

Jon Bernstein :

Welcome to PNC C-Speak: The Language of Executives. I'm Jon Bernstein, regional president of PNC Bank New England, alongside my co-host Carolyn Jones, market president and publisher of the Boston Business Journal.

Carolyn Jones:

Thanks, Jon. It's great to be with you on PNC C-Speak. Each podcast features local executives talking about relevant and timely business topics. This knowledge sharing platform showcases leaders with forward-thinking approaches that disrupt the status quo and cause us to think differently.

Jon Bernstein :

Our guest today is Jim Sullivan, president and CEO of NWN Carousel. Jim, welcome and thanks for joining us today.

Jim Sullivan:

It is great to be here.

Jon Bernstein :

To give us context in our conversation, can you share a bit about NWN Carousel and the work that you and your team do?

Jim Sullivan:

Sure. NWN Carousel is a national organization focused on cloud communications and enabling people for hybrid work, so cloud communications like systems like we're on today, communication systems of how contact center, of how people are interfacing with their customers. We do security for those systems. We build the networks. We're a telecommunications company as well. We also, the thing we've been doing the last few years is rebuilding conference rooms, so when employees are coming back or in a hybrid work situation, they have the right space just as if they were at home. Then we deploy all those solutions. We manage those solution for customers and we do this for predominantly enterprise customers and also state and local organizations and higher ed organizations as well.

Carolyn Jones:

Yeah. Thank you, Jim. You mentioned your deep experience in the enterprise technology space and your industry experience overall. You've really had such great success, as we mentioned earlier, in leading both emerging and established companies as they've had rapid growth. I wonder if you could share some stories of that success and what were some of the key factors in making those kinds of experiences happen and be successful.

Jim Sullivan:

My background's been in all technology and really started it with EMC, a Boston, Massachusetts company in the late '80s and I think really learned a lot there early on, which is customers have particular challenges in technology. You're developing a differentiated solution and then you're surrounding that with just great people to go help clients and bring solutions to the market. I think a lot of it was the basis there and all the companies that I've done over the years and then especially with NWN Carousel, we really focus on big markets, understanding customers' challenges, trying to build

solutions that really solve it different than everybody else and then we build it around just incredible people.

Jon Bernstein :

NWN has been recognized as a fast 50 growth company as well as the best places to work. Neither is easy to achieve, let alone at the same time. Could you share your secret sauce for producing that combination?

Jim Sullivan:

Sure. I think one, NWN Carousel is very mission-driven. We have these core offerings. It's a really big market in North America. We're a nationwide company based out of here, but we're all over the country. People buy in to the mission. We're very focused on the offerings we have, the challenges customer have. The company's very organized with what we do. We've had incredible people and we continue to attract great people. I think people rally around the mission that the company's really organized. People get the right resources to be successful. They're working with people or working for people that are very focused on the same like-mindedness and cultural characteristics. It's like, hey, we want to win for clients. We want to do the right thing. We want to keep being innovative and drive it.

So I think you put those two together and that's how you end up where they should go hand in hand. You can be really successful and then people love working there and want to stay there and also want to continue to attract other great people. Customers are a big part of our organization in terms of solutions for them and partnering and relationships that we've built over many years.

Carolyn Jones:

Jim, I wonder if I can tack on to what you were just talking about and maybe share with us how you approach some of the biggest challenges that everyone talks about is talent recruitment and retention. Is that a challenge for you, finding people and keeping them? What are some of the things that you do to be successful there?

Jim Sullivan:

I think we've been really successful attracting great people, retaining great people, even going through an integration and going through a lot of the changes over the last three years in the marketplaces with everything we've been going through. I think it's very important that you A, have a great mission of what you're trying to accomplish is very clear-cut and organized with roles and responsibilities. I learned this early in my career. People have to have, in addition to the mission-driven company, but really work for a great person is really, really important and also having the right competitive comp and benefits and all things that go with that that brings everything together. But I think my experience is who people are working for and what's the mission of the company has been the top things that attract people and make it so people want to be here. We have incredible people and an unbelievable time of how long people have worked here. It's really amazing.

Jon Bernstein :

Jim, you became CEO of NWN Carousel just before the pandemic and you've been able to be a fast 50 company, a best places to work with the tremendous talent retention. Please can you share a bit about how you accomplished all that in such a short time?

Jim Sullivan:

Right. I started with NWN in May of 2019. We did a tremendous amount of work to work the employees, really get us very organized, put all the focus and offerings in there. At the time, we had a couple thousand customers and we're managing these people, folk's contact centers, their communication systems, their phone systems, all of their devices. Then the pandemic hit and it was March 14th and customers were calling us up of like, we need to send everybody home and we need all the solutions. So we were just going right away. I think in hindsight, I think it was pretty amazing of what the team did really. I think one, we had to help customers and we personally had to keep our employees safe as well. So it was like a balancing act and I think everyone really rallied and stepped up and then drove it and it went really well.

Obviously, we didn't [inaudible 00:07:27] this at the time, but we're like the hybrid work solution company. We backed into an amazing business opportunity as we're coming out of that and these solutions. Then we had a really nice opportunity to acquire Carousel, which became really an acquisition that was company similar to us, like-minded. They wanted to do the transformations that we did. The employees were incredible, and so it was more like a real collaboration bringing the two companies together. We wrapped that up May of 2021. Then did the same transformation. Part of it is big markets, great solutions for customers, and then really, really good employees that rallied around the mission. I think collectively as a team, we did a nice job to get things very organized with what we did and how we did it.

So attributes around that is being mission-driven, we communicate and overcommunicate a lot, listen a lot to folks and the feedback. My experience has been the truth resides in the organization with customers or with employees and with partners, so you listen a lot. The trends tend to really jump out at themselves to what you got to do and what you got to fix and how you drive it. We never really change course, but you keep iterating of what's working, accelerate that, what's not working, decelerate that and drive it. So very fortunate experience. I would attribute it to the management team and our employees and customers that were long-term partnerships.

Jon Bernstein :

Those are all incredible components of success, Jim. Thanks for sharing that. I also wonder for you personally, what were some of the career pivotal moments that helped to shape your leadership style and influenced your success?

Jim Sullivan:

I was in an organization, YPO, Young Presidents' Organization since I was about 31 or so. I had a lot of good takeaways and there were probably two things. I went to a session one time and I'd done a whole bunch of different schooling stuff, but this was a different one and it was about servant leadership. Once you really get organized and here's the mission and what you're doing, you're ultimately trying to help people be successful and how you enable them to be successful. Then I read a book. I read a lot of books but read one book in particular by Jim Collins called Good to Great. It was a spot-on, pretty simple book, but there was a lot of substance to that, and I think a lot of what we've built over the years in companies has been around those philosophies, some best practices. I was at EMC when it was maybe a hundred million in sales and I left when it was 13 billion.

Really fortunate experience around a lot of incredible people that I've worked with up unto this day and in different practices. But also with NWN Carousel, there's lots of people there that I've worked with

over the years at different companies and different experiences, and so part of it is a lot of experience around a lot of really great people and mentors over whatever, 34 years.

Carolyn Jones:

Yeah. The people, the mentors, that really makes a difference. Good to Great is one of my favorite books of all time. It never ceases to give great advice. Jim, we've just talked so much about the different aspects of your career, but when you look at things in general, whether it's your business, the economy, what are you optimistic about and what worries you?

Jim Sullivan:

The business opportunity for us, I'm always optimistic that we can continue to build just a great pillar company for the United States and for Massachusetts and New England with NWN Carousel. I think we're in this huge market. We've got these great solutions and you would like to see more great large pillar companies out of New England, out of Boston, out of Massachusetts. I'm very optimistic that having been part of one really early and having done several startups that had fantastic exits with great investors and great people, now we're on one that's approaching a billion dollars. It's really working. We got great people. It's a national company and so I'm really optimistic on our ability to keep this rolling and moving. To be candid, I don't really worry about a lot. I'm pretty focused on-

Carolyn Jones:

Great.

Jim Sullivan:

... what do we have to do and what are the challenges and really rallying around getting that built, to get it fixed, and going on it. But we have a really good team. It's not like rose-colored glasses, but it's really have issues, solve issues, have experience over time that these things work out if you're working hard and you're doing the right things the right way. You'll have challenges for sure. The pandemic was a real challenge. There also was supply chain and inflation and the general labor markets, but you just have these issues. When you engage the right team, the right people, the right partners, and you build big relationships and networks over time, you worry less. I think one takeaway is the cliché of the harder you work, the luckier you get. It's like it keeps staying engaged and then worry is not part of the equation.

Jon Bernstein :

What are some of the best advice that you've been given and also what is your best advice looking ahead to the next generation of executives?

Jim Sullivan:

The best advice I'd say is probably paraphrasing from a few people or paraphrasing from a bunch of different experience. For business, be in large markets with differentiated offerings with great people and help them be successful. That's a real great summary on any different size and level of business, and there's plenty of details as you go around that. I think the general advice I would give to people that might be a little bit new or different would be in the hybrid work world, relationships still matter a lot. I think particularly for younger folks, it's a little bit different that we all had to take control of our careers,

but if I showed up in an office back in the day, you're around a bunch of people. So here, someone might be remote and they're coming out of college or there might be hybrid.

I've got a couple of kids that are doing really well in the work world and they're in technology but they're just out of college. So you have to really take a bit more entrepreneurial ownership of building your network, of getting your mentoring, of being really engaged. I think there's a lot of great advice out there. I think that's the one that's pretty prevalent right now for everybody. When COVID was ending, we were out with customers really pretty quickly, outside, safe environments but doing different types of things and constantly coming up with creative ways to be in front of customers, with partners, with employees, ways to keep building your career, learning your career, building the network, but some of that has to be a little bit more entrepreneurial self-starter than you're showing up in the office five days a week.

Carolyn Jones:

Lot of good advice there for, especially those young folks coming up. Jim, you're a leader in the Boston business community. What do you see as some of the key issues that are critical to our future here in Boston and beyond? How do they shape, if at all, how you lead?

Jim Sullivan:

Yeah. I think the second one first. We really focus on our customers, our employees and everything I was mentioning before, where there are issues and challenges and staying really close to them and then building the right organization so people want to be here. I think for Boston, Massachusetts in general, the more we can be supportive of building businesses, businesses can be such a really thriving part of the overall community and continue to have the right environment that companies can be here and build the companies and have the right sustaining ecosystem that you can just build great companies. Not all companies need to become huge companies. You can just have a great entrepreneurial spirit and a lot of great small companies. Some continue to grow up to be mid-size companies and then you get fortunate with a bunch that get big and they provide a lot for the community and they provide a lot of jobs and a lot of really goodwill and they can be successful. Just having the right support and ecosystem around having that environment. I think Massachusetts and Boston's done a good job with that.

Carolyn Jones:

Yeah, agree.

Jon Bernstein :

Jim, we like to close with some rapid fire questions. Are you ready?

Jim Sullivan:

I'm ready.

Carolyn Jones:

It's the fun part.

Jim Sullivan:

I'll go as fast as I can.

Jon Bernstein :

What are you currently reading or watching?

Jim Sullivan:

I'll give you two. I just finished a book called Genius of Place, which is by a writer named Justin Martin. It's the story of Frederick Law Olmsted. Reads like fiction. If you don't know who he is, he created landscape architecture, built Central Park, has the most amazing career and also built, I don't know if that's Back Bay behind you, but the Back Bay and the Emerald Necklace of Boston. It's just an amazing story. Then watching, we watched a bunch of different types of shows but watched one that might be off the beaten path was a great show called Rogue Heroes. Rogue Heroes is a true story of the founding of the British SAS. It's written by the guys who wrote Peaky Blinders, if you like that kind of show. But the writing's really good and the British acting's pretty amazing.

Jon Bernstein :

Who's a Boston leader or an organization to watch?

Jim Sullivan:

I think one maybe to watch and maybe just to give a plug for is we partner with Year Up. If you're not familiar with Year Up, Year Up is providing some essential training for young people that are looking for an opportunity to bridge the gap maybe from high school and maybe not attending college or maybe want to attend college at some point. Organizations partner with Year Up to bring in some of these kids to the organization. Year Up provides a bunch of essential training on technical skills and some also soft skills and then organizations like us really will bring those folks into different types of jobs to give them jobs. Year Up's done a great job. We've been doing it for a few years. We want to do more. I think that's an organization to be a great plug. More people should be engaged with those guys and we clearly want to continue to focus on how we do more.

Jon Bernstein :

Great partner. What's a favorite spot you have in the city?

Jim Sullivan:

Mine would be Fenway Park.

Jon Bernstein :

What makes you laugh?

Jim Sullivan:

Well, I think great comedy makes me laugh. Like this summer, my wife and I went to Bill Burr at Fenway. It was a lot of fun, a lot of laughs and a great Boston flavor [inaudible 00:19:16].

Jon Bernstein :

And finally, what's a wish you have for Boston?

Jim Sullivan:

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Hey, I think Boston is the best city in the world. Raised our kids here. I think Boston is the best city in North America. You hear people say it all the time. We have a bunch of different places. We have everything. We have a great city, vibrant community. We've got the ocean. We've got the mountains not too far away, and the accessibility on the East Coast. I just hope, I'm a very optimistic guy, that Boston continues on that role and being the best city in the US.

Jon Bernstein :

I love it. Absolutely. And that wraps up our time together. Thank you so much for joining us, Jim, and for sharing your insights.

Jim Sullivan:

Thank you. Great to be here.

Jon Bernstein :

I'm Jon Bernstein.

Carolyn Jones:

I'm Carolyn Jones and this is PNC C-Speak: The Language of Executives. Our guest today was Jim Sullivan, president and CEO of NWN Carousel.

Jon Bernstein :

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