

## LEADERSHIP WEARS “CARHARTT”

It’s baffling to me that so many great small-business leaders don’t think of themselves as such because they don’t wear suits and ties to work. Somewhere along the line they got the notion that the best business leaders have offices in tall and shiny buildings; that they sit around conference tables thinking noble thoughts and always talking in soft and modulated voices. My experience suggests nothing could be further from the truth.

The most effective business leaders I’ve worked with over the years don’t fit this ivory-tower profile at all. Instead they’re the kind of people who actively run their businesses. They get down in the trenches with their people. They learn to make important decisions on the fly. Most of the time they aren’t people you’d expect to find wearing pin-stripes. I believe you’d be much more likely to find them wearing Carharts.

You’re probably familiar with Carhartt clothing. It’s one of the leading brands of rugged clothing for outdoor work. Carharts are known for their durability, toughness, and long-lasting performance. Come to think of it, doesn’t this sound a lot like the people you know who are effective leaders of a small business?

When I think of Carhartt clothing I picture a rugged outdoorsman. I get the sense that the clothes and the people who wear them, whether for work or recreation, are all about business. This practical work garb, rather than silk shirts and pin-stripes, describes most of the small business leaders I’ve had the privilege of working with over the years.

Carharts are made to withstand the rough and tumble of hard work while they protect the wearer against inclement weather. It’s not uncommon to see Carharts that are scratched, heavily worn, and stained. Isn’t this what they’re built for? They’ve protected their wearer from harm; proof they’ve done their job.

The same can be said of seasoned small business leaders. Over time, the daily strains of running a small business tend to leave a mark.

Facing a looming payroll when you’re not sure where the money’s going to come from has a way of thickening your skin. Having to remove people from your payroll—people who’ve been loyal to you in the past and who you’ve come to like, but who are no longer performing in their jobs—will leave a few scars that take a while to heal.

No business leader gets to the top of the business heap unscathed. I believe every one of them has had their knees skinned, their noses bloodied, and their arms bruised from the tough calls they’ve had to make on their way to the top. I see them standing there with a rugged dignity about them. Then I see them put on their Carharts and go back to face it time and time again.

One of the tough truths about leading a business—and one that doesn’t get talked about much—is that the process of growing that business isn’t neat and tidy. Nor is it for the faint of heart. It’s messy, often unpredictable, and sometimes painful. That’s the nature of the game. That’s one of the reasons it takes strong and rugged people to lead companies; the kind of people you just might find wearing Carhartt clothing.

Chuck Violand