



LEARNING TO LEAD

From the corridors of a U.S. Navy submarine to the Ivy Leagues, Outdoor Spaces 360° founder shares the experiences that taught him what it means to run a growing pool business

John Cooper's path to the pool industry has been a bit unconventional.

Prior to founding pool service and maintenance company Outdoor Spaces 360°, Cooper served in the U.S. Navy, earned degrees in chemical and nuclear engineering, worked at a pool retail store, and spent more than two decades building custom homes. He also DJ'ed at a nightclub on the West Coast.

Each role, according to Cooper, has been instrumental in preparing him to run a pool business. However, despite his eventful background, Cooper is quick to tell you he doesn't know everything.

"I've still got room to grow, and I'm happy to admit that," he said. "One of the greatest things I was ever told is that the smartest man in the room is the first person to tell you he doesn't know anything."

This humility has made Cooper a better student of his experiences and has allowed him to grow into an effective business leader.

Knowledge is power

Cooper served in the military for four years following high school. He worked aboard a U.S. Navy submarine, on a team of 115 people, and learned about plumbing systems, thermodynamics, and control systems, and operated the nuclear reactor.

"The education and the leadership I learned in the military was pretty critical, and it was a good primer for swimming pool work," Cooper said.

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John Cooper, Outdoor Spaces 360°



Shortly after leaving the military, Cooper began building custom homes, and it wasn't long before he built his first swimming pool. Within his 27 years as a builder, his company built around 40 swimming pools. A couple years after retiring from building homes, Cooper discovered the Kansas City market he lived in was primed for a pool business.

In 2020, Outdoor Spaces 360° was born. The business started out as a builder of outdoor spaces, from landscaping to pergolas. However, within a month, Cooper realized a gap in the area for high quality, knowledgeable pool businesses and knew he could provide something different as a swimming pool service and maintenance business.

"The customers just came out of the woodwork for us," he said. "It was amazing, really. With my chemical and nuclear engineering degrees, I could see the need for education. The customers were begging for help."

Cooper's background in science continues to be an asset for the company, as customers appreciate his ability to explain why their pool needs to be shocked or requires certain chemicals in a time of inflation. However, the qualifications he and his team earned through Pool & Hot Tub Alliance (PHTA) certifications has set his business apart.

"It's one of the things that has put us in a position of authority in town," Cooper said. "And I think the customers look at it like, 'Wait, these guys know something. They are true experts.'"

Re-learning real leadership

Shortly after Outdoor Spaces 360° began to grow, Cooper realized that he needed a better understanding of leadership to manage his team well. Although he held a leadership position in the military, leadership in the military was "all about supervision" and giving orders. He needed a different approach in business.

"Humility caused me to really take a look at how I was leading the team, not just that I was," said Cooper. "Everything that I had learned in my entire life, I just wanted to set it aside and just learn what a real leader is and does."

In fall 2022, he learned about the PHTA Leadership Certificate Program powered by Cornell University. The program, which is exclusive to PHTA members, offers courses on leadership taught by Cornell University professors. Curriculum is broken out into two tracks: one for Emerging Leaders and one for Executive Leaders.

Cooper participated in the Emerging Leaders track, electing to "start at the bottom and learn it all the way up," despite being an executive. He graduated with the first cohort in summer 2023.

Beyond learning basic management skills, the program gave Cooper a greater understanding for how to handle workers' frustrating behaviors, such as not showing up for work or off performance days, as well as how to motivate your crew and inspire a positive company culture.

For Outdoor Spaces 360°, which has 12 full-time employees, the program has made all the difference.

"The Cornell Leadership Program honestly resulted in a better bottom line for us," said Cooper, who expects his business to grow double in revenue in 2023 and potentially again in 2024. "We've been able to improve our efficiencies and our profits, and our revenue stream has increased because the leadership is beginning to take effect."

Cooper's team is more cohesive, engaged, and productive than ever, which he credited to his application of lessons learned from the program. Anyone in a leadership role can benefit from the program, according to Cooper, who is eager to take the Executive Leaders track next year.

"My team is led better now than they were before because I know more about what real leadership is," said Cooper. "Even though I still have room to grow."

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