

Doing It His Way

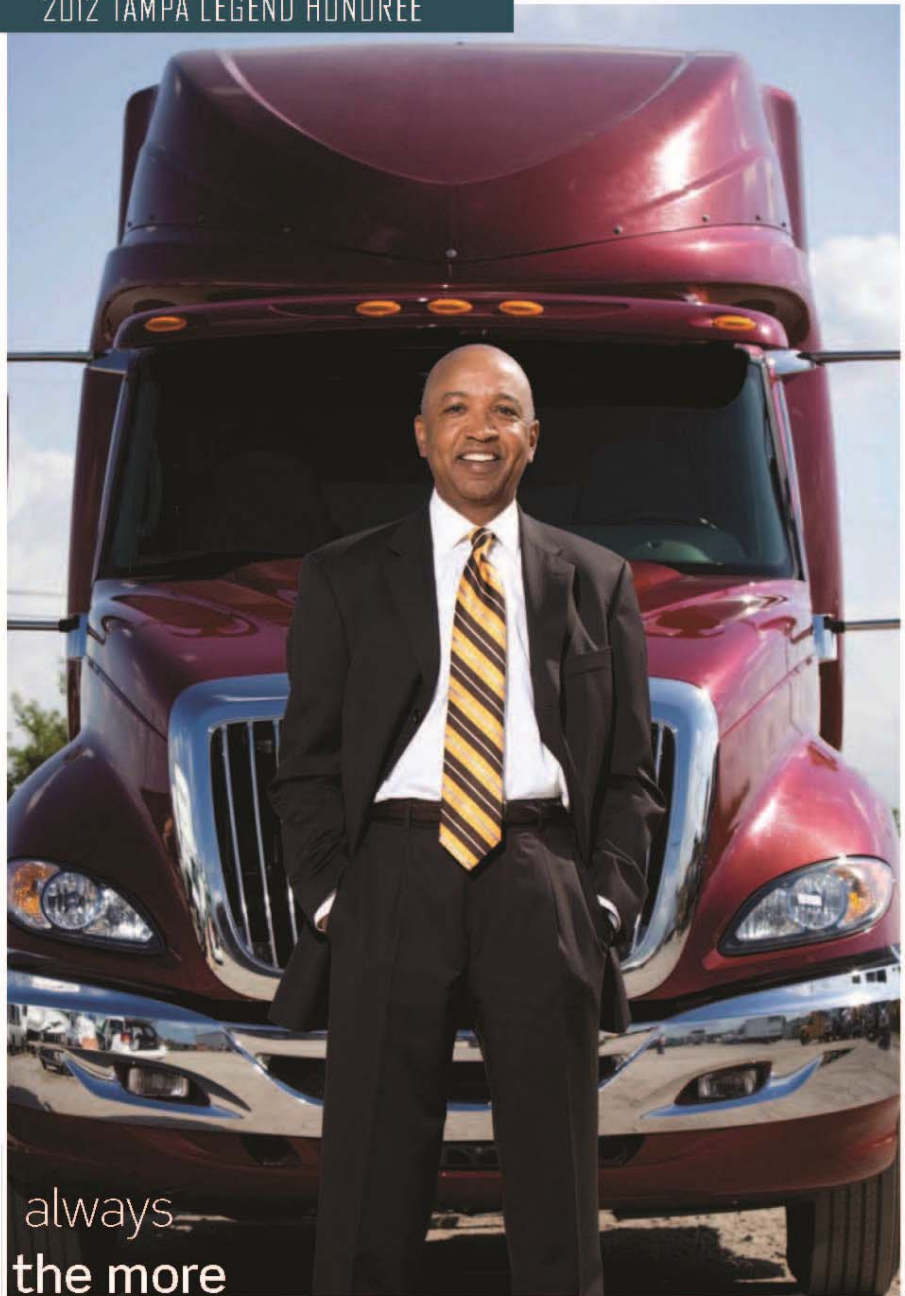
2012 Tampa Legend honoree Oscar Horton has successfully grown a business founded on respect, communication, and service to the community.

As a child growing up in Camden, AR, Oscar Horton always strived to be a successful entrepreneur. Today, he has not only achieved that vision, but has trademarked his company with a number of signature leadership strategies. As President and CEO of Sun State International Trucks, Oscar not only maneuvered around the recent economic downturn, he actually tripled the company's revenue since acquiring it in 2000. A somewhat small but growing company, Sun State currently has five locations in Central Florida and employs around 200 people. Horton's ability to successfully incorporate all employees into company initiatives,

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as well as his significant presence as a corporate leader in the local Tampa community, have led him to be recognized as the 2012 Tampa Business Leader Legend Honoree.

Horton was introduced to business principles early in life, as both of his parents ran a family general store along with a few other side businesses. He quickly learned not only the ingredients for survival in any business venture, but also the importance of holding a reputable presence. "From a very early age I always admired my father and the respect he demanded in the local community," he said. To Horton, respect is a core value that should be held as a priority in any area of human-to-human interaction. He kept



this in mind throughout his education at the University of Arkansas, and into his first job as a management trainee at International Truck and Engine's Financial Corporation. "This was the start of my education for entrepreneurship," he said. "Twenty-five years later and after a series of different positions inside International, my dream came true. I could be like my father."

After working his way up to Vice President of International's Foundry Business, Oscar left the company to become President of Sun State in 2000. Moving away from a secure position at a Fortune 500 company certainly was a partial gamble, but it was a risk Horton was willing to take. "Becoming the International dealer for the west coast of Florida was the opportunity to use all the education I had gained with International and apply it to my own company. It also provided me the opportunity to manage the company the way I wanted to see one managed," Horton said. This philosophy begins with what Oscar refers to as a total open book management system. This means ensuring that employees on every level are aware of company happenings, regardless of whether they are positive or negative. Horton emphasized that he is committed to treating every member of his team with respect.

He also marks making available ample opportunities for growth as a necessary means for consistent improvement. A major way in which this facet is executed includes putting every employee through an annual financial literacy course, a project integral to educating members of exactly how the business works. While Horton does understand that customers are the one thing that makes or breaks any business, he is hesitant to embrace totems that are typically accepted as business norms. He emphasizes that the customer is not always right, simply because the employee does need to be held in high regard if any business is to be successful.

Horton's ability to have transparency between employees and executives has reaped benefits that cannot be overlooked. This line of communication allowed him to successfully get all members to buy into a new focus in light of the recent recession. By placing more of an emphasis on service business as opposed to vehicle sales, Horton and his team were able to remain afloat without having to lay off any employees.

The essence of Horton's protocol for success is summed up in giving back to the surrounding community. "I don't have any desire to live a life of excess," he said. "I want a comfortable life for my family and me but after that I love helping others achieve success. I have always found the more you give the more you get. You will always be successful if you help others succeed." He pointed out that he has always made an effort to share his success with others, especially because all of it is a result of teamwork. "It is important to understand that you can't do the job alone. It takes a large village to raise a child," he added.

It is evident that Horton has worked to do this not only for his own employees, but for the very people that support his business in the Tampa area. His commu-

nity involvement is diversely spread throughout a variety of areas, including serving on the Board of Directors for the Bank of Tampa, Boys and Girls Club of Tampa Bay, and the Academic Prep Center of Tampa. He marks education as a true passion, and has dedicated himself to making visits to

surrounding schools to share his insights with students. The focus of this teaching surrounds being honest, approachable, and ethical.

Horton stated that he has been blessed not only by individuals who have offered great counsel in his life, but also those who have held him accountable. "It's important to have a team of people I like to call the 'solids.' These are the good people in your life. The people that will tell you when you are doing right and when you are doing wrong," he said. Horton specifically pointed to a mentor who stressed dividing life efforts into three categories—learning, earning, and returning. He added that he could not have achieved any of his accomplishments without a determined heart and considerable amounts of patience.

It is clear that Oscar Horton's dream did not end in 2000 when he first became President of Sun State. Instead, he gets to live it everyday by running a company the way he feels a business should run—with a basis on respect, transparency, and service to the community. His creative approach to leadership serves as an ideal model for any company looking to grow, succeed, and serve. ♦

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