

## The First Trait: Creativity

Hunters solve problems. They look at every situation as a puzzle that has an answer. It may not be an obvious answer, and it may not be the answer they want, but they fervently believe that there is an answer. Failure merely means that they haven't found the *right* answer yet.

Jeff Salter is the CEO and majority shareholder of Caring Senior Service. CSS provides in-home nonmedical care for those who, due to age or disability, cannot care for themselves. Every day, thousands of CSS caregivers across the USA go into people's homes to help them cook, clean, and bathe. Sometimes, they are simply companions for the lonely.

Jeff was working his way through college as a customer service representative for a home health agency in Midland, Texas. He noticed a large number of requests for help with Activities of Daily Living (ADLs). The home health agency that he worked for was limited to nursing care and medically related services.

Jeff's first solution was to locate a provider that could help his clients. He would happily refer them to another company, if that would solve his customer's problem, but no such services were available in Midland.

Jeff quit his job to open Caring Senior Service. In a very short time, the business became so busy that he had to quit college as well. Jeff had identified a problem and solved it. People needed his services.

Soon, Jeff opened a second office in McAllen, Texas, then another in Corpus Christi. San Antonio followed, then Austin. In five years, Jeff had quickly built a substantial company with over 200 employees.

Success brought a new set of problems. The growth of CSS was limited only by its infrastructure. Jeff did not have enough experience on his management team to open new offices as fast as the market demanded, so he decided to franchise. Working with franchise business owners, he reasoned, would relieve his team from having to manage each individual office. He could focus on a plan for opening more company-owned offices parallel with new franchise locations.

Some of the franchisees were very successful, but others were not. Feeling an obligation to the people who contracted with CSS franchises for care, Jeff repurchased the failing franchises and converted them to company locations.

However, those offices were far away. They weren't in markets that had been planned by CSS; rather, they were wherever a prospective franchisee had thought

they might be successful. The infrastructure requirements of handling these far-flung locations expanded by the day and the company, once again, stalled in its growth.

Jeff came up with a new solution. He would find experienced operators with track records of success. Local owners of small in-home service companies could be joint venture partners with CSS. They could combine with the CSS offices in an area. The combined company would have experienced management, the CSS national support and software capabilities, and economies of scale in operations. The small agency owners would have access to CSS systems, fewer details to worry about, and greater profitability.

CSS entered into several joint ventures and Jeff handed off his company offices in those areas. Then he recognized another problem. There was a reason that small agency owners were small. Most lacked either the skills, or the desire to be bigger. They couldn't surrender the details to someone else. They did not like managing multiple locations. They did a lot of the work in their own office personally, and abdicated rather than delegated responsibility in their branch locations. Again, the company's growth slowed to a crawl.

Jeff was not starving. CSS was already large enough to provide him with an excellent living; but he wanted the company to be a lot more than it was. He saw the failure of the joint ventures as merely another problem to solve.

He reorganized CSS again, dissolving the joint ventures, either by dividing the offices into freestanding sites or selling them off to his joint venture partners. He closed some of the reclaimed branches and several of the company-run franchises as well. He erased his organizational chart, and recreated CSS as a pure franchisor with all functions focused on supporting franchisees. He changed the status of his original company stores from corporate to simply the holdings of the largest single franchisee, himself.

With improved focus, the company began growing again. More franchises were sold, and management's distraction from running two operating entities lessened.

Did Jeff solve the problem? He would be the first to say, "For now." He understands that CSS' renewed growth will again bring new challenges and the need for new solutions.

Hunters don't defend their failing solutions. In fact, they are usually the first to see that they are not working. Often, they develop a new answer before others even notice there is a problem. Sometimes, they develop answers to things that aren't even problems yet.

That doesn't mean that hunters are exceptional planners. Often, they are just the opposite. They may not have a Plan B and a Plan C when they begin Plan A. Alternatives would only distract them from a total focus on making Plan A work. However, if Plan A fails they will develop Plan B and pursue it with the same single-mindedness that they recently devoted to Plan A.

Hunters believe that there is a solution to every problem, and that the only things they need are the time and resources to figure it out. “I can’t possibly do that” simply isn’t in their vocabulary. They will keep trying until they find a way.