



## To manage innovation, a restless entrepreneur must manage himself: Talk With the Boss

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**Robert L. Smith, The Plain Dealer**

By

Andrew "Andy" Sherman is a scientist and engineer with the restless energy of an entrepreneur. The Mentor High School graduate, class of 1981, has been a leader in the launch of 12 companies.

Sherman's latest clean-tech venture, MesoCoat Inc. of Euclid, was recently named one of America's Most Promising Companies by Forbes magazine. MesoCoat, a subsidiary of Powdermet (which Sherman also founded) employs 25 people and plans to hire 35 more when it opens a new, \$6.5 million coating plant this year.



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Scott Shaw, The Plain Dealer

Andrew Sherman is the founder and CEO of MesoCoat in Euclid. Sherman graduated from Mentor High School in 1981.

### **You call your company the Duracell of the coating industry. What do you mean?**

The copper zinc battery really revolutionized portable electronics. They set the technological standard. That's us. We're here to change the world. Why would you do anything else with your life? Some people do it with the pen. We do it by providing better tools and materials. If I can make a ton of steel last four times as long, I have eliminated 100 tons of greenhouse gases.

### **You're about to open a new plant in tough times. Tell us how that happened.**

We have two patented technologies that we'll apply to putting protective coatings on pipes to make them corrosion resistant. But it's really the process. We have, essentially, an artificial sun.

Instead of using a laser beam, which is a spot, we use plasma arc lamps. Instead of scanning over with a paint brush, I now have a roller. It's 40 times more productive than what they're doing today.

We're waiting for another tranche of financing and to work out some bugs with the state. But we've formed long-term relationships with the suppliers and the customers. After that, it's execution.

**I know you're a specialist in metal finishing, in metallurgy. But what, in layman's terms, do you do?**

We create coatings that extend the life of metals. We apply nanotechnology to build better coatings, cleaner coatings. If you have large steel structures and assets, we make them last longer. It's a specialized niche. We're replacing chrome plating with a cleaner, cheaper coating. We're able to put down a coating that has none of the toxic waste or environmental issues of chrome, and at a cheaper cost.

**What's the difference between being an inventor and being an entrepreneur?**

My role as an entrepreneur is not to invent but to deploy technology. If it's not being used in society, it's a mental exercise. I'm not here to prove how smart I am. I'm here to make our environment better.

**Still, you've earned some patents.**

I think I'm up to about 20.

**What's your biggest challenge managing innovation?**

Managing myself. It took a lot of coaching and help to get me to understand that my job is not to be doing. I think that's an engineer thing, that you want to get involved in every project. If I'm doing, I'm not running the company.

I need people to grasp responsibility. We're trying to build a culture where people are willing to do that, to make decisions and move up. I also need people to tell me when I'm getting too involved. I try to hire strong people.

**What kind of jobs do you have here at Powdermet and MesoCoat?**

Over half of our staff is engineers. We're a material scientist's playground, the things we're doing, so we attract a lot of idealists who like the idea of cleantech and reducing greenhouse gases and cleaning up the water.

We also need very self-aware, self-motivated people. People who can adapt to rapid change. We're growing 300 percent a year. That means all of your systems have to change constantly. You have to have a high tolerance for that.

**How do you find great employees?**

We're still figuring that out. We now have a full-time HR department. We can hire for skills. We can also train for skills. The hard part is behavior. What is this person like? How are they going to thrive? What makes them want to get up and go to work?

I believe in empowering employees. The lowest guy down there should be able to make the decision. I don't want to make the decisions.

**You spent the first half of your career in California. What brought you home?**

I was the 14th employee of a start-up in California. I saw high-tech metals and ceramics as a field where I could make a big impact. I started Powdermet in California and I was looking to expand. I dreamed my little dream.

But California is not manufacturing friendly. In California, they're like, 'You want do make something? That's all on you.' I knew where I had to go. Euclid understood what we're trying to do. They've been very helpful. It takes a community.

**You're having fun?**

Oh yeah.

*Follow Robert L. Smith on Twitter @rlsmithpd.*

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