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ERICKSON, INC.
CEO: JEFF ROBERTS

State of the Market

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Erickson Air-Crane Inc. is known in the helicopter world not only for its iconic orange Aircranes, but also for its iconic reputation. With a varied fleet of rotary- and fixed-wing aircraft, and employees who have won numerous industry awards, the Portland, Oregon, company has operations not only in North America, but also South America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia Pacific, and Australia.

Erickson is not only engaged in vertical flight, but is also vertically integrated and diversified through three divisions: Commercial Aviation Services, Government Aviation Services, and Manufacturing & MRO. There are few missions beyond Erickson’s capabilities, or as the company says:

*If we can’t do it, it can’t be done.*
Roberts Takes the Reins

An industry leader like Erickson needs an equally impressive pilot in its captain’s seat. In 2015, Erickson found its next CEO in Jeff Roberts, a man with more than 30 years of experience across nearly every segment of the aerospace and aviation industry. However, his love for aviation goes further back than those 30 years; it began in childhood.

Roberts father flew B-17s in World War II, and after the war he continued to fly as he moved his family back and forth between Colorado and North Dakota, working in the oil and gas exploration business. The younger Roberts acquired his father’s passion for flight. “I was always fascinated by aviation,” the CEO says. He later attended The University of Colorado-Boulder where he received a bachelor’s degree in political science and minored in economics. After college, as Roberts phrases it, “I gravitated towards a career in aviation.”

“Gravitated” has multiple meanings. It is defined as being pulled (usually lower) by gravity as well as moving towards something. In Roberts career, it appears both forces were in action. First he got his fixed-wing pilot licenses and began his aviation in the rather low position of a certified flight instructor (CFI). This is not how one usually pictures the career beginning of a successful CEO at a prestigious aviation company, but when asked if he really started out as a “poor starving CFI” Roberts replies, “I sure did. Financially and economically it was a very challenging time in my life, but quite candidly it was wonderful. I developed friendships and relationships that are still in my life today. It was a wonderful time.”

Ascension

Then the second phase of Roberts’ aviation gravitation began—the climb toward new career challenges and heights. He continued to accumulate flight time (currently several thousand hours), but his interests were growing beyond the cockpit. “I very quickly fell in love with not just the flying aspect, but also the business of aviation. Aviation provides a disproportionate benefit as an industry via activity, technology, and business facilitation. I wanted to better understand how the business of aviation worked, so I migrated from being a flight instructor to the business side.”

This migration was extensive. Roberts moved from general aviation to commercial aviation to business aviation. He bounced between business and commercial for a while, and then landed at Southern Air Transport, where he eventually became the president of their company SimuFlite in Dallas. While Roberts was there, SimuFlite was acquired by GE Capital. So the once CFI had risen to an executive level at GE. “That was a fantastic experience for me, I learned a tremendous amount about leadership, business operations, and finance. It was a very exciting time to be at GE. It was towards the end of Jack Welch’s career and the beginning of Jeffrey Immelt’s leadership.”

However, as corporate conglomerates often do, GE eventually sold SimuFlite to another corporation, CAE, and Roberts continued his leadership under new owners for over a decade. Then towards the end of his time there, he founded the consulting group JG Roberts & Associates in 2013, and worked in his own firm until Erickson came calling. His ascension has been great, but if Roberts has his way at Erickson, his new company will also reach new heights.
Erickson has been flying high for a long time, but even top companies need rejuvenating transformation, especially those in aviation. Roberts explains, “Aviation aerospace is just a fascinating industry. It continues to evolve, change, and reinvent itself; it’s very dynamic. Technological advances are continual, business model evolution is consistent and continual, and the capability and application of aircraft continue to migrate and evolve. That’s exciting stuff.”

To keep ahead of this change, Erickson is going through a three-part transformation process under Roberts’ and his team’s guidance. First, they are making sure Erickson is sized appropriately to “meet and exceed” their customers’ expectations. (“Meet and exceed” is a phrase Roberts frequently uses.) The challenge is to be competitive while containing costs. “We’ve been working very hard over the last six months to make sure we get that piece of the puzzle right,” he says.

The second part of the process is to better understand the “value proposition” that Erickson can create and uncover for its customers, and then better communicate those capabilities. “I would say we’ve made good progress there as well. I think people are better understanding what we can do and how we can do it. We’ve really invested in the front of the organization to have more of those conversations with prospects,” Roberts says.

The final piece of the transformation is to make sure that Erickson employees have the resources, tools, and focus “to meet and exceed (There’s that phrase again,) the expectations our various stakeholders have,” says Roberts. Those stakeholders are the customer base and shareholders. Roberts believes the company is making good progress. “We’re not through the process yet; it’s a journey not a destination, but I’d say in the last six months we’ve accomplished an awful lot in terms of positioning, refocusing, and knowing where we want to go and how we’re going to get there.”

**Personal Principles**

One cannot transform and move a large corporation in the direction it should go without first having an inner compass and firm personal principles. Roberts first acquired these traits in his upbringing. “Members of my immediate family provided tremendous mentorship, guidelines, and displayed characteristics that I still try to emulate,” he says. However, he’s reluctant to specify those who later helped him in his business career, even when pressed. “I don’t want to name anyone specifically because inadvertently I’ll forget someone; it’s been a long list,” he says. “There have been a number of folks that I interacted with from whom I gleaned tremendous amounts of insights, knowledge, and skills.”

However, Roberts is much more open to reveal principles of success others helped him see. “First, you really need to learn and understand the value of staying close to your colleagues, customers, and prospects and to understand the value proposition that they’re looking for.” Then one needs to surround oneself with and associate with very talented and capable people. “Help them be successful,” he says, “because if they’re successful then by default you’re successful.”

A third key for success is holding yourself and your colleagues to high standards. “Make sure you understand what your commitments are and that you have a plan to deliver or exceed the expectations of those commitments on a consistent continual basis.” Still, just having a plan is not enough. “You have to execute,” he says. “When you say what you’re going to do, you have to find a way to get it done on a consistent continual basis. And if delivering is ever in jeopardy, then don’t tell anyone ‘It’s your problem.’ Instead, it’s our problem.” Roberts believes people can solve problems much better working together than they can independently.

He also believes enthusiasm and energy are key components for success. “Part of being a leader is that you have to be able to energize people. People have to be excited and enthusiastic about what they’re doing, and leadership can help them see that.” As Roberts talks on this subject, his already evident energy level rises further. “You have to be passionate about what you do; I hope you can hear that in my voice. (Yes, it’s abundantly clear.) I’m very passionate about aviation in general and specifically about the company I work for. I believe in what they do and how they do it, and the opportunities they’re pursuing.”

However, there is one thing a successful leader should never do: Fail to decide. “The only wrong decision is no decision. You have to decide,” he emphasizes. “If you decide correctly—fantastic. If you decided incorrectly, then OK. Let’s learn from that and be willing to correct a bad decision, but the only wrong decision every time is no decision.”

If you wonder if it is sometimes safer not to decide, Roberts has an answer: “You can’t get away with indecisiveness and analysis paralysis in today’s market and business environment. The world moves at an increasingly rapid pace, so you have to move with it.” Then he adds a final key insight, “Ideally, you want to look around the corner and anticipate; that’s where real value is created.”
Aviation Values

Roberts has been looking around corners and anticipating most of his life. That’s why he’s in aviation, because it creates real value, monetarily and otherwise. “Whether you’re in the utility aircraft arena like we are where we help create infrastructure and make the world a more civilized, connected, and more capable place, or whether you’re in the business of transporting people from Point A to Point B, there’s a higher good that aviation does compared to a lot of other industries. That’s nothing detrimental to those other industries; it’s just the reality.”

Then he gives a quote that nicely sums up his career to date. “I’ve been in aerospace for 30-plus years and been in the business leadership of aerospace for 20-plus of those years. I would say I’m a person who is absolutely still enamored and in love with aviation and aerospace, and I’m fortunate to have been afforded the opportunity to be a leader in that space for an extended period of time.”

May we also add that our industry is fortunate to have dedicated, visionary leaders like Jeff Roberts leading companies like Erickson.