

**Kirt Jacobs:** Welcome to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This is an archived edition when our program was called Leadership Landscape TV.

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**Kirt Jacobs:** Welcome to another installment of Leadership Landscape where we go inside the minds of local community leaders and sometimes legends and allow them a chance to offer some keen insights into how they see themselves and most importantly just what makes them tick. I'm Kirt Jacobs host of Leadership Landscape where previous interviews have included former mayors, state politicians, former Miss Americas, sports legends, and heads of major business concerns, community activists and developers. Today our guest is Steven Higdon. And he is the former president and CEO of GLI better known as Greater Louisville Inc and he's currently the executive vice president of Faulkner Real Estate. He's a Louisville native. He graduated from Trinity High School in 1981. He then graduated with honors from the University of Kentucky where he received his bachelor Business Administration with a concentration in marketing. From 1987-1997 he worked for United Parcel Service airlines serving in many different capacities including economic development manager, passenger service sales and marketing manager, an air cargo marketing manager and as the architect of an amazing college tuition program that provides free tuition room board and books to the UPS employees who want to complete their college degrees.

From 1997-2005 Steve was with the Greater Louisville Inc better known as GLI and metro Louisville's Chamber of Commerce. He served at the helm as president and CEO from 1999-2005. As GLI's CEO Higdon had the overall responsibility for implementing the community's economic development vision by working closely with local business and government leaders, state economic development officials and other economic development organizations throughout the region. Under Steve's leadership GLI was instrumental in a number of important community initiatives most notably the successful

campaign in 2000 to merge Louisville and Jefferson county governments, the attraction of the UPS 1.2 billion dollar Worldport Hub expansion and the creation of Everyone Reads, which is America's most aggressive literacy initiative aimed at having all get this all 98t thousand Jefferson County Public School children reading at grade level by 2008.

Upon Higdon's departure from GLI he stated my time has been at GLI has been some of the most rewarding of my life. As a community we have accomplished so much during the past five years and it's been exciting to be a part of the momentum. Being a part of this Chambers' transformation from three separate organizations just eight years ago to being named by our peers as the best chamber in America has been an incredibly gratifying experience. In 2005 Higdon became executive vice president of Faulkner Real Estate, a regional real estate development firm that owns manages and leases nearly two million square feet of commercial real estate with a portfolio made up of medical and class A office buildings and neighborhood retail centers.

Steve's primary responsibility is the company's leasing, marketing, regional business development and its acquisition efforts. In addition he is active on numerous boards and committees including the Louisville Zoo board, Greater Louisville Sports Commission and the Trinity alumni association. Steve and his wife Suzanne have four sons Caleb, Connor, Aaron and Andrew. Steve you're a busy man welcome to Leadership Landscape.

**Steve Higdon:** Thank you

**Kirt Jacobs:** Great to have you have you here today.

**Steve Higdon:** Thank you good to be here.

**Kirt Jacobs:** For our first question we like to ask our guest is what drives you to do this? You had a pretty good run in the private sector. You went to the public sector and now you're back to the private sector.

**Steve Higdon:** You know I think you know it a kind of 30 thousand foot level what drives me is family. We've got four boys as you said earlier 13 down to five-years-old and and at their age is all that they're doing in terms of school and sports and maturing and growing into young men. Family is what drives me. One of the main reasons that I left GLI, though when I went down there I knew it would not be a career move I knew it would be for an amount of time, was really to get out of the you know the five night a week speaking engagements, Chamber events that we had to do. To get back to being a hopefully a better father and a better husband.

**Kirt Jacobs:** That's great. Whom do you credit most influential in your life Steve? Can be more than one person.

**Steve Higdon:** Yeah I don't think there's any one person. I think without a doubt my mom and dad. Mom and dad are still married after 55-57 years something like that in the same house that I grew up in.

**Kirt Jacobs:** That's a testament.

**Steve Higdon:** Just great core values with both of them. My dad is the hardest worker I've ever known. In fact I remember when he retired one of his proudest things that he remembered is that he missed three days of work in 33 years. He went to work every day and worked hard every day. He worked hard to send his four children you know to a private high schools and to college. He sacrificed everything to do that and I think I got a lot of the work ethic from my father in commitment to complete projects and get things done through him. My mom is probably the most selfless person I've ever met. Absolutely has never done a thing for herself but has done everything for the family. I'm not a selfless as her. I wish I was. Without a doubt she is someone who has really really shaped my values and shaped what I'm about and how I look at the world. I think from a professional perspective. Doug Cobb is the person that that I really really highly respect from kind of all aspects of what he believes in. He is number one it's not easy to be consistent it's not easy to be consistent when you're involved in high profile high stakes ventures with a lot..

**Kirt Jacobs:** You're kind of the target. You're set yourself up so to speak.

**Steve Higdon:** Absolutely and Doug is the most consistent man I've ever met. Doug is a man of values. He knows what is right. He knows what is good for him and he sticks by his values. And I think it's a very very important trait to have and he has it in spades. He's one of the smartest if not smartest men I've ever known. And I think his values are in line. I think without a doubt with Doug God his first, family a second, career is third and. He is a very very successful person and a great person.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Sounds like a future guest for Leadership Landscape. We will save this time for you.

**Steve Higdon:** I think he would do well.

**Kirt Jacobs:** OK. What was the most defining moment of your life? Can you name one? It can be more than one.

**Steve Higdon:** I'm not sure if... You know I think,,

**Kirt Jacobs:** Can be professional or personal.

**Steve Higdon:** I think on a professional from the professional perspective when I made the decision to leave UPS and go to the Chamber was probably the most defining. When I was at UP. I was there eight or nine years at that point. I was doing well within the company, moving up pretty quickly. When I made the decision to leave to be honest I really made the decision to leave because of Doug Cobb. In fact when he called me and asked me I said no probably three or four times. And at the time Doug was tapped to run this new Greater Louisville Inc. before it was even named. But we merged back in '97 the Louisville Chamber of Commerce, the old office for economic development which was the mayor and the county judges economic development office for local business existing business in the greater local economic partnership. When the business community put those three together Doug called and said I'm going to be the the guy to head it up and really to bring

it together and to organize it in the one effective economic development organization. He called me and asked me if I would head up the economic development efforts essentially the number two position in the Chamber. And I loved UPS. In fact maybe we'll talk later in the interview some of you know maybe my biggest professional regret in a lot of ways was leaving UPS at the same time it created a great opportunity. I loved UPS. Still love UPS and that was probably the riskiest thing that I've ever done. In hindsight I'm glad I did it I wouldn't change a thing. It was very risky though to leave a successful company that was riding high with a good career to do something like that. But in hindsight 20/20 it was the right move to make.

**Kirt Jacobs:** November of '99 was a good day for a lot of those guys. That's when the stock went public.

**Steve Higdon:** Yeah what I heard is that about six thousand local Louisvillians became millionaires that day when the stock doubled.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Great for economic development .

**Steve Higdon:** And that's the reason that had I stayed there I'd maybe be happier now who knows.

**Kirt Jacobs:** I think you just kind of touched upon that if there is one what is your biggest professional regret? Can be more than one.

**Steve Higdon:** Biggest professional regret. You know...

**Kirt Jacobs:** Regrets a strong word.

**Steve Higdon:** Yeah. Regrets a strong word.

**Kirt Jacobs:** In other words is it something you could have done differently. You can couch it that way too.

**Steve Higdon:** Well I'll go ahead and couch it under the word of regret. I regret the fact that this community did not bring profession-

al basketball to Louisville. I regret that and and though I played a small role in trying to get it here. I really do believe down deep not because I'm a fan of the NBA because I'm really not and I really do deeply believe that if we had a professional sports franchise particularly in the NBA and basketball I think that it would propel Louisville to greater economic status than without it. A lot of people feel very differently than that. And i understand why they do and I also understand how risky and how inexpensive a proposition it is. It would have been no pun intended it wouldn't have been a slam dunk for it to be successful here. It may not have been successful but I do regret it. I really think that the community would have benefited from the global exposure of having a pro sports franchise here and..

**Kirt Jacobs:** OK let me go on a tangent of that. You know now we've got the merger which you were instrumental in. We've got an arena that extensively is going to be built it seems to be a matter of time at this point. Do you think post 2010 when the arena is supposed to be up and running do you think at that point an NBA team will take a hard look at Louisville? Or is it just it will be a different world at that point. Different variables.

**Steve Higdon:** You know I think if the new arena's built, it sure seems like it will be which I'm very excited about, ultimately it would depend upon how much control the University of Louisville has as the master tenor of the master lease in there. If they control the key dates, if they control the majority the revenues it would be hard for to be NBA team to come here. The economics wouldn't work. I don't think the NBA will come here now. I really do believe that the time for the NBA to be in Loiusville has gone. There are probably though I'm not up to speed I'm not involved in this any longer. I'm aware of probably three or four other cities who aggressively want the NBA. For example Oklahoma City because they share the dates with the Hornets because they they had to leave New Orleans after Katrina. I think that our day is gone.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Really

**Steve Higdon:** It may be the right thing. I don't think it's I don't

know if it's a good or bad thing but I think our day for the NBA is over. I don't think it will happen here in Louisville.

**Kirt Jacobs:** I appreciate you sharing your opinion on that. On the flipside of regret, what is your biggest professional triumph? If you can name one.

**Steve Higdon:** You know I think I think the biggest triumph would be would be when Greater Louisville Inc. was named by our peers, the other chambers in America, is the number one chamber America.

**Kirt Jacobs:** OK

**Steve Higdon:** And that was three years ago. It was the second the last year before before I resigned. And obviously any time your peers say you do something well that means more to you than if a sportswriter were or..

**Kirt Jacobs:** Right

**Steve Higdon:** ...when people who are in the same business as you. That compete with you and try to do the same thing and face the same challenges you do every day say that you really do it well it means more than when other people say it. And when our peers voted GLI the best chamber in America bar none it told me that you know after five years of blood sweat and tears of working and praying and doing everything I could to make it the best organization it could be that was recognized as a great organization and I think that that encompassed five years of dreams of visions of hard work by a lot of people. I was at the head of it and I spent more time than anybody day-to- day involved with it but it really really just kind of solidified hours and hours of a lot of people doing something we all believed in.

**Kirt Jacobs:** What do you find exciting about all this? Like us in the beginning you know you're in the private sector the public sector now you're back in the private sector. What do you find exciting about all this?

**Steve Higdon:** Well I've always been a private sector guy and I always will be. I mean my time at GLI I would not trade a day of it and I'm incredibly lucky and grateful to have had the opportunity to do it. Though when I first was offered it I didn't... I wasn't sure that that's what I wanted to do. I wouldn't trade a day that now. I'm excited to be back in the private sector. I'm excited very excited to be with a small entrepreneurial fast paced organization that can move and make decisions in the hallway. Where I came from before with UPS, which is the greatest company in the world as far as I can tell and with the chamber you had a board of directors or you had committees and you had to go through committee...

**Kirt Jacobs:** Decision by committee if you will.

**Steve Higdon:** Very much so decision by Committee. It's fun to be able to make a decision in a hallway and ultimately you will reap the rewards of the decision or you pay the risk if you make the wrong decision.

**Kirt Jacobs:** There's a tangible product at the end. Office building or what have you.

**Steve Higdon:** No question about it. There's there's either financial gain or financial loss. There is a tangible product at the end. It's a lot of it's a very very funny business.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Can you define leadership in one word? You know the show is called Leadership Landscape. It can be more than one word in the great English lexicon.

**Steve Higdon:** I guess one word I would say empowerment.

**Kirt Jacobs:** I don't think we have had that one.

**Steve Higdon:** Well if you if you couch empowerment. What I think great leadership is. I think leadership is one I think you have to have a vision.

**Kirt Jacobs:** OK

**Steve Higdon:** You have to be able to see in the future what you want done. I think number two you have to have courage to get there. Lots of people have a vision but they don't have the courage. To ultimately make the tough decisions and risk what it is you're risking to get there. But at the end of the day I really do believe that leadership is about empowerment. I think that and I'll give an example at GLI..

**Kirt Jacobs:** Yeah do.

**Steve Higdon:** I am a firm believer that you are only as good as the people who work for you. And if you really can assemble a group of people talented people that are better than you and each are their own individual discipline. Like finance accounting, economic development, sales, marketing, whatever those disciplines are and you empower them to do their jobs as well as they know how to do them. Ultimately that is what a leader is all about is driving a organization to higher performance and I believe the way you do it is you get great people better than you in most cases if not all cases and you let them do their thing. As opposed to micromanaging them..

**Kirt Jacobs:** Big brother if you will.

**Steve Higdon:** Yeah and you know there's a there are a lot of ways to skin a cat. There are a lot of ways to do an economic film project. There are a lot of ways to build a building. There's a lot of ways to do a deal and ultimately there may not be a wrong way to do it but if you don't allow the people who are smarter than you to do it how they want to do it and can be successful doing it. They're going to ultimately get burned out they're going to leave and you're not going to have the you know you're just not going to have as much success but micromanage and telling people how to do things your way. Because it's not the only way to get things done.

**Kirt Jacobs:** That's true and it's personally the way I'd like to be treated. If you could change one thing Steve be it in your own life

or in general what would that be?

**Steve Higdon:** I'm not going to discuss my own life. That would be a different show.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Yeah

**Steve Higdon:** I haven't been invited on that one yet.

**Kirt Jacobs:** It's a government channels

**Steve Higdon:** A lot of changes in my own life. You know if I had a magic wand and I could change one thing about the community...

**Kirt Jacobs:** It can be the community.

**Steve Higdon:** I would I would go back 150 years and make Louisville the capital city.

**Kirt Jacobs:** I've never heard someone mention that.

**Steve Higdon:** And if you made Louisville the capital city it would have changed so many things over the history of the state. And the most important thing would have changed is our relationship with the rest of the state. I am convinced that the single biggest issue with Louisville Kentucky today it's not that we're not a great city to live in and we can't make a great career here and raise a family. It's a great place we all know that. We could be twice as great if we had a relationship with the rest of the state like Nashville does with Tennessee. Like Indianapolis does with Indiana. Like Richmond does with Virginia. And the reason they have those relationships is they are the capital city.

**Kirt Jacobs:** It seems I want to go from a tangent that there's a perception at least in this new governor and forget his politics but that there is more of a relationship out of Frankfort with Louisville then there was I guess under your tenure with GLI. Do you agree with that or is it more perception and it's not as real as it seems to feel?

**Steve Higdon:** I do believe that incrementally over the last 10 years the lip service is turning into more concrete things for Louisville. I don't think we're anywhere near we need to be. We're not even close. Jim Host just did more for Louisville Kentucky than any outside Louisvillian I have ever seen in my life.

**Kirt Jacobs:** We've had him on the show. Yeah he's something else.

**Steve Higdon:** He's done more for Louisville with his arena. And he has a very very genuine man and he is the hardest working man. He's the James Brown of economic development. He works harder than anybody I've ever seen.

**Kirt Jacobs:** I'm hoping he sees this show. I bet he will like that. I don't think he's ever been called that.

**Steve Higdon:** Well he's a hard worker and more important than anything he's sincere. And he told me when he took over the position he did for the governor that he would be here. A lot and he was and not only was he here a lot he was very successful in getting the arena done and I don't know that anybody else could have done that. So you have to...

**Kirt Jacobs:** Not in that short period of time. It was remarkable.

**Steve Higdon:** Well in the course of our history it hadn't been done in 55 year since Freedom Hall was built. So you have to give the governor credit for allowing Jim Host to do his thing. No question about that. What we need to do is we need to elect and I'm not suggesting in this election but we need the first governor from Louisville Kentucky to be the governor of this commonwealth. The City of Louisville has never had a governor period. Governor Wetherby was from Anchorage but Anchorage is not Louisville and they will tell you it's not will they live in Anchorage. We need a governor for this Commonwealth who is from the largest city. The real economic engine in one of the best cities in America. And if I had a magic wand I would put the capital in Louisville Kentucky and I would have done it 150 years ago. And I think this state would be

far better and far richer and far more progressive than it is today.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Do you believe that's just a pipe dream? Could that even happen?

**Steve Higdon:** It could never happen. It won't happened. That's why I said if I had a magic wand.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Magic wand. Alright moving on. Could you describe in detail a particular incident or scenario in your professional or personal life where you utilize your personal style and philosophy on leadership?

**Steve Higdon:** You know I think probably the I don't think probably without a doubt the most significant thing I've ever worked on the most controversial thing I've ever worked on was UPS expanding in Louisville.

**Kirt Jacobs:** OK

**Steve Higdon:** And most people don't know the story but what happened was. The day I left UPS was was the day GLI was created. It, GLI, had been in the works for a year. GLI had been in the works for a year. I had cut a deal with Doug probably six months before that I would leave UPS Of course it was confidential then only he and I knew. But the day I left was October 7 '97. Which was the first day of GLI. And what happened was in my last year of UPS I was very aware confidentially of UPS Airlines plans and need to expand the air hub. The plan and I am convinced personally that had I not intervene at the time it would be in Richenbacker up in Columbus, Ohio today. The plan was was to expand it. The biggest issue with UPS at the time was we had about five thousand part-time workers that work in the middle of the night at the air hub. The biggest issue UPS had was that every eleven weeks on average they would turn over 100% of the part-time work force. Every eleven weeks they would hire and fire they would hire and lose 4-5 thousand people every eleven weeks. You can imagine the cost of training, of recruiting, of productivity losses when you lose people. It was killing internally we were looking at moving

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to Richenback which is the big freight airport or the old Air Force Airport up in Columbus. The reason that we believed at UPS that that was right place to go is because Ohio State University was in Columbus. Fifty thousand students. Three times as big as UL and therefore there was a bigger population of package handlers in the middle of night. We could solve our workforce problem. UPS was very close to making the decision to go into Columbus. The day that I left UPS, and went to GLI that obviously became the single largest economic development project that anyone ever knew of. No one knew about it. Outside of UPS and I made a public. First person told was Doug Cobb my new boss and CEO. And we called UPS and said in we now know because of Higdon that UPS is very seriously looking at leaving. The mayor didn't know it. The governor didn't know it. No one knew it right. We made it public knowledge. We were invited to come to a meeting. I don't remember the consultant the large consultant we used to use out of Atlanta came up to a meeting with UPS and they projected based on population trends and growth or decline a population of Louisville over last 25 years that Louisville in 10 years would not be able to support this new super Hub 2000. And they were ready to go. And ultimately we got J.D. Nichols and Bob. J.D. was the head of the airport authority and he was a good friend of GLI' and our executive committee in between Douglas, JD and myself. Yeah well we we made some we made we came up with some ideas -- six ideas. One of them was Metro college. We didn't call it Metro College but one of them was a way that we could tap back into the University workforce and try to find people who would like to work at night and who would work at night. But otherwise they would choose not to because of one rich enough for them or the benefits weren't right or whatever the case may be. Within a week of that we had a meeting on Sunday morning at the Chamber. The governor drove in from Pikeville Governor Patton did. President Shoemaker from UL was there. President Green from JCC. And ultimately in less than a week we had a handshake that they would create a new college called Metro College. That ultimately would provide 100% free tuition to any person who would pursue a postsecondary education whether it's an associate's, bachelor's, or technical degree but work at UPS. The brains behind the idea really the idea itself came from J.D. Nichols. The brains behind the idea and making it happen

was John Shoemaker and Governor Patton. It was unbelievable to watch them. We put the whole thing on the table by creating by creating the concern that UPS was very seriously going to leave. The real leaders made it happen and we went to the state legislature. They committed 20 million dollars to fund this. UPS matched it dollar-for-dollar we had 40 million dollars to create Metro college and of course the rest is history. It was neat once it was all said and done and they signed the deal to do have Hub 200 here. The Wall Street Journal did a front page story on it and documented they called it the Anatomy of a Deal that documented how Metro college came about. It was front page. It was really a neat thing.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Put Louisville on the map.

**Steve Higdon:** Put Louisville on the map but at the end of the day it was a very disconcerting issue for me. Leaving UPS one day and then divulging very confidential information from my partners in a public way that ultimately if I didn't do it I have no doubt in my mind they are in Columbus, Ohio today.

**Kirt Jacobs:** So one man can make a difference.

**Steve Higdon:** Well in that case

**Kirt Jacobs:** The moral of that story.

**Steve Higdon:** You know in that case I mean it was a case of leadership. It was I saw the future if they weren't in Louisville. Without a doubt I'm now in charge of economic development and you're going to lose your eight hundred pound gorilla. It would have sucked the life out of the city. Where would we be where would we be without that airline? And they've since announced subsequent two subsequent billion dollar expansions after that.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Do you think, I'm going to switch gears here for a second. Do you think leaders are different today than they were 20-30 years ago?

**Steve Higdon:** I think very very much so

**Kirt Jacobs:** Why do you think that is?

**Steve Higdon:** Very much so yeah. Individually maybe not. Collectively absolutely. And what I mean by that is 50 years ago, 40 years ago there were a small group of men in this community who made unilaterally most important decisions. Most of the important decisions. It isn't that way anymore. Today it is it's very much. It's consensus. You have to build consensus. It has to be diverse consensus. There are no longer four white men in one bank building making every decision on behalf of our communities. Growth or lack of growth.

**Kirt Jacobs:** You think it's better now or just a different style than back then to today.

**Steve Higdon:** I think anytime that you can get a consensus is involved it's always better. It's what America was built on was a democracy.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Good point

**Steve Higdon:** You know which in the old days it was it was like having a king make all decisions. Some cities had that. They had the benefit of great people making decisions and you can see the benefit of what they did back then. I think in Louisville's case I think a lot of good decisions were made. Louisville's a great community. Looking for a place to raise a family and to live. In economic terms we still compete and not as successful as we need to with other communities like Nashville or Indianapolis. And and so it had you had more consensus building 50 years ago you probably have different decisions made that I think would have lent Louisville to be more competitive today.

**Kirt Jacobs:** I'm going to do a 360 and switch gears.

**Steve Higdon:** OK

**Kirt Jacobs:** I think it's a good time here is a question we ask all our

guests young or old.

**Steve Higdon:** It's a basketball question.

**Kirt Jacobs:** No it's not actually. When the great day comes Steve how do you want to be remembered? You know God forbid you walk out here today something tragic happens how do you want to be remembered?

**Steve Higdon:** I think that's real simple. I would love to be remembered as the greatest husband, greatest spouse, greatest parent anyone's ever know.

**Kirt Jacobs:** Steve it's quite a pleasure having you on a Leadership Landscape. Sir thank you very much.

**Steve Higdon:** You're welcome.

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**Kirt Jacobs:** Thank you for listening to MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs. This episode was archival audio from when we were known as Leadership Landscape TV. If you have any feedback, general comments, or a recommendation for a suitable guest feel free to email me at [kirt@moxietalk.com](mailto:kirt@moxietalk.com) or catch us on Facebook under MoxieTalk with Kirt Jacobs, or on Twitter under [@kirtjacobs](https://twitter.com/kirtjacobs) or our extensive website at [www.moxietalk.com](http://www.moxietalk.com)