

Jeff Brown, UpLift Solutions, and Leadership

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09 June 2011

Jeff Brown is a persuasive and dynamic leader with over 20 years of grocery and business experience. He is well-established and experienced in the for-profit supermarket sphere and has quickly gained respect and recognition for his ambition, strategy and leadership in the nonprofit arena. Brown is an entrepreneur, creative thinker and innovative problem-solver.

As President and CEO of Brown's Super Stores, Jeff Brown has opened and oversees operations in ten ShopRite stores throughout the Philadelphia area, many of which are situated in what were previously considered "food desert" areas, characterized by a lack of accessible, affordable, fresh and healthy food. Brown saw the potential for a public/private partnership in these locations, where, as he describes, "society was paying a lot for the neglected and poor, but could invest some money up-front and end up paying less overall." Brown sought to overcome the financial challenge of operating stores in these areas and to work closely with community members to create stores that would be appealing and respond to community preferences. As he explains, "I wanted to work with the community in a way that made it

clear that we're all partners and on the same page."

While aiming to create profitable supermarkets, Brown's steadfast dedication to community interests and social issues is also clear. When poised to open one of his newer stores in Philadelphia, Brown made a concerted effort to invite as many community members as possible to a planning meeting; approximately 200 local leaders, including clergy, politicians and police attended. Brown describes the meeting, commenting "we started a dialogue, and people were skeptical because they'd been let down before and they didn't trust guys like me. But I said I'd be honest with them, and people gave me a chance. It was clear that no one else was trying to solve the [food desert] problem."

Brown's success at opening stores in food desert areas traditionally excluded from grocers' prospective store sites has earned him national recognition. Visitors from across the U.S. seek to learn about and to replicate Brown's approach for financing and operating stores in disadvantaged communities. Brown's interest in sharing his model for opening thriving supermarkets in underserved, food desert areas was the impetus behind creating a nonprofit, UpLift Solutions. UpLift was born from Brown's realization that grocers nationwide could assume an important role in addressing food deserts, particularly if they could receive proper guidance and assistance. As he describes it, "I wasn't interested in starting stores nationally, but I wanted to help others do

this. So the nonprofit started because I realized I needed to train people to do my job elsewhere."

In Leslie R. Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant's text, *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Nonprofits*, they describe one of the key practices for high-impact nonprofits as the ability to "advocate and serve." Brown and UpLift Solutions thrive in this mode. In collaboration with State Representative Dwight Evans, The Reinvestment Fund and The Food Trust, Brown aggressively advocated for funds allocated specifically for new grocery store development in food deserts. His experience and strategic thinking were crucial to the adoption of the Fresh Food Financing Initiative (FFFI), a state program in Pennsylvania that fulfills the financing needs of grocery operators who plan to open stores in underserved communities. Brown helped to make the issue of food deserts more prominent both locally and nationally. As an organization, UpLift Solutions, with Brown's leadership, is embarking on an impressive service platform, aspiring to serve supermarket operators nationwide who share a similar vision and commitment as Brown for confronting the food desert problem.

Perhaps stemming from his for-profit background, at the crux of Brown's style is a philosophy that business ventures need to be "win/win," including those that have a mission focused on service. He contends that for-profit and nonprofit entities may not be so different, since they both need to take in more than they pay out, or else they

are not succeeding as a business. He sees a clear intersection between social problems and business, in that one has to work for the other, and vice versa. Brown recognizes the potential of strong public/private partnerships as a vehicle for benefiting society as a whole, including combating food deserts. As Brown has observed, one of the central challenges to opening food stores in low-income areas is securing appropriate funding, and an essential problem to be addressed is how to finance stores so that they are sustainable.

Brown was an instrumental partner in the collaborative effort to create the FFFI, which is designed to increase the number of supermarkets and grocery stores in underserved communities by serving store operators' financial needs. Conventional financial resources do not satisfy the infrastructure costs and credit needs in these areas. The FFFI, along with Brown's successful grocery stores, attracted the attention of President and First Lady Obama, who recognized the value of these Pennsylvania-based activities as models to address food deserts nationally. Having committed to developing initiatives to improve nutrition and decrease obesity, the President and First Lady sought Brown's input for how to tackle food deserts on a national level. The President adopted the FFFI as the template for a national program, the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), which allocates over \$400 million to combat food deserts.

With the implementation of the HFFI and FFFI, Brown and

his collaborators helped create a mechanism by which opening stores in food deserts is more financially enticing and feasible, even when financial gains are not necessarily the primary goal. However, even with financial resources, supermarket operators in food deserts will likely require other types of support in order to be successful. To bring interested parties closer to success, UpLift Solutions provides an array of consulting services based around Brown's proven business strategies. As Brown describes it, "UpLift will have a menu of offerings," and grocers will be able to choose which forms of technical assistance or guidance they need.

Brown succeeds in wearing many hats; he is the Chairman of Uplift, owner and operator of Brown's SuperStores that serves as a regional and national model, and an advocate through his involvement with the FFFI and HFFI. His ability to thrive in these roles is a testament to his leadership.

When asked about where he finds the motivation and inspiration to be a leader in his field, he replied simply that he recognized a need that was not being filled. He stated that he was "inspired by the unmet needs of the poor, which has resulted in their excess rate of obesity and related illnesses and the overwhelming cost to society endangering our future prospects. The fact that this huge problem exists, that little evidence of any other attempt to correct it show much progress and that I see a clear method to overcome this challenge. It's a window of opportunity; you can sense the power and potential for

the good of our society."

In defining his leadership style, Brown stated that he is opportunistic, recognizing something that's broken and could be done differently in order to be improved, and then thinking carefully about how different fields' (both for-profit and nonprofit) can best address the problem. He said he is always thinking about how something can be done differently in order to lead to a more favorable outcome. Brown also shared that his leadership style is characterized by a willingness to be fair and flexible, as he enjoys "looking outside the box with a willingness to change whatever is necessary to achieve the outcome (we) need." He encourages the his team to do the same, citing a "shared ideology and common goal" as reason for his flexibility, with a collective eye on the goal "to make things better for everybody." Brown tries to encourage his employees to cultivate an ability to solve problems, to think creatively and to rely on their experience and intuition to address challenges that arise. He favors a working environment in which his team members feel capable and empowered to make decisions and to trust their instincts instead of automatically turning to others for assistance or "calling corporate" to ask about an uncertainty.

Brown's experience in both the for-profit and nonprofit arenas and his flexible style were clear in many of his remarks. He believes that good leaders look for a practical way to fix problems, and need to be comfortable with the

fact that different problems need to be solved with different skill-sets. Brown believes that the business side and the social side intersect, and that business models can offer good mechanisms to address and work to alleviate social problems. He believes in social responsibility, and recognizes that there are ways for the business side and the "social/caring" side to work well together. Being a successful leader is not without its struggles. Jeff Brown describes one of his biggest challenges as being people's strong resistance to change; change can be scary and difficult, and people are often concerned about a bad outcome. Brown also commented that there is a delicate balance between mission and finance, and it is challenging to not be able to financially "aggressively address the problem" of food deserts.

Finally, and intertwined with issues of funding, when asked about the most important piece of advice Brown would share with someone starting a nonprofit, he said his advice is to "have a mission that funders believe is of critical importance, with a business model that works."