

LEADERS in Action

Jason Womack interviews JIMMY LEE



Jimmy Lee is the former Executive Director of RESTORE NYC, a non-profit working to end sex trafficking in New York and restore the well-being and independence of foreign national survivors. In 2010 RESTORE NYC opened a safehome for women victims of sex trafficking; the first of its kind in the northeastern U.S. Lee studied business at the University of Chicago and sociology at Cornell University, and has worked with GBCHealth, World Vision, American Express, J.P. Morgan, and Goldman, Sachs. He lives in Harlem with his wife Christine and loves to run long distances.

Q&A

Jason Womack: *Do you have a simple way to think about how leaders get better?*

Jimmy Lee: Being effective is indeed an inward journey. Leaders get better by focusing on themselves first. I'd say the best thing you can do to improve as a leader is to work hard to understand yourself.

People follow leaders who lead from an authentic place, leaders who know why they do what they do. Ask yourself questions about purpose and contribution; and, ask yourself those questions again at ages 18, 23, 30, 42 and beyond. Strive to identify your strengths and wonder – every day – how you could be better at them.

JW: *What was your Defining Moment as a leader?*

JL: In April 1994, I watched on television as Nelson Mandela was elected the President of South Africa. That summer, between my junior and senior years of college, I travelled to South Africa and observed firsthand the birth of a new country. For many years, I followed developments in Sub-Saharan Africa and devoted part of my career to addressing AIDS in that region.

So, when my wife introduced me to the founders of RESTORE NYC, I came to understand that women are trafficked for many of the same reasons they are disproportionately affected with AIDS: they are in a vulnerable position, and easily taken advantage of. I joined the organization as the founding Chairperson, and later took the position of Executive Director; literally jumping at the idea of being able to do something in my own back yard.

JW: *What will leaders increasingly need to include that up until now they may not have had to study in great detail?*

JL: I believe leaders will have to do more “Thinking.” We must ask ourselves big questions that move us toward more transcendent thinking. As the author Simon Sinek said, we've got to “start with why” and move toward the *what*, and then the *how*.

Q&A with Jimmy Lee

Jimmy Lee is the quiet leader who ultimately stands out in the room. (And, it's not just because he's over 6 feet tall!)

He listens, a lot. Then, in a burst of vision and strategic thinking, he pulls the conversation together in a way that says, “I've been thinking about this for a long, long time.”

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Practice asking the questions that make you uncomfortable, which enables people to feel more comfortable around you, knowing you're asking the tough questions. This goes a long way in increasing their trust in you.

Personally, I'm experiencing the fulfillment of a vocational desire to be the leader of an organization whose mission I am passionate about. This came after a lot of thoughtful planning.

JW: *What do you think are the most important questions effective leaders need to ask of themselves?*

JL: I've been journaling since I was in high school. [It turns out Jimmy's wife, Christine, has ALSO been journaling since then.] There are some basic questions that I've continued to push through the journaling process.

"What are those things that I do that give me life and bring me joy?"

"Why truly am I doing this?"

"What my strengths, and how do I get better at them?"

JW: *What are some of your own habits or routines as an effective leader?*

JL: This is an important question, because the more people look to you as leader, the more they watch what you do.

I start the morning with a cup of coffee, and 30 minutes of reflecting, meditating, or reading, often something inspiring such as the Bible. Reflective thinking, nutrition and exercise is an important part of my day, every day.

I'm known as a doer within the organization. I constantly look at the value I can bring to the team by creating structure, studying process and managing people.

My job each day is to move the organization toward where it needs to be tomorrow, so that people can do their best work. I believe I'm seen as a hard worker. To me, that means that I am disciplined, I'm reliable, I'm committed, I'm high energy, and I'm structured.

JW: *How do you listen - and what do you listen for - so you hear more than what is just being said by those you lead?*

JL: I continue to think in different – maybe non-traditional – ways. For example, I journal. A lot. In fact, I see journaling is my third eye; I'm able to see truth in a way that I can't otherwise.

Also, I rarely tackle a problem "head-on." If I'm not thinking directly about something, I get insight in to the challenges I am facing. I don't expect results, but I know that if I give my mind a moment to relax – or even time overnight – I'll come up with ideas and answers I had not seen before.

JW: *How would you define your self in just one sentence?*

JL: I work hard so that I can help others.

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