

Tony Coombs

The Mission-Driven Mind

For many business owners, entrepreneurship is solely about the product and the profit. But for Tony Coombs—founder, president, and CEO of TCoombs and Associates, LLC—it’s about something more. His motivation far surpasses the confines of his office space, extending beyond each of his 800 employees and the countless clients for whom he does business. It’s more than a means of making a living; it is a means of making a difference.

Indeed, while TCA is known for its excellence in telecommunication, security, and healthcare logistics services, the primary driving force behind Tony’s ambition is his ability to transform society through the initiation of positive change. His business accomplishes this by providing opportunities to individuals who might not otherwise have them. In an effort to instill vision in populations that are oftentimes marginalized, Tony’s professional pursuits demonstrate that personal ideals and social change can have a place of worth and prominence in the world of business if we allow them to.

Tony moved to the U.S. in early adolescence but was born in Jamaica, a country stricken with considerable poverty and scant privilege. After moving around New York City, his family settled in the Bronx, where his father worked as a janitor and his mother served as a maid, cook, and nanny. With his parents each working multiple jobs, Tony found himself compelled to keep order amongst his siblings, ensuring that they did their homework after school and stayed out of trouble. He views this early experience as his first brush with leadership, as well as an early exhibition of the three traits that laid the foundation for his success: discipline, faith, and focus. Growing up in an environment where respect was highly valued, he inevitably developed strong skills in patience and restraint.

His parents, who he refers to as the most influential people in his life, laid in him a foundation of honesty and self-control, and he has thoroughly assimilated these traits into his character over the years.

Though Tony received an athletic scholarship to attend NYU after completing high school, he instead enlisted in the marines per his father’s direction. The year was 1977, with the Vietnam War winding down and a thick tension looming in both the political and social climates.

Training on a base in rural South Carolina, Tony faced several tiers of prejudice—one for being a black man, and another for being city-raised amidst the perception that strong character was cultivated through country work. Navigating with an immutable sense of self, however, Tony was able to endure the preconception and was later deployed throughout the Pacific. He served for twelve years and excelled at his position, recalling that the patience and discipline he had fashioned in himself as a child gave him a tremendous advantage.

After finishing active duty, Tony took up residence in Florida and married the woman who would later prove herself an integral pillar of support in his success. After obtaining an engineering degree, he organized a janitorial business with six or seven employees, predominantly family members, while he applied for jobs at IBM. The rag-tag company afforded the young family a reasonably comfortable livelihood and gave Tony the opportunity to learn business management skills until his persistence paid off and he received a call from IBM in 1985 offering employment at their manufacturing plant. He was then transferred up to the DC metropolitan area in 1986 and found the work fulfilling for the following decade. During this time, however, he



couldn't help but observe his wife Shanda's work in the social services. Seeing so many low-income individuals whose lives could be transformed through opportunity and vision equipped Tony with the impulse to build a vehicle that could fulfill those needs.

It was this impulse that hovered in the background of his thoughts when he stepped away from IBM and sought to start TSystems Group in 1999, which would later evolve into TCA. The business didn't earn a profit until 2003, adding stress at that time when the family was attempting to put its two eldest children through college. They were subsisting on Shanda's salary while Tony spent the majority of his time marketing himself, doing cabling for different department stores and finally coaxing business from the government of Maryland to provide service in county high schools. He positioned himself as a specialist in telecommunications, with services including cabling, wiring, and phone systems. Through his experience at IBM, however, he knew that success would be limited until he diversified his company's repertoire.

The timing could not have been more opportune when he attended a conference in the summer of 2003 and met a retired lieutenant colonel, Roger D. Stull, who had since established a cyber security company. The two joined forces, expanding the portfolio of TCA to include CNA, risk assessment, and Information Assurance services. Diversification was even further achieved through partnering with another air force retiree, John Olson. Between the three veterans, the company now boasted a strong working knowledge of the staffing and technology needs of both the air force and the Office on Disability. As a result, TCA's expertise spanned telecommunication, cyber security, and healthcare. Today, its service list correlates to these three main divisions but is even broader, encompassing engineering, technology, security, healthcare services and staffing, financial services, human capital management, telecom and access control, development and construction, alternative energy solutions, and TCA Foods. Diversification paved the road for the success and longevity that Tony predicted, and the company grew to \$90 million in revenue in less than a decade. The incredible growth even won TCA a spot in Inc. Magazine's list of the top 500 fastest-growing private American companies in 2007.

In addition to its strong business model and its ability to deliver quality, budget-friendly, and timely services to its clientele, one of TCA's greatest fortes is its company culture. With an employee retention rate of nearly 100%, Tony says that TCA is defined by this culture—one that is not so much delineated by the amenities of working at TCA (like the gym and racquetball courts on the tenth floor of their home office building), but rather by the permeating sense of community that Tony strives to instill. He builds this ethos by serving as a leader that his employees can reach out to whenever they need. Despite his many responsibilities, he is adamant about being "in the trenches" both professionally and personally. "Nobody is an employee or a number," he remarks. "Everyone who supports what I'm trying to do is an extension of my family."

Tony's commitment to his "extended family" is further confirmed by the fact that TCA assumes between 50 and 80 percent of its employees' healthcare costs. This may seem impossible in today's economic depression, but Tony accomplishes it through a simple adjustment of profit margin. His overall attitude and business model fuel unparalleled employee morale and loyalty, which in turn engenders a workforce that is committed, focused, and impassioned, whether local or at one of TCA's international sites.

Young entrepreneurs entering the workforce today could benefit greatly by modeling themselves after Tony's level-headed approach to leadership. He reflects that his best business decisions were when he chose to stay the course, have faith, and not panic. In making these choices, he advises to stay attuned to your gut instincts while also emphasizing the significance of context. "Under no condition would I make a decision solely based on a dollar amount," he emphasizes. While cost-effectiveness should not be discounted, one must always stay true to oneself, choosing a course that maintains the integrity of your mission and vision.

Perhaps it is exactly this coherence between professional success and personal objectives that drives Tony's success. Contrary to many business owners, he is rarely stressed in his work and does not draw a clear distinction between the professional and personal spheres of his life. In this sense, it is as if he is working every minute of everyday, whether physically, mentally, or spiritually. Because his company's culture is so

in harmony with his personal values, working imparts energy rather than depleting it.

Tony is currently using this self-sustained energy to look toward the future of TCA, which will hopefully entail evolution both in service model and in mission breadth. In terms of the business's portfolio, he hopes to build up the commercial aspect so that it is more in balance with the company's federal contracts, which now comprise approximately 90% of its focus. He has also developed an exit strategy that extends the chain of command to his eldest daughter and first employee, and ultimately to his two granddaughters. Considering this, combined with the fact that over 70 percent of TCA's employees are female, the company's present and future echo Tony's firm commitment to the respect and promotion of women professionals. "I believe the world would be a better place with ladies at the helm," he explains.

In terms of mission, Tony also hopes to take the vision behind his organization to the next level by focusing more on advocacy. As a private company committed to providing transformative opportunities to low-income yet talented individuals, TCA provides an effective and lucrative business model that succeeds in instigating positive social change as well. Tony's next step is to bring political awareness to this model in the hopes that other businesses can observe and adopt such principles, enacting change on both local and global scales.

These big picture goals may seem grandiose, but Tony takes each morning to reaffirm their clarity in his mind and strives to deliver this visualization to his staff as often as possible, keeping the team focused and driven. A respectful and fastidious observer, he has honed his relational skills such that he can tailor his communication style to best correlate with his audience—a proficiency that allows for effective exchange regardless of demographic variance. Whether in the trenches or in the conference room, whether at work or at home, and whether in street clothes or a suit, Tony's unity of personal and professional purpose is at once refreshing, transparent, and powerful. It is one that has generated swift and sturdy success thus far, and one that promises to impart solidarity and growth in years to come.

– By Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®

About Gordon J. Bernhardt

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](#).