: Thank you.

Cynthia Cleveland: Take care.

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