

JOHN
VELERIS

CHAIRMAN & CEO
JVA PARTNERS

COVER STORY

MACHINES, MENTORS, AND MILESTONES

Inside the Career of a Turnaround Visionary John Veleris



"Founding JVA Partners was my first step in acquiring and turning around underperforming manufacturing companies,"

says John Veleris, Chairman & CEO of JVA Partners. His inspiration behind the founding of JVA Partners (JVA) was driven by a passion for manufacturing technology and a knack for best practices for creating innovative consumer and industrial products.

He launched JVA as a consulting firm to tackle a few projects that needed a fresh pair of eyes for turnarounds. The first was a \$40mm Chicago-based frozen gourmet food manufacturing company. The strategy was to leverage a new technology that allowed dough to thaw in its own sweet time, all while keeping the delightful coffee aromas from getting ruffled. John shares how bringing Joe McEvoy on board was a power move for the company. He is a whiz with a PhD and hands-on experience in related technologies, who helped their team win big business with Starbucks within a matter of months.

Subsequently, JVA transformed into a private family office that John leveraged for 9 company acquisitions and M&A transactions in the mid-market arena. Today, JVA has its

fingers in three manufacturing holdings and one in the IT space, with over 50 patents.

As the years rolled by, John learned from both his experiences and the wisdom of seasoned pros. The main takeaway? He understood that setting a clear, effective, and compelling vision is a must. It is the starting point for inspiring and aligning teams toward a common purpose that resonates with the heart of the organization's mission and values.

Rising Through Advanced Manufacturing Technologies

Rightly said, *"morning shows the day."* John's caliber and potential started to shine through early on when he joined the aerospace division of Rexnord as an Industrial Engineer after college. His manager and the executive team evidently liked his contribution enough to keep putting new challenges (along with constructive coaching and mentoring) in front of him. Recounting that time, John shares how designing a new plant expansion with dozens of

machine centers was assigned to him based on his aptitude for problem-solving. That experience allowed John to redesign the production flow with Quality Assurance processes fully integrated into the Production process.

RR Donnelley (the largest printing company with 35 plants across the country) was his next professional move. He spent several years as a corporate project engineer there, leading major automation and technology projects across several RRD plants that were reconfigured entirely with new digital processes. His portfolio of projects spanned from digitizing typesetting and beaming it down from the company's satellite transponders to whichever plant had the most available capacity, to automating material handling with the first generation of AGVs (Automated Guided Vehicles) and robots loading the 2-story printing presses across the plants. John adds that these types of projects were the first generation of Business Process Reengineering (BPR) applications that honed his skills in BPR at the time.



However, in 1990, he realized the magnitude of manufacturing offshoring to China was threatening his professional career in the manufacturing industry. This wake-up call prompted him to shift his career into the consulting industry. One of his professional acquaintances, Norm Wold, then president of Wizdom Systems, introduced him to CEO Dennis E. Wisnosky.

Together, they interviewed John for a role managing the largest reengineering project in the country, valued at well over \$100 million. The initiative required integrating the HR function across the Regular Army, the Reserves, and the National Guard, while migrating personnel records

from microfiche and paper files to computer centers.

It intrigued John to learn that Dennis had served as the Chief Architect and Chief Technical Officer of the Department of Defense (DoD) Business Mission Area (BMA) within the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He was among the first pioneers to develop the IDEF methodology for both process and data modeling, a few years earlier. This approach later became the foundation for computer programming architectures in process and data modeling, influencing early simulation pioneers such as Dennis Pegden.

Managing the largest BPR project in the country out of the Army HR Headquarters and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, was a defining chapter for John. For over a year, he worked shoulder to shoulder with Army personnel and led a team of civilians. This venture tested his resilience and shaped his leadership style more than he ever imagined.

That milestone opened the door to his next professional chapter as a senior manager at Deloitte & Touche, where he came under the mentorship of Doug Engel, a senior partner he remains deeply grateful to have worked with.

The Hands That Marked His Path

Ascending the ranks without any guidance, help, or support along the way is tough. Who lit the path for John? His first mentor was his father, a self-educated gentleman whose family suffered greatly in World War II. Hand in hand with his brother, he created from scratch a Fortune 100 pharmaceutical company in Greece, where John grew up. Integrity, continuous learning, adaptability, and treating everyone with respect are some of the personal values that John's father taught him, and which the latter still holds close to his heart to this day.

John's world revolves around a people-centric mantra. They make the

ultimate difference. As he puts it, **"Human relationships are those that create great careers and successful businesses."**

The Role of Mentorship in Professional Course

You ask John what role mentorship plays in his approach to developing future leaders. He answers unequivocally. It is of utmost significance. And this is not something he has picked up from theory. His life has been an apprenticeship, where he experienced things up close.

In his first year of college, John met Dennis Pegden, a young man pursuing his PhD in Industrial

Engineering, skilled in Computer Process Simulation. At that point, John was weighing his options to see which branch of engineering would be the best fit for his career. Dennis volunteered to mentor him, and that helped the former significantly.

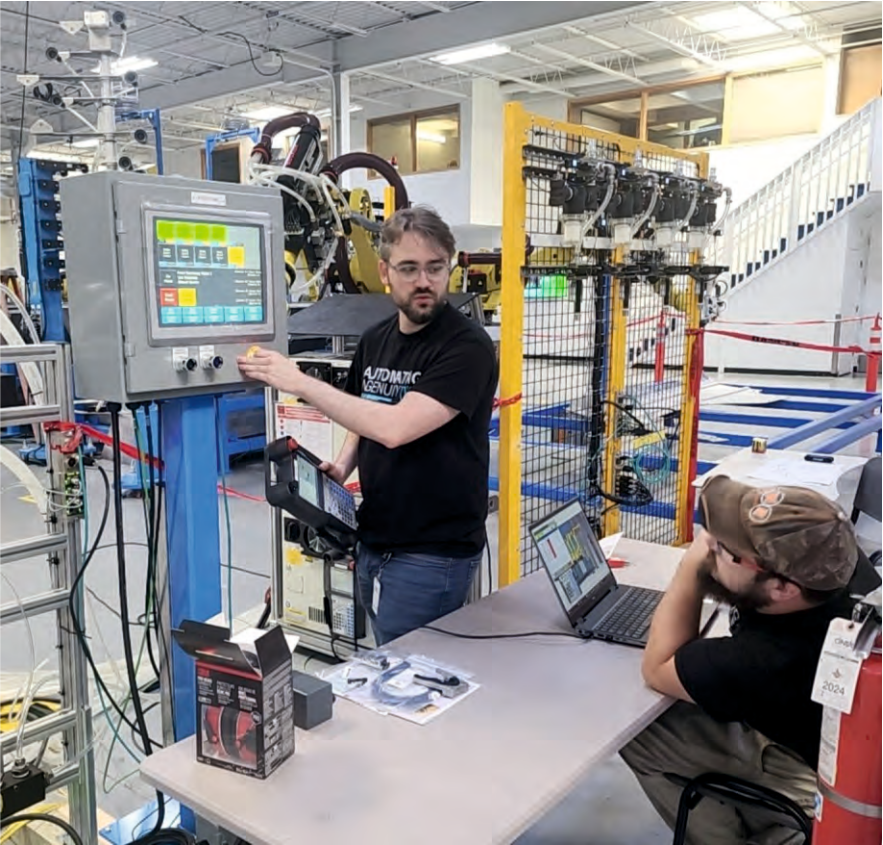
As it turned out, Dennis Pegden became, and still is, the industry authority on computer process simulation, launching several companies that monetized his technology. John gladly admits he relied on Dennis's software during his tenure with RR Donnelley. Today, his holding Wes-Tech Automation uses the same tool for large-scale projects that cater to entire manufacturing plants and reputable clients.

For John, the bottom line is exact. Mentorship is no longer a nice-to-have. Delivered through personalized guidance and real-world insights, it is an integral part of the corporate world. Under the tutelage of seasoned professionals, the newcomers develop confidence, expand networks, and sharpen essential leadership skills.

"Mentorship accelerates career growth," John believes. It cultivates enhanced self-awareness and fuels a more inspired leadership pipeline within any organization.

Leadership Must-haves in Today's Era

The modern problems always require modern solutions. And to bring such



solutions, a significant shift in the mindset of a leader is the first step to ascendancy. John has observed that in today's dynamic and rapidly evolving business environment, leadership transcends traditional notions of authority and hierarchy. Now it is an influential force that inspires and guides individuals and teams towards achieving shared organizational goals.

He thinks that good leaders have a firm grasp of behavioral psychology and can articulate a clear and compelling vision for the future. As importantly, they motivate and unite their people behind the company's objectives and ethos.

Great leaders, John believes, are those who can steer their teams to think outside the box and roll out



"Human relationships are those that create great careers and successful businesses."



groundbreaking deliverables that create competitive advantages.

Culture as The Real Strategy Catalyst

For John, strategic growth and a strong company culture walk side by side. He strongly advocates building and sustaining a culture that lasts. Looking at today's cutthroat business arena, it is far from a luxury. Instead, it is a necessary factor for planning and executing a strategy in the best possible way, measured by the magnitude of its financial impact. From the floor up, John has experienced the direct cause-and-effect between a strong culture and successful strategic initiatives. So, he sees culture not just as a catchy phrase, but as the very backbone of his strategy.

Rescuing Giants: The Turnaround Triumphs

Bringing Wes-Tech Automation back

to life is John's proudest moment at JVA Partners. He bought the company out of the State of Illinois bankruptcy in 2002, and it has been profitable and growing with phenomenal Fortune 500 customers and highly successful projects ever since. Indeed, a landmark comeback.

A similar feat came with Keeler Brass, a Michigan company that goes back to 1893. John acquired it just weeks before the peak of the Great Recession, when bank financing was coming to a halt. Thanks to quick guidance from veteran banker Charles Smith, the deal closed, setting the stage for a remarkable turnaround. To this, John recounts with awe, **"We were one of the last banking deals that closed in the country."**

Survival of the Smartest

Staying ahead of industry trends is no longer a luxury. It's the new normal, where only the fittest survive and lead the game. High-performing leaders

today need skills and expertise very different from those of previous generations. At JVA, CEO John has moved quickly to build new leadership models that meet the demands of this fast-evolving sector.

He keeps his ear to the ground by staying informed about industry trends. Just as important is assessing top-notch business models and the latest best practices, and then pushing their team to see how they could surpass their performance. Creative thinking, continuous experimentation, and speedy market testing are non-negotiable attributes at JVA. These are always in the mix of their process.

John emphasizes that at JVA, the primary focus is extensively on ways they can innovate and create higher value propositions for their customers. Competitors come a bit later. JVA's secret of success? It hinges on addressing problems and wrapping things up in a jiffy.

"We were one of the last banking deals that closed in the country."

A great example, John shares, is the *Belwith Keeler Augmented Reality* (AR) platform with the 'View in Your Space' feature, which allows customers to explore more than 5,000 products across its brands. The result? This feature totally makes shopping a breeze! The shoppers can snag their best choices super-fast and effortlessly. All from their own comfort zone.

The CEO Who Doesn't Do Burnout

Work-life integration is often easier said than done. John puts much thought into it to make it work seamlessly. Instead of drawing a hard line, he favors *"work-life blending,"* a smooth and easygoing integration of work and personal life.

John knows this approach reflects the realities of modern life. High-level roles demand more adaptability and less rigidity. Without it, stress and burnout are inevitable. With it, professional and personal fulfillment become possible.

One of the mechanisms that paid off for John was joining organizations that gather leaders for monthly meet-ups and special getaways. In his early days, he became a part of TEC (The Executive Committee). Eventually, he joined VISTAGE, a coaching and peer advisory group for CEOs of small and midsize businesses.

After 25 years at VISTAGE, John still enjoys his work and personal ties. Among them is their Group Chair Richard Gilbert, a successful corporate CEO, who has been an outstanding coach and mentor for John and his peers.

Fourfold Advice for the Next Generation of Courageous Leaders

His pearls of wisdom for budding entrepreneurs aiming to create lasting enterprises come in fourfold. It all begins with following their passion and defining their entrepreneurial goals. Next, John urges these aspirants to seek mentors and learn from their knowledge and life-earned wisdom. By now, we know how important it is to him. Thirdly, he advises, **"Polish your social skills and learn how to put yourself into the shoes of your current and future customers."** Without understanding the customers, the sustainability of any enterprise may hang in the balance. His ultimate stress is on hiring the cream. Building strong professional relationships is as important. It can significantly impact their decision-making process when confronted with uncertainties.

John is well aware that these budding leaders have already been penning this chapter of their careers. All John wants is to ensure that the next generation is equipped to lead with

courage and innovation. He's got his fingers crossed that they, too, will inspire others to walk in their footsteps when it comes to passion, teamwork, problem-solving, and carrying the torch forward.

Scouting for Success

The whole shebang for fostering innovation and adaptability within his leadership team starts from learning to walk a mile in the shoes of their present and future customers. John calls the front end of the process *'scouting.'* It involves getting to know the real needs and decision drivers of their most demanding customers. He elaborates by saying that trust and acceptance grow from strong professional relationships, opening the door to new ideas.

Legacy Beyond Results

This techpreneur has seen how leadership is evolving. Now, the obligations of future leaders are enormous. They are envisioned to be adaptive, compassionate, technologically skilled, purpose-driven, embracing continual learning, and facing uncertainty with fortitude.

John wants to leave an unconventional legacy. It is more than results-oriented. It is about creating a healthy corporate culture, inspiring people to lead, and leaving a lasting positive impact on individuals, their organizations, and their professional society.

JVA PARTNERS