



12 MINUTES TO STSQ

Shattering the status quo is about standing out. It is about going against the grain and pushing limits and boundaries every day, in everything you do. Our mission at Mediaspace Solutions is to shatter the status quo. We have created this series to showcase how individuals have done this throughout their personal and professional lives to arrive where they are today.

Jeff Prouty is the Chairman and Founder at The Prouty Project (www.proutyproject.com), which specializes in strategic planning, organization development and board/team development. Once a year, Prouty and associates take clients and business associates on a Stretch Expedition. These expeditions are intended to stretch them physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally. Prior to starting The Prouty Project in 1987, Jeff worked at Coopers and Lybrands (now PricewaterhouseCoopers) in Minneapolis and New York City for seven years. Jeff graduated from Iowa State University with a BS in Business Administration in 1979.

WHAT MAY HAVE BEEN SOME OF THE KEY LEARNINGS THAT YOU USED TO HONE YOUR PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS?

I am a voracious reader. Someone once said to me, during my Coopers and Lybrand days, 'We are the product of the books we read and the people we meet.' What I have developed and created over the years is a combination of all these experiences.

When you walk into our office you will see a quote saying "A mind stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions." This was important to me when I started the business. We have built the business around that concept.

We are constantly thinking about how we can stretch clients and expose them to new experiences, ideas and people. This allows them to develop even more compelling strategies.

WHO HAVE BEEN SOME OF YOUR MENTORS THAT YOU HAVE LOOKED TO OR HAVE REALLY INFLUENCED YOU?

I would say John Sullivan, the Managing Partner of Coopers and Lybrands office, in the early 80s. I was 23 years old, and he was 61 years old. He took me to lunch every Friday at the Minneapolis Club and was a great advisor. One of the things he told me was 'Prouty, fight the right battles.'

In my early 20s, I did some volunteer work with Curt Carlson.

I respected his tenacity and work ethic. Also, Max Depree is an author who wrote, Leadership is an Art. Max was the CEO of Herman Miller, the furniture maker, and I remember his concept of 'Everyone has a voice not a vote.' The notion of getting everyone's input and building on it, versus a democracy where majority rules.



Leadership is being willing to make the tough decisions that may fly in the face of what everyone else is thinking, and having the courage to do so.

TALK ABOUT A TIME THAT YOU HAD TAKEN A RISK KNOWING THAT FAILURE HAD HUGE IMPLICATIONS.

I don't think anything in business is that risky. Certainly, there are some money elements that might impact our families and jobs. In regards to the day to day of running a business, there is a perceived risk which is greater than the actual risk.

I do believe there is much in business where people say they are uncomfortable. It takes them out of their comfort zone to do an edgy advertising campaign, consider an acquisition, or create a new product.

Did you know? STSQ = Shatter the Status Quo – the mantra of Mediaspace Solutions employees and what we set out to do every day for each and every client.



I'm a big believer in the Jim Collins' line, 'Try a lot of stuff and keep what works.' The negative consequences are perceived to be a lot worse than they really are. The perception of the consequence is worse than the reality.

HOW IS THE POWER OF RISK TAKING COMPARED TO ENCOURAGING CLIENTS TO STRETCH THEMSELVES? HOW DO YOU SEPARATE THE TWO?

When we talk about stretch, we are referring to stretching mentally, physically, spiritually and emotionally. What can you try that takes you out of your comfort zone? What could you do that makes your heart pound a little faster? These are things which are more perceived risk than actual risk.

We hope to inspire people to make those bold moves that may feel a lot riskier than they really are. Unless a client can convey to me there is a life or death element to the risk they are taking, there isn't that much risk. It is more overcoming the fear of taking a shot and trying something new.

We have a number of quotes in our creative think tank around the notion of swimming upstream or zigging while everyone else is zagging. For a lot of folks that is the challenge. While everyone else is doing it one way, it takes courage to go the other direction.

Being courageous can be difficult for some people. It is more difficult for leaders as they move into their 40s and 50s. More mature leaders—oftentimes—are focused on landing the plane safely instead of exploring new territories and finding new opportunities.

HOW DO YOU CREATE EXPEDITIONS FOR THOSE CLIENTS WHO ARE FOCUSED ON LANDING THE PLANE SAFELY RATHER THAN EXPLORING NEW TERRITORY?

Our process has evolved. The first stretch (1999) was to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro in Africa. The reason we picked Mt. Kilimanjaro was because my wife and I were in Africa in the mid-90s doing some volunteer work. I saw Mt. Kilimanjaro and said, 'I want to come back and climb this mountain at some point in my life.'

A few years later, the light bulb went on and I said, 'We should have this concept of Stretch

Expeditions.' It played off the Oliver Wendell Holmes quote. Invite clients and business associates every year to do something that would take them out of their comfort zone, including ourselves.

On our expedition to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, we had 13 people sign up and 12 submitted. The next year we decided to do something more service-oriented and ended up doing a service project in Calderon, Ecuador. We helped the Ladies of Calderon build a day care center for children of the working poor.

In odd numbered years, we tend to do something that is more of a physical challenge. In even numbered years, we do something that is giving back, service-oriented and

volunteering.

Five years ago, we went on a stretch in New Zealand. On the final night of the stretch, 10 of us sat down and came up with 450 ideas for stretch expeditions. It was more than we will ever pack into our lives.

The only thing that came up which was outside of our scope was going into a war zone. One individual was doing volunteer work in Afghanistan, and suggested we go there and help out. The war zone is beyond the scope of what I want to take on, and would be beyond the scope of what most of our clients would want to take on. Other than war zone, we haven't defined anything that is 'too stretchy.'

In 2012, we are going to the Galapagos Islands, a town called San Cristobal, occupied by 25,000 people. We will be doing an environmental service project, and have 17 participants. They know exactly what they are getting into in terms of the intent of the stretch. However, you never really know until you get into the country.

We like countries which are developing, where it is not easy living. It is tough to get there, and it may be challenging living there. That is part of the stretch. We know where we are headed, what the project is, but there is always a curve ball.

The perception of the consequence is worse than the reality

TALK TO US ABOUT WHAT BALANCE DOES FOR YOU AND HOW YOU WORK THAT NOT ONLY INTO YOUR LIFE BUT ALSO PROJECT AND TEACH IT TO YOUR CLIENTS.

It is an ongoing challenge.

As a little background, I was on the board of a national fraternity for 14 years, and one of the key tenets of the fraternity was to build balanced men. I had to miss a board meeting once, because I said I was trying to be a balanced dad.

The way I look at it, I work hard at everything I do. When I am focused on business, I am very focused on business and the clients. At home, I am focused on my wife and kids. My friends give me grief saying, 'You do not have a cell phone. You have a cell phone that sits in your car.'

I am one of those guys that unplugs.

To be balanced in anything, you have to have the courage to say no. To say, 'I'm going on vacation, and I'm not calling into the office.'

The best analogy I can think of would be the football coach; you don't see a football coach standing on the sidelines with his or her cell phone multitasking. They are focused on the game and that is what I'm trying to do. I don't know that I'm teaching anyone, but I'm trying to at least get people to think about that kind of focus. Knowing when to focus on their family, their business, and their body.

It is not easy. I think with the pace of business today it gets even tougher. I saw a quote from one of the senior executives at IBM saying, 'To be a good business leader today, you have really got to be on 24/7.' I hear what he is saying, but I'm not



sure that is a good formula for success in the long haul.

You may be a good CEO for 2, 3, 4 years but can you sustain that 24/7 pace?

I remember reading about a very visible and successful CEO, when he retired at the age of 65. He had never gone on vacation for 10 days straight in his forty year business career. If you build a great business, but trash your body or trash your relationships, you win the battle and lose the war.

HOW IMPORTANT IS PUSHING THE LIMITS AND SHATTERING THE STATUS QUO IN TODAY'S BUSINESS?

Steve Jobs had one enemy and that was the status quo. His goal in life was to eliminate the status quo.

That is a wonderful philosophy, because there are a lot of things we do in life and business just because it has always been done that way.

I am always trying to inspire clients to think about: what are the craziest moves you could make and then what is the downside of you making the moves? More often than not, it is what will people think of me or what if it does not work?

When you peel back the onion enough times, there are really not that many things that are life or death in business. I am a big believer of try a lot of stuff and keep what works. You need to keep pushing the edge.

WHAT IS ONE WAY THE PROUTY PROJECT IS MAKING OR BREAKING THE RULES INSTEAD OF JUST ABIDING BY THEM?

I would say this whole concept of Stretch Expeditions.

If I had a board of directors they might say, 'Why do you do this? It is not an income generator.' I was with a client yesterday who said, 'Prouty, there is huge psychic income.'

There is a piece of breaking the rules by saying it's not just dollars and cash flow to the bottom line, but there is also psychic income from the things we do in business.

With clients, we should be willing to try almost anything in terms of processes to stimulate creative thinking. Research says that music, laughter and movement stimulate creative thinking. A wise CEO once said 'every strategy session needs an artist, a musician, and a scientist.' If we think about music, laughter and movement; if we think about artists, musicians and scientists; what are the edges we can push to help people think and inspire people to think more creatively?

We get our clients out of their comfort zone without embarrassing them. They have to trust that good things will bubble out of the process. It is easier to think in terms of the status quo. I am trying to break rules and not be tied to the status quo, particularly with boards and senior management teams.

HOW DO YOU CONVINCING AND LEAD YOUR EMPLOYEES TO CONSISTENTLY COME UP WITH THOSE IDEAS FOR YOUR CLIENTS?

I try to live by 'Try a lot of stuff and keep what works,' as well as 'We are going to make mistakes. Things are not always going to work. Try it. See if it works and if it doesn't, learn and move on.'

It is mainly about trying it, continuously learning, and to keep trying. It all comes back to 'We are the product of the books we read and the people we meet.' This means you need to keep getting out there, meet new people and keep reading.

Don't run around with the same type of people, day in and day out. Get exposed to different people who look at the world differently.

For instance, this may be a rule breaker: we have had senior executive teams as part of a strategic planning process rubbing shoulders and working with homeless people. What can you learn from the homeless people that may give you some insight into how you run your business?

We have had eighth graders come to board meetings to share what a kid would think about an issue the board is grappling with. Again, it is looking at a lot of sources for input and having the courage to break the routine.

I had an eighth grader who said to the board, 'Can't you guys figure out a way to say this in a simpler way?' He was right on. These folks wanted to use 200 words to say something they could probably have said in 15 words. I'm sure some of the board members thought, 'What in the world are these eighth grade kids doing in our board meeting?'

Another process we use is the "red team", consisting of four or five bright, creative outsiders to look at a business strategy and tear it apart in a constructive way. What do they like? What don't they like? How can they make it better? It's important to think about the tough questions they will offer, and be exposed to that kind of unfiltered input. It is extremely powerful.

AS AN ESTABLISHED BUSINESS LEADER, WHAT IS THE ONE THING YOU SPEND THE MOST TIME THINKING ABOUT?

I think about finding the next superstar. I am always looking for that person who is a good strategic thinker and really good with people.

I want to hire the young, up and coming superstar who's got a real marketing hat. I look at the world from a people perspective, another colleague looks at the world from a finance perspective, another from an education perspective, and another with a sales development perspective.

The young, 25- to 35-year-old who looks at the world from a brand, advertising, and marketing perspective would be a really nice addition to our team.

I also think about how we pay attention to our clients. Are we hugging our clients? Are we thinking about how we can help our client CEO's be more successful? I think we do a good job at it, but I think it is an area where we can always do better.

Did you know?

Mediaspace offers educational webinars on a variety of topics affecting the advertising industry, at no charge. Send us an e-mail at info@mss-mail.com to get added to the invitation list.



You have to keep showing clients how much you care, and how much you are thinking about them. It is that notion of really hugging your clients and being good advisors for them for the long haul.

I remember reading a book that said, 'You don't really know your client that well unless you can tell what his or her eye color is.' Think about that. How many of your clients could you say, 'Yeah, I know that John has brown eyes, and I know that Julie has blue eyes.'

WHAT IS THE OUTLOOK FOR THE PROUTY PROJECT THIS YEAR AND THE FUTURE YEARS?

We have been profitable every year for 24 years, and I'm proud of that. The Prouty Project has grown every year--except for 2009--for the last 24 years.

I see this upward trajectory forever, and I would like to emulate in a little way, Peter Drucker. Peter Drucker lived until he was 96 years old, and he was consulting right up to the end. Andy Rooney lived until he was 92 and was on "60 Minutes" right up until the end.

I see myself doing this forever, and I want to keep growing the business forever.

I think we will always have the focus on boards and senior management teams and strategy. This is our niche, and we play well in it. We have done good work all over the world in this arena.

The other piece, five years ago, we started the Stretch Fund of the Minneapolis Foundation. We have been putting money into the fund, and our goal is to build it to a million dollars. This allows us to invest \$50,000 a year to help the world. We are trying to put some more definition around the Stretch Fund, but it will have a focus on youth and developing future leaders.

Also, I want to write a book, but I have said I will start this project once the kids are off to college.

There are plenty of people pushing us to do more stretch expeditions, but I think one a year for the next 50 years is ideal. Maybe space exploration as part of a stretch? Now that would be fascinating.

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Did you know?

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