

“How does your management and leadership style change during the especially difficult times?”

“You have to be willing to be more assertive...”

—Paul O’mara

The Olsen Group : Paul O’mara—Executive Interview

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Paul O’mara

Scott Olsen

Paul O'mara has a history of achieving success again and again throughout his career that includes executive roles at Sequent, Tektronix and currently as the Senior Vice President of Global Operations and Services at [FEI](#). He is a natural leader who defines clear objectives and consistently helps his teams achieve more than they ever thought possible. We hope you enjoy the insights and stories Paul

Scott Olsen (SO): Well, I know you love sports and the competition involved, especially football, the real football with the round ball.

Paul O'mara (PO): The one played with the foot?

SO: That's right, the one played with the foot, like you played in England. How important is that competitive nature, that spirit, in success in business?

PO: To me it's hugely important for a couple of reasons. One is to succeed as an individual as part of the overall entity of the corporation, I think you have to have a very strong desire to win. Not an overwhelming, brutal, you know jump-all-over-your-competitor and your enemy. But really, just in terms of keeping you up, motivated, wanting to move ahead, wanting to achieve the next big thing. Sport, the competitive nature of sport and what you learn in that is hugely important to me. I've been a team sport person my whole life. I'm pretty

damn inept when it comes to individual sports. The very nature of team sports is very analogous, in a lot of ways, to the business environment. In fact, a lot of business consultants use sports analogies all the time as a part of business. There's a huge parallel.

SO: In addition to your executive roles, you've played competitively in soccer leagues throughout your life until only recently. What do you do now to replace those competitive games on the field?

PO: I have not found anything that gives me the same adrenaline rush, frankly. I do different things. I'm taking up different hobbies. I tried golf and I'm useless at it [laugh]. I've even taken up photography. I've got a nice digital camera now and I've actually enjoyed the results, especially, because it appeals to my instant gratification nature. With digital you can take a picture, you can print it out, or you can delete it. You can do what you want with it. I work out. And, I'm at a different stage in my life with my kids, because they are not at the age where they need me to be around for them to wrestle and tussle on the floor with, they just need me for cash, [laugh] on a fairly frequent basis. I'm in kind of an evolutionary phase there as well.

I haven't found anything in terms of the physical, competitive nature, but I do work out and I quite enjoy that. I'll actually do it watching a TV, [laughter] watching a ball game hopefully and preferably.

SO: What's the most difficult challenge you've faced professionally?

PO: Leading a division of a company with an overall company culture where the division didn't fit. It was an ill conceived organization structure. And my role was to try and lead this division that just didn't fit within the cultural business history of that company.

SO: At what point were you able to recognize that?



Paul O'mara

PO: Probably about four or five months in. That's the point when I recognized it. The sign's were there from day one. I should've recognized it from day one. That was actually a huge learning for me.

SO: What are you doing differently as a result of that experience?

PO: I spot the warning signs, so it wouldn't get past me again. I wouldn't wait, hoping I could fix it. Where I made a mistake was that I was more idealistic than I am now, in the sense that, I believed I had the talent and the capability and the energy and the support around me to fix it. I'm less idealistic about that now and I'm a lot more mature about it in the sense that if the signals are there that it isn't going to

work then recognize them and do something about it. That's the key learning I took away from that.

SO: You mentioned getting support was one of the key ingredients that was missing? What can you do now to make sure that support is there, and to gain that support?

PO: Demand it up front. The nature of the answers you get when you demand it, are a pretty good indicator as to whether you are really going to get it or not. Interview several people who have been around the company for a while and test whether there is an attitude or desire, and an appetite for the kind of changes that would be necessary. Talk to some of the key stakeholders. If they're exhibiting the right signs then go ahead with it, if they're not then forget it.

SO: ...versus the lone ranger approach.

SO: How does your management and leadership style change during the especially difficult times?

PO: You have to be willing to be more assertive most of the time during difficult times. People have to know that it's not a time for jocularly necessarily. It doesn't mean you can't have any fun doing it, right? You can still crack the odd joke and bring some humor into the situation. But, the fact of the matter is, when the times are tough you need to be focused: heads down, understand the task. What I tend to do naturally is gravitate to the situation where I bring more personal involvement to the table in terms of being absolutely clear that everybody understands what the objectives over the next period are and that they bought into them and then they're doing them.

I tend to be more, I want to say lenient, but less directly involved than when the times are good because I like to be off doing other things as well more strategic related things. Because when the times are tough you sometimes have to get involved, put your head down with the team and make sure they're all marching to the same drum beat and getting the job done. Because, sometimes you have to do some pretty nasty things during tough business times.

SO: Bill Lattin had mentioned that during a war time or a more serious time, there's less time for talking and collaboration. It's more like, here are your orders and this is what I need you to do.

PO: Yeah! That's actually a good way of putting it. I tend to become a lot more involved and assertive. (**SO:** Even more so?) Yes, even more so than I sometimes can be [laughter].

SO: Do you feel that effective managers can also lead, and leaders can manage? Or are these two separate roles?

PO: Management and leadership ideally they go together.

SO: Same person?

PO: Ideally, but it's rare actually. It's rare. Leadership is kind of a unique intangible thing. It's hard to measure leadership. It's easy to measure management. Because, you can put a dashboard together, or you can put a score card together that says, "I'm going to manage this organization to reduce inventory by 3% a quarter" and you can measure that and you can tell whether the manager and the team is doing a good job, as an example. Leadership, where people will intuitively, naturally just follow a leader because the leader has got some charisma or some indefinable thing, you just know - we're going to take that hill, you go around this side, you go around that side and I'll see you at the top. That's a different characteristic than management. Ideally, they go together in the same body. If they do, you've got a dynamite situation. It's very rare though.

SO: Are leaders born or are they developed, like the military's approach or thinking?

PO: I think managers are developed and I think leaders are partially born and partially a product of an environment, but it's when they're young. I think it's real hard to learn leadership. But, you can't learn to be somebody who people are going to follow. You can say some words and people might follow you because you said the right words and you say them with enthusiasm, because you can learn that type of behavior. But, pretty soon you get found out.

SO: Interesting, that reminds me of idea that there's "the art and science of it." The science, being management, is a lot easier to learn, but the art...

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PO: Yeah, the art is something you just have and possess, or you don't. It's a personality trait.

SO: One might be able to enhance their leadership but it's not so easy to learn it.

PO: Yes.

SO: When you're recruiting people for your team, are there any skills and traits that are absolutely must haves? Obviously there are different roles to be played, but are there some things that you just have to have or see in the individual?

PO: Yes, it's subject matter expertise. Let's say I'm recruiting a field service manager for Europe, which I am right now. I need somebody who understands the political landscape of Europe, right? So that they know that the Germans, and the French, and the Brits kind of get along these days, but they don't like to talk to one another still. There are centuries of distrust there and that plays into business still today. They've got to understand things like that. I look for people who have experience and knowledge on how to grow a service business from a financial point of view, manage a strong P & L growth and can manage a team of managers. So, leadership as opposed to management is a bigger element of that role.



The next level down, for a guy who's going to run a team of field service engineers in Belgium, I'm looking for more management skills there because they've got some specific, detailed metrics on a day-to-day basis to carry out. They've got to get their calls closed and keep repairs times within a certain set of boundaries, response times, and revenue rates. It's more of a hard measurable set of metrics which is more the management side of a company.

It depends on what the role is, and then I have a clear vision in my head of what I look for in every different type of position.

If it's a global position, I'm looking for someone with extremely strong influence skills because if you send an American over to Europe or Asia and they say, "I'm the big guy now, you do what I tell ya," that is a recipe for disaster. They might say yes to his face and then turn around and do whatever they want. That is very typical, in a nutshell, what tends to happen. So I look for people with real strong influence skills with a strong ability to listen, as well as be firm. But, listen first.

SO: Being from England yourself, what type of an advantage is that for you?

PO: I'm going to give you a facetious answer to that first. Having an English accent helps. I can't explain it. I don't understand it. But, it's a fact that if you speak with an English accent, people seem to think you're smarter than they really are, when in fact; I'm no smarter than the next guy. I might sound like it, for some strange reason. That's a help.

I think that there is no question that, understanding a world outside of Oregon or the U.S. is an extremely valuable commodity in the U.S. because a lot of American business managers, even today, grow up with a very restricted view on life without this understanding that life is going on outside these shores. Understanding how it goes on. Why things happens the way they do.

Why you can't put a European service call center in Paris and hope all the customers in Europe will want to call into that number. You've got to understand some of those things, and those kinds of things have been of incredible value to me.

SO: I know you have an extremely busy schedule that consistently takes you around the world. How do you manage your time effectively?

PO: Earlier on in my career I fell into the trap of finding it real hard to distinguish between what's important to do and what's secondary to do. You tend to think that you have to do everything. But, I've gotten more discerning as I've gotten older and more experienced about what truly is important to do and what just doesn't matter or what somebody else can do for you. Feeling comfortable about delegating is a big step for me to get through because I'm a control freak. I want to make sure stuff gets done. I want things to be done properly.

Delegating is a challenge. As I got more comfortable delegating, and as I've gotten older, that's allowed me to be a lot more discerning about the things that I think are more important for me to be directly involved in and do. When my schedule gets tighter I get more discerning. If some stuff doesn't get done I make sure it's the stuff that doesn't matter if it gets done. If I can't do what needs to get done I'll find somebody who can.

SO: Sounds like consistent prioritization.

PO: It's all about prioritization. I have a lot of conversations with the people who work for me about prioritization because most people I find, especially in the technology industry are smart. It's an overwhelming characteristic of these people; they tend to be some of the smartest people alive. You tend to get people who have a strong desire to do the right thing and do it all the time. So, people will tend to say yes to everything and pretty soon I don't know how they are going to succeed because they are overwhelmed. I have a lot of conversations with my people about prioritizing.

SO: Because they know they can do it they'll say yes to the request?

PO: Yes, they know that they are able to do it except suddenly, they end up with twelve hours worth to do in an eight hour period. It's something you can't squeeze into the amount of time available and people will panic. People will become paralyzed when they reach that. So, I look for that in people and make sure that they are not doing that and making sure that people are getting stuff off their plate so they can focus on the important things. Constantly a lot of the stuff doesn't get done, as long as it's the stuff nobody cares about. It's like the old days before e-mail, stuff would come in by paper and your inbox would get bigger and bigger and bigger and then once a month you'd go clear it out. Stuff would sit in there that no one had bothered to come back and remind you about. If they hadn't reminded you then it wasn't important so you'd throw that away. I look for things that have that characteristic about them.

SO: What are the highlights of your career?

PO: There are three points in my career that I can look at and think, wow! They were great times. First one was when I first moved to the U.S. because I was at a point in my life and in my career where I was pretty comfortable with who I was. I came over here and instantly a team came together. My management team came together and it was an absolute blast. Then I went on to take this other role and found it was a mistake. But that was a wonderful time because it was a great team. We gelled pretty well and we produced fantastic business results.

SO: Was this Tektronix?



PO: Sequent. The second time was when I decided to leave Tektronix and I didn't know what I was going to do. I decided to leave Tektronix and they asked me to do a few things before I left. One of the things they asked me to do was go back to Europe and run the European sales organization. I went back there and the same thing happened. I brought a fantastic team together. We had a disastrous forecast at the start of the quarter when I went in there and by the end of the quarter we had blown through our numbers; we had actually doubled our forecast generating a substantial amount of revenue. I had a great

time doing it and people just responded to me in a way that was electric. It was a wonderful, wonderful thing.

The third time, frankly, is right now. I love what I'm doing and I've got a very strong team and FEI is at a point in history that is very unique. You don't get many of these opportunities where an industry emerges and you have the technology that enables that emerging industry. The industry is nanotechnology. Nanotechnology is not going to emerge without FEI and a few other players. I think we're that important to the industry and we're going to help put Oregon on the map from a nanotechnology point of view. It's very exciting.

SO: What are the most important things you need to do to make that happen?

PO: Given the role I have, I have half the company working for me. I spend most of the company's money and I keep customers happy. If my organization screws up, I ship bad products and I have unhappy customers, we'll lose a lot of money and a lot of goodwill in the market. I've got to prevent that. I need to keep taking cost out of producing our product. I need to make sure I'm making money from a service point of view and delivering a lot of customer satisfaction. If I sway from that mission, FEI will not achieve its full potential.

SO: For FEI as a whole, what needs to be done?

PO: Stay ahead of the technology curve in terms of continuing to keep our technology lead because more and more competitors are going to come into this space. You don't keep an opportunity like this to yourself for very long. That's the very nature market dynamics. We have to stay ahead of the curve. We have to be the best at delivering customer intimacy in the marketplace. We've got to be close to our customers to understand their needs. We've got to deliver what they need when they need it. Some stuff they don't even realize they need.

SO: It really goes back to listening.

PO: That's right, you teach selling. (laughter) Shut up and listen! (laughter)

SO: You've led and managed so many people, how would you like to be remembered by these people?

PO: I'd like them to think they grew as individuals and contributors and as a team, under me or working for me. That's what I'd like them to remember me by.

SO: What do you do to ensure that happens?

PO: First of all, I promote talent. I put people in the right place so they can succeed, make sure they've got objectives that allow them to succeed, and coach them when necessary. Actually, I coach quite a lot because I enjoy it and people like it usually. Give them a rollicking if they deserve it. (laughter) Let them make mistakes. Not too many or not too often, don't keep making the same mistake because you're stupid if you do. But, let them make mistakes so they feel they can innovate. Really it's making sure they understand what's expected of them; that's when people are most productive and happiest and contribute the most.

SO: What motivates you?

PO: Success. I like to win. I like my team to win.

SO: How do you define success?

PO: Understanding the goal and beating it. If there is a competitor out there, beating the competitor is part of that too. If the goal is reducing inventory by 30% in a year, I like to do 33%. That's beating the goal. If it's beating this competitor to win this order, or have a higher level of customer satisfaction than this competitor; that's a win. I like my team to win and I like to be basking in the glory of that with the team. That's what I love more than anything.

SO: It's that competitiveness. Defining goals and then beating them.

PO: Yes.

SO: Of course not everyone has that competitiveness.

PO: You're right, not everybody does have it. Different things motivate different people. Just having an ego can motivate some people. I don't particularly enjoy working with people who are just egocentric, because personal gratification can get in the way of achieving an objective. I have worked with a lot of people who are there for their own self-promotion who don't even truly understand the team goal, the business goal, and the company goal. It's an old over used "bull-shit" saying in a way, "I look to surround myself with people who are better than me." But I truly believe that. I truly believe that because I actually don't know that much, in terms of



detail, about many things. But I do know how to bring a team together and get them to do what I need them to do. I couldn't tell you how all or any of our products work.

SO: What do you do if there are people within your team that do have this type of ego you're describing, when it's all about them?

PO: I coach them. Either they have to put that aside and learn to manage themselves differently as part of the overall team or its going to end in tears. It's not a recipe for success because it becomes disruptive to the team. Teams by and large hate working alongside people who are in it for their own self aggrandizement.

SO: Would you hire someone knowing that they're like that, thinking you can coach them through it?

PO: I have done it. I've done it knowingly.

Once or twice I've done it for the challenge of bringing them into line and I've succeeded once and failed once. When I do it, actually, I'm very blunt with the person and say, "hey, you have these characteristics, it's pretty obvious, and I don't like those characteristics. I want you in the team so we're going to work out how to get through it. I've actually had that conversation. When I left the U.K. before I moved to New York, there was a guy we recruited to be my successor for the European position. I interviewed this guy. He came into the room and he was this big rugby player, he had broken his arm and he couldn't shake my hand. He kind of waved his cast at me and I waved my hand at him. He sat down and he said something to me and he was so arrogant in the way he said it. I thought he was so arrogant. I said to him, "you arrogant son of a bitch. You are going to have to work really hard for the next hour and a half to get anywhere near getting this job." I actually said that to him. Then it was like two big guys squaring off against one another. (laughter) It was actually quite stimulating. I hired him and he's actually now one of my best friends. He did a fantastic job.

If you talk to somebody who has that size of ego you have to confront them with it. If you don't, then forget it, because you'll lose. You'll lose him. They won't respect you. They'll think they have the upper hand and then you've lost it.

SO: If you weren't in the type of leadership and management role, what would you be doing?

PO: I'd be making plans to go to the 2006 World Cup Championships in Germany and the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. I'm going back to England with my wife and we're going to meet a couple of friends next month. The center piece for me is going to see my old soccer team play. I've got the tickets already and they're all just going to have to come with me. [laughter] I've become more passionate about it as I've gotten older. It's like reinvigorating the way I was at 20 years old. I'm just so passionate now. I get so worked up and I just love it! It's an adrenaline rush.

SO: Isn't that amazing that you love it as much now as a fan as you did when you played when you were younger.

PO: I do! I think you and I have talked about this when we had lunch a couple of times. I'm getting worse. My wife says I'm getting worse. I painted a room in my house the colors of the team I was a fan of when I was 12 years old. [Laughter] I have been a fan my entire life. But now, with technology, I can get up on Saturday mornings, log into the Internet, and listen to their games. It's awesome!



SO: What team?

PO: Leicester City. It's an English premier team. This is not the team I was on as an apprentice. Playing on this team was my dream.

SO: Paul this has been a great experience and I really appreciate you sharing with us.

PO: I didn't quite know what to expect in terms of what you were going to talk about.

SO: My goal in highlighting executives in the Portland area like you, is to help people learn from each and to provide better ways to understand the players in the game who are successful at making good things happen. I think this can go a long way in building a stronger business community.

PO: It's funny actually; sometimes my wife is very good about bringing me down to earth, in terms of reminding me where I came from. I grew up in a little village in the middle of England and I never forget this. A few years ago, I was with Sequent and we had this big fancy corporate plane. We called it Air Casey (Casey Powell) because he was our CEO. I got off this plane at an airport somewhere and I had no idea where we were so I said, "What blasted airport is this!" And it clicked in my head; I can't believe I just asked that. I just got out of this multi-million dollar aircraft with a bunch of executives from the company and I don't even know what airport I'm at. But, you know, from running around being a soccer hooligan in England to getting off a big fancy airplane...

SO: Where did you grow up in England?

PO: The County was Leicestershire. Leicester was the capital town of the County. It's a big city; 3 or 4 million people live there. But, I grew up about eight miles north of that. The center of Leicester is exactly 100 miles northwest of London.

SO: When did you come to The States?

PO: In 1992.

SO: What motivated your decision?

PO: Sequent. I was with Sequent in Europe. We did some wonderful things with the service business. The revenue stream was about a million dollars when I joined in 1990. By the spring of 2002 it was running at 20 million. They were looking across from the Atlantic thinking, ooh! That's



good! Let's see if we can have some of that. They invited me over to see if I could drive the same kind of growth world wide. It was an opportunity to good to miss.

SO: Going back a little further to the point that you decided not to be a soccer hooligan your whole life, although you are now and again as a fan [laughter]. What were the first jobs you had out of college?

PO: Immediately after I left college I literally was looking around wondering what the heck I am to do. I've got a degree in electronic engineering. My ambition when I left college was to hitchhike to Australia. That was the extent of my ambition at that point. But, I met the girl who I fell in love with and who I would ultimately get married to. I

thought, well I better get serious and get a job. I just looked around several companies where I could apply sort of what I learned in college. The one I knew least about and looked most interesting, in terms of where I could take it, was becoming a field service engineer for a mainframe computer company. That was a company called International Computers Limited which was the biggest European mainframe vendor of the time. I stayed with them for about four years and then went to a U.S. company called Prime Computer located in Massachusetts. I got my first management job there. I went in there as a field service engineer but pretty soon got moved to a management position.

SO: Is that something you were seeking?

PO: What, management? No, I was nervous about it quite frankly. One of the regional managers came to me and said, there's a branch management position open, you need to go apply for it. I went away thinking, nah, that's a bit scary. I was 26 at the time. But, he talked me into it and I got the job.

Actually, I received the single best piece of advice I've ever had in my life and I've given the same piece of advice to a lot of people, a lot of first time managers. Now, I've got this job and by coincidence there was this national service managers meeting three days after I'd been appointed in this job. I'm a manager for the first time and I'm thinking, "*Well what do I think and what do I do.*" I went to this conference and I'm sitting late night having a beer with one of the senior regional managers. I'd had a couple of beers so I'm talking fairly freely and I said, "Look, what do I do? How do I behave?" He said to me, "Look, you've got the job for who you are, not for who you think you ought to be, so just be yourself, do what you can do." That was tremendously comforting because it allowed me to be who I was and that would be ok. That was tremendously enabling to get that advice.

SO: That is great advice. That reminds me what my wife's uncle tells her, "Lynda you need to be more you." It is very comforting. Who else can you be?

PO: Who else can you be, right! If you try to be something else, you're not something else, you're who you are. If you try to be something else, you're false. It's hard to succeed if you're being false because you get found out, or you confuse yourself or confuse others. Just be who you are, if it doesn't work go somewhere else and make it work. It works pretty well for me too.