

LEADERSHIP PROFILE

Cedric Glasper, President and CEO of Mechanical Rubber Products Company, Inc.

# Sharing the Vision



HV Mfg. recently sat down with Mechanical Rubber President and CEO Cedric Glasper to discuss his path to a career in manufacturing; the challenges of entrepreneurship; his perspective on leadership, and navigating the specialty rubber products business.



**HV Mfg:** How did you come to own a manufacturing business? Did you come to manufacturing or did manufacturing come to you?

**CG:** A little bit of both. My mom worked for many years on an assembly line in my hometown of St. Louis, Missouri. My dad worked for UPS and was also very mechanically inclined. He was always working on projects around the house, so there was always talk of making things and fixing things at home. I became pretty handy myself and when the time came to decide what to study an uncle of mine suggested that I should become a mechanical engineer.

**HV Mfg:** So you're an engineer?

**CG:** Well, no. I spent a year at the University of Missouri. Notice I did not say I spent a year studying, because I didn't. College was fun! Then I grew up a bit and transferred to Cal Poly, changing my major to Architecture and Urban Planning in the process. My degree is in Urban Planning. I did some work out of college in urban public policy in California. It was important work, but I found it very frustrating. I was young and idealistic and the bureaucracy kind of frustrated me. I couldn't see the results of my efforts and I just felt powerless to make any positive change, so I left that field.

A marriage brought me to a job in central New Jersey as a telemarketer for a rubber manufacturer, a company called Itran Rubber. I was pretty good at it, I suppose, because in a few months I was promoted to "Lead Generator," then "Marketing manager."

I loved being in the private sector, in manufacturing. It makes sense; revenue, expenses, costs, employees, facilities, equipment all come together to produce an item and sell it to a customer who needs it. They need it – we make it.

**HV Mfg:** How did you come to own Mechanical Rubber?

**CG:** Mechanical Rubber had been in business since the early 1940s. They had a great reputation in the defense industry that lasted for decades. The

company fell on hard times in the 1900s due, I think, to defense cuts and their inability to diversify their customer base. The company's reputation in the industry had suffered as well. They filed for bankruptcy in the mid 1900s and the company I was working for bought them out of bankruptcy.

Itran pretty much stripped Mechanical Rubber of all its useful assets and customers before generously offering to sell the much smaller company to me in 1995. They offered to finance me for five years and I figured that opportunities like this don't come along in life too often, so I accepted and the struggle began.

**HV Mfg:** Struggle?

**CG:** Yes. For the first five years I had big ideas and no resources. I needed to overcome the bad reputation that the industry associated with the name "Mechanical Rubber"; our biggest customer in the Region – Texaco R&D in Beacon—closed and we had a three-year battle with the Internal Revenue Service.

By 2004 we had battled through most of that and managed to stay in the game. We bought the assets of another small rubber company in the region, Minisink Rubber. Their products and customers gave us a nice boost and by 2007 we were turning the corner and seeing some real growth when bam, the Great Recession hit and almost everything came to a complete standstill—no orders, no payments, nothing. We suffered a 40 percent drop in revenue in 2008.

**HV Mfg:** Things are humming here now, how did you turn it around?

**CG:** Well it took some doing. One of the first things that had to happen was for me not to take it personally. You know, I take responsibility for everything. If good things happen, it's because of my efforts; if bad things

**In keeping with its "solutions-based" approach, Mechanical Rubber reverse-engineered the Möbius Band in a New York Hall of Science exhibit to develop the appropriate neoprene compound and create a custom extrusion needed to refurbish it.**

happen, it's because I failed in some way. Given the extent of the drop, I got really down. I was isolated, wallowing in the day-to-day lousy numbers. While I knew things were bad in the industry across the country I didn't really understand how bad. It actually was my parents who helped me get back on track. They have always been my best mentors and when I was speaking to them one evening about how difficult things were they just said, "Yeah, so? It's not your fault. Things are tough all over and they will get better." They told me that I should start preparing for when things turn around – be ready to take advantage.

**HV Mfg:** Sounds like really good advice—how did you prepare, what did you change?

**CG:** At about this time I had been doing a lot of reading about management theory and leadership and I stumbled upon this concept of "Co-opetition." It has roots in game theory but, as the name implies, it is a blending of cooperation and competition with the idea that companies and individuals can cooperate with each other to reach a higher value creation than could be achieved without working together.

I found that our company could cooperate with other firms in the specialty rubber industry that are actually competitors in some areas, to win business and compete with bigger firms. Working as individual companies, we did not have the resources to bid on certain contracts, but by joining forces, pooling our resources and expertise, we could. This greatly expanded our potential markets and helped us recover.

I also had to rethink what it meant to work at Mechanical Rubber. For this new vision to succeed we needed a buy-in from all our people—management, designers and especially our sales people. We all needed to share the same vision. I needed people who cared. That took some time and some people never caught on, so we needed to part ways.

But the group we have now... they're all sharing the vision. They come to work every day asking what they can do to add value to the customer. This is reinforced through our motto, "Reputation cannot be easily mitigated." This applies to employees, co-workers, customers and associates. It's a constant reminder that how you treat someone will leave a lasting impression; it's customer satisfaction on a macro and micro level. With that in place, I really no longer manage the company—I get to spend all my time working strategically to implement the vision.

**HV Mfg:** Can you give us an example? What are some of the strategies that you have employed to implement that "co-opetition" vision.

**CG:** Well, for one thing, we have been able to invest in a number of certifications: ISO-AS, MBE, DOT. We recently became approved to supply the MTA. All of which make us a more valuable partner. We've also expanded our product offerings to include spec plastics, aluminum and, most recently, assemblies. Another example is our "WeConnect" website, which we have completely overhauled into a better tool for marketing and customer support.

**HV Mfg:** What do you see as the biggest challenges in the next year or so?

**CG:** In a word, capacity. We really have positioned ourselves very well to grow in the next few years. We may need to expand pretty quickly if some of the projects we are pursuing come to fruition. We have not bid on anything we can't handle, but we know we will have to add capacity in the near future.

**HV Mfg:** What are the opportunities?

**CG:** I see a lot of potential in the transportation sector. That is why we pursued the MTA approval. Our products are used in the automotive, aerospace and rail industries and we have worked hard to get in front of



these companies. Federal, State and local governments buy a lot of the products from these industries —such as rail cars, for example—and our status as a minority-owned business gives us a leg up in bidding on some of these projects. It's not a big leg-up, we still need to be competitive in terms of delivery, quality and price, but we do have a good chance to grow in that sector.

**HV Mfg:** What do you think makes a good leader?

**CG:** Being a good listener. It is one of the simplest things but also the most important. How can you lead people if you don't know their constraints, their needs? Sometimes being a good listener means hearing what's not being said as well as what is being said. It means asking the right questions and then listening to the answers. Of course, communicating back is important too. Hearing what the constraints and needs are is one thing. Doing something about it is another. But it all starts with listening.

**HV Mfg:** You have been involved with the Council of Industry for quite a few years now. You serve on its board of directors. What are we good at? What can we do better?

**CG:** Without a doubt, our advocacy efforts on behalf of manufacturing are a strength. Working to form the Manufacturing Alliance, MANY, that has proven to be a real success. The Council and MANY are giving a voice to all us little guys and that is terrific.

As for what can we do better, well, I think we need to build that advocacy even more, speak even louder on behalf of manufacturers. Also, and I guess its related to that, I think we could do more networking, more connecting of the executives of our Hudson Valley manufacturers. I still appreciate the advice I was given by some of my peers when we did a tour and visit here at Mechanical Rubber, 10 or so years ago. I still consider many of the other members to be mentors and I hope I prove to be a mentor to some of them as well. Building those connections is something that would make the Council an even better resource.