Some thoughts from AEgis CEO Steve Hill, who was honored with the 2012 Executive Leadership Award

Who he is...

When I was 16 years old, I figured out pretty quick that creating a business to push a lawn mower for $15 or $20/hour beat flipping burgers for $3.35/hour – not rocket science but I could do THAT math. It also reinforced the merits of getting a college degree. I received a BSEE from UA/Huntsville in 1987 and later did MBA studies at Vanderbilt. I was 24 years old when co-founder, Bill Waite, and I started AEgis Technologies, so I had a lot to learn. Much of my knowledge and experience today has come from on-the-job training and the school of hard knocks. Over the years, I progressed from vice president to president to president/CEO, and the organization has grown from “two guys” in a one-room basement office to 315 people spanning 12 locations in 10 states. I have continued to read and study as life long learning is essential to leadership. We have developed AEgis Leadership Institute to invest in and train the current and next generation of leadership for our company. I am also a member of Huntsville’s Vistage group - a collection of 20 local presidents and CEOs who study leadership, solve common problems, and support the growth of each other’s businesses.

That pivotal moment...

Bill and I had started discussing our own business venture principally because of our passion for modeling and simulation and wanting to control our own destiny. A few months after initial conversations, we were abruptly laid off. Fortunately, 1989 was a strong economy for aerospace and defense, so we decided to go ahead and take the plunge. It has been a challenging and rewarding 23-plus years.

Advice for entrepreneurs...

First, pursue a service or product that you are really passionate about. You will spend a lot of sweat and tears working at it, so make sure you love it. You have to “be all in” – do not make the mistake of thinking starting a business will be easy or you will have more leisure time. Second, be a person and business of integrity in everything that you do. Doing the right thing by your customers and employees is non-negotiable and paramount to your reputation and success. Third, spend a majority of your time building valuable relationships with key customers. Nothing will affect your bottom line more than the quality of your customers. If you do not enjoy developing business or selling, hire someone who does because great ideas or efficient business organizations go nowhere without customers. Also, just like MBA programs tell you, an excellent banker, attorney and accountant are extremely important to supporting your business growth. Fourth, expect change and adversity. Prepare for it, embrace it with a good attitude, and remain committed. And finally, build a good business plan, define the metrics you will track to meet your goals, review regularly, and hold yourself accountable.

His coolest product...

I can’t pick just one! Our team’s UAS simulators, called VAMPIRE, for training warfighters; a recoverable/reusable test missile called MAST; several terrain database applications for security for events such as the Vancouver and Beijing Olympics; two large helicopter simulators for training pilots; and Laser Eye Protection technology for protecting warfighters and pilots from laser threats are a few of our “coolest” products.

On winning the Russell Brown Leadership Award...

There were so many outstanding leaders and friends of mine that were nominated. I was sincerely very surprised and honored to be selected. The award is clearly a team recognition, and we received and celebrated it with our whole team. It is such a privilege for me to lead such a hard working, talented group of professionals, and I am so proud of the outstanding services and products they provide to our customers.