

David Coleal

The Joy of Innovation Flames the Passion of Cirrus' Productive President

It is never all about him. Talk to David Coleal for 10 minutes or two hours and the first thing you learn is that the president of Cirrus Aircraft Corporation embodies a lot of Ralph Waldo Emerson's great line, that "the great always introduce us to facts; small men introduce us to themselves." It is not that Coleal is so intensely private – so reluctant to introduce us to himself – that it is difficult to pry from him details of his personal life; it is just that he is so utterly besotted with what he does – run one of the hottest, most exciting aircraft companies on the planet – that this passion seems to overtake most else in what is guaranteed to be a spirited conversation.

"I love our product," says the neophyte pilot (he got licensed in 2005) who trained in the Cirrus SR-20 before moving into the SR-22. "I'm the perfect target market segment for it, being a busy executive with a need to travel." Coleal drives up to his interview in an SUV with a kayak strapped on top and bike clipped to the rear, but don't let this Sporting Man look fool you: He may indeed indulge in a love of outdoor action, but this president takes "busy executive" to its highest level. Ask him to name some of his interests and the first word out of his mouth? "Work," he says. Ask him to list some of his passions and what does he say? "Work," he replies. Oh, he will also mention kayaking and biking and snowboarding, but probe a little more and learn that this enterprising business leader is, at 38, driven above all to make – and keep – his company a winner.

"You gotta be on your toes," he says of his efforts to create in Cirrus a "constant air of excitement." "It's exhausting," he admits. But in 2001 when he hopped aboard (as executive vice-president of operations), the

aircraft manufacturer was building less than one plane a day; today that number is four planes a day and Coleal, who rose to president in 48 months, is thrilled. It's exhausting, "but we will never have an environment of mediocrity like lots of companies over time – those who lose the entrepreneurial spirit because they get too focused on business systems, profits and proce-



dures." He adds: "At the end of the day ours is still a people business. You can apply tools and techniques, but if people don't buy into it, or agree with it, or if you don't have the ability to lead people...well, you've really got mediocrity."

And mediocrity is not for David Coleal. It was not for him growing up in Lancaster, CA as the impassioned son of a former B-24 navigator who post-war was stationed at Edwards Air Force Base. "Every young boy wants to be a pilot," he says. "I made models of every kind of major aircraft fighter. I could tell you what they were just by looking at their silhouettes." Mediocrity was

not for him as he attended Sacramento State University on a baseball scholarship. "I realized the probability of being pro was pretty slim," he says and instead earned "something useful": a degree in mechanical engineering technology. Nor was mediocrity his m.o. when he went to work at the Toyota/General Motors joint venture known as New United Motor Manufacturing. "What a wonderful opportunity to work for a premier organization," he says. In awe of how a Toyota Corolla could be built every 60 seconds, a Toyota pick-up every 90, the budding manufacturing adept took "the great, great experience" he got there, bundled it with the MBA he earned at night from California State University, Hayward, and took his show to Caterpillar, Inc. in North Carolina. One year later he was at McKinsey & Company, a manufacturing consulting firm, where his mediocrity-busting was applied to a number of manufacturers' operational improvement programs. Increased efficiency and significant cost savings seemed to be Coleal's Midas Touch.

"I have a lot of drive to problem-solve," he insists. "But I'm also very critical!" So the day at the gym when he picked-up an issue of *Popular Science* was pivotal. He read of a small company in Duluth, MN that makes small airplanes and, as Coleal recalls, "needed help with diagnostic work." The manufacturing boy marvel, who by now was married with children, felt his heart leap. He knew: Up ahead was a move to Duluth for wife Lori and kids Michael, 11; Cameron, 8; and Eric, 7 months.

"I saw a lot of huge potential to really make a change, to bring all the skills I had developed," he says. "I was instantly excited about the product and saw a lot of



opportunity to perhaps change the industry." Changing an industry is no small feat. But bringing to Cirrus what Coleal calls "the philosophy of auto manufacturing," where production is so efficient that 300,000 vehicles roll out annually, he hopes to ensure it a brilliant future. "The planes we build today are *definitely* better than those built in the past," he says. Easier to fly. Better performers. Overall a better value. "Excitement, innovation and safety – that's what I want people to know Cirrus is about." Coleal adds: "We say you don't have to lose the entrepreneurial spirit when you get to be a bigger company. And if it is one thing about this organization, it is that it is always willing to learn. It is always changing."

It took awhile in life, but the work-loving executive finally got around to some *other* play: On lunch breaks, after hours, and, he says, "with weekend crash courses," he earned his pilot's license 14 or so months ago. Around his home of Duluth

and, especially, Lake Superior, "there is so much perfect flying geography," he says. Happy times in the sky include Coleal's flights (in the SR-22) to Florida, California, and, on shorter hops, to beautiful Madeline Island. True, most trips are to the many Cirrus customer events scheduled into his packed-full agenda, but once in awhile the kayak or bike or snowboard gets a whirl. It's nice, says the over-200-hour flyer who no doubt will pile on flying adventures as his work allows, that there is so much "ease of travel" with the toy that is also such a great business tool. Says Coleal: "I credit our management team that none of us has a traditional mindset of what an aircraft should be. What an aircraft should be," he adds, clearly in love with his own, "is what we want it to be – comfortable, safe, efficient transportation."

Come now, Coleal, aren't you forgetting something? Oh, yeah, he says, parting with a little something personal, "what we – I – want it also to be, is fun!" ✕

"I was instantly excited about the product," says the Cirrus leader of the craft whose manufacturing he oversees. Pictured with him: his snazzy SR-22.