

K-12 Educator Development through Works Published



Jeffrey Jones - CEO

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"Solution Tree is different because we focus on our authors. I think I said that our mission statement is to advance the work of our authors. They are our number one customer." - Jeffrey Jones

About Solution Tree

Your success is our success. When the bar is raised for you—and the expectations for students and educators have never been higher—we raise the bar for ourselves. We constantly ask ourselves how we can better serve educators in the most important work there is: preparing our children for the future.

Ultimately, what we all want is success for all learners. When we say all, we mean all: youth at risk, English learners, students with special needs, every child. At Solution Tree, we don't just believe that learning for all is possible. We know it.

Succeeding with all learners is only possible when educators have developed deep expertise in content: by mastering best practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Collaboration and intervention systems ensure that no child slips through the cracks.

Core content work succeeds best in environments that intentionally nurture learning: safe, culturally aware, well-ordered classrooms where students take ownership of learning. Teachers differentiate instruction, implement brain-compatible learning strategies, and model respect and care.

The foundation for success in all these efforts is a context that drives continuous improvement: strong leadership, shared vision for school improvement, a system for assessing learning needs, intervening when students struggle, monitoring results, technology to support 21st century learners, a data-driven culture, a professional learning community.

In reality, great schools are rarely built from the ground up. Most schools already have strengths in some areas and need help in others. We bring the work of world class authors to build strengths at every level in schools.

**Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor, CEOCFO Magazine**

CEOCFO: *Mr. Jones, what is the concept behind Solution Tree?*

Mr. Jones: Solution Tree provides professional development to K-12 educators predominantly in the United States, all based around works published by top thought leaders in education from around the world. We provide it through the means of books, videos, DVDs, on-line courses, or other shippable items. We do it through contract work where we send experts in to schools and districts, and we host registration events where educators come to listen and learn from thought leaders as well as each other.

CEOCFO: *What is the lay of the land for you?*

Mr. Jones: We have those three legs of the stool: shippables, contract work and registration events. At one point about five years ago, those were equal as far as gross revenue if you looked at them year end. It has shifted in recent years. People are buying fewer print resources. They are still attending events on a regular basis, but the demand for on-site consultants has really grown. We are bringing known experts into the schools, helping them with their specific problems, and tailoring solutions.

CEOCFO: *Tell us about your experts. Generally, what are the backgrounds of the people who you are sending in? Over and above knowledge, what do you look for?*

Mr. Jones: Everybody who we use is or has been an educator, who successfully implemented the practices they will be consulting on, and has research behind their instruction. They are either a Solution Tree author on this subject, or have been hand picked by the author and trained by Solution Tree on how to deliver the content. The mission statement of Solution Tree is to advance the work of our authors. We only represent people who have published books with us. If we decide to publish a book, it is because it fits into the market we serve, is research based or based on research, and provides a solution to an issue or problem that schools face. The author is the primary consultant on that topic. If the demand is too high for that particular author, then we build an associate pool behind the author to go out and present on her or his content as well. That person has to be approved by the author on content knowledge and has to be approved by Solution Tree on effectiveness of delivery. Everybody who is working for us in schools is either an author of the content or trained by the author of that content. Next, if we have enough market penetration we build events around their work, with the Author and Associates delivering the sessions, or use other mediums besides events, such as on-line courses, in which to deliver their content to educators.

CEOCFO: *What are the hot topics these days?*

Mr. Jones: The biggest piece of our business, which continues to grow on an annual basis, is the concept of Professional Learning Communities. Educators work in collaborative teams all with a common goal. It sounds like common sense to a lot of people in business, but educators are used to working in isolation. They are not used to working in collaborative teams horizontally and vertically within the school. That is our anchor product line. We also do a lot of work with assessment, Response To Intervention (RTI), digital learning, leadership, and district-

wide solutions. But the real new demand topic is Common Core. It has taken front stage for a lot of what schools are wrestling with. As we read in all the newspapers, it changes state to state, but every state in implementing some of the Common Core and educators are really struggling with implementation. Those are the hottest topics right now.

CEOFCO: *Are teachers good students? How might something need to be presented for a teacher community that might be different in business or other areas?*

Mr. Jones: Good educators understand that what they are dealing with is not a job, but a career and an opportunity to change the world one child at a time. The educators who come to our events are fantastic students because for the most part they are not forced to attend but want to be there. Now when we bring a consultant into the school, you get a mixed bag. You get the teachers who are hungry for learning, and then you get the teachers who say they have heard it before and they will wait until next week for a new plan that will come into play. As if a new Christmas ornament is going to be hung on the tree. So on-site, we have to have a presenter who really understands their content and has sat in their chair, or you lose the student. Exactly how a good teacher engages their students and a bad teacher loses them. We spend a tremendous amount of time making sure that we send the right presenter into the right location. If the chemistry does not work, it can be a disaster.

CEOFCO: *Are you typically working on the district level, city level or school level?*

Mr. Jones: In the larger districts, we are more school based. For instance, in a city like Dallas we will work more with specific schools. In the state of Indiana, we will work with districts. It is very rare that we would sign up with a district like Chicago Public Schools to deal with all the schools. We tailor so much of what we do, and large districts often want one size fits all. It can be done in larger districts, but it takes a real visionary leader, willing School Board and Central Administration, combined with buy-in by individual school leadership to make it work. One rare find is the State of New Mexico. We are in year three of a long range plan with them, and we are seeing dramatic results. Some fantastic leadership in that state.

CEOFCO: *Is it easy, in many instances, for schools to justify the budget to bring someone in, or do you find that is becoming harder?*

Mr. Jones: Almost every school has funds available for professional development. There are also Title funds available by the federal government and school improvement grants, local foundations and other creative ways to find money for good staff development. The staff development that is not funded and thankfully dying are the ones not providing research-based, best practice. Nobody can afford, or should want, to have a presenter come in and do a warm and fuzzy keynote to make them feel good about their school before the start of the school year. Schools don't have the time for that, and they know what they are doing is important. What they want are instructional strategies they can put into place next week to help their kids hit the standards that are set in front of them. If it is not best practice, it is not going to work, and you are going to continue to struggle.

CEOFCO: *Walk me through how a presentation works. Is there a standard format that works well?*

Mr. Jones: We have a standard format for our two and a half day Institutes and Summits with a keynoter to kick off each day of the event followed by multiple breakout sessions. Our two day workshops will have a maximum number of people in the same room for two days with one or

two presenters and a high degree of interaction. We know how often to have to have breaks, and how often to have people working together to keep everybody engaged. Nobody just wants a sit and get presentation for two days. Now as for when we send a consultant into a school, it really depends on what that school needs. These are all customized with the school in advance of delivery. For instance, we could be meeting with central administration, all the principals and assistant principals at the elementary schools if you are doing a district-wide solution, or we could be dealing with all elementary school teacher on implementing common core math or leadership teams on building your Professional Learning Community. We customize each presentation for the population we are meeting with that day. We do not have any canned presentations where we come in with a workbook and say we are going to walk through this manual.

CEOCFO: *Are there topics where you have experts or authors that schools in general do not realize the value of as much?*

Mr. Jones: For the most part, no. There is continuous improvement needed at every lever of every solution. And that doesn't just apply to schools, it is true in business and all endeavors. But I would have to say that assessment maybe one piece that people really struggle with in schools. There are two types of assessment. There is a summative assessment and a formative assessment. A summative assessment is at the end of the school year, a final grade. A formative assessment is when you take quizzes and regular tests throughout the course of the year and then you form your teaching strategies to get an individual child to the highest proficiency level possible. You have to be able to assess a child, and then know how to take that assessment and have a strategy in place to move that child individually forward. This is where a lot of schools struggle. It is a hard concept because teachers have so many kids in their classrooms now and they do not know how they could possibly have individualized strategy for each and every child. You can, and that is what we work with teacher to create. A lot of our tools are built around the four critical questions of a Professional Learning Community. What do you want our children to learn? How do we know if they are learning it? What are we going to do if they are not learning it? And the fourth question is what we do if they are learning it? Let's say little Chris gets the concepts but most of the class does not. You just do not want Chris to go sit off in the corner and read a book. Chris has just as much right as a struggling student to have a specific strategy to move forward on a learning path for the highest successful.

CEOCFO: *Do you work with charter schools at all?*

Mr. Jones: Yes, we work with every type of school. Most of our market is K-12 public.

CEOCFO: *What is the competitive landscape? Are there many companies in your space?*

Mr. Jones: There are a lot of consulting companies in education, and most of them are regionally based. It is somebody who was a very successful superintendent who has retired and is now doing a lot of consulting and professional development. As far as professional development organizations, there are probably a half a dozen of us that are recognizable at the top nationally and even fewer with internationally recognition. The rest would be association, like the Elementary School Principal's Association, or content specific associations like math or special education, and school board associations. But it is kind of interesting to watch other publishing companies begin to model after Solution Tree. One such company has a business plan titled The Solution Tree Model.

CEO CFO: *How do you reach out both for your seminars and conferences and to get business?*

Mr. Jones: We have a significant marketing department that customizes for the population we are trying to reach, whether it is a curriculum director, a principal or central administration. Very rarely do we market anymore directly to teachers. They are just not the decision makers, and they are so busy with their day-to-day schedules that the principal, staff development director or the superintendent is the person who decides. We do a lot of print, email, and a tremendous amount of advertising. We advertise in our trade publications more than any other professional development company in the country. We reach out to a lot of different populations and there is a lot of word of mouth marketing. Last year, Solution Tree provided over 3,000 professional development days across the country in schools, and around the world. That is quite a bit of advertising right there. But what we refuse to do is ask our presenters to be sales people. That is not their job. But they are great testimonies of professionalism.

CEO CFO: *I am assuming experts and potential authors are coming to you no*

Mr. Jones: It is a nice blend of our acquisition editors seeking out manuscripts from our current and new authors, along with submissions being proposed to us. Once it is accepted by our acquisitions team, it then goes to our Editorial Board who reviews all submissions. We discuss each submission as a team. We make certain we all agree that it is a book that Solution Tree should publish, as well as if content is potentially right for other resources to be built around the book. Some of our best acquisition folks are our current authors. If they are happy, then they refer us to other authors looking for a publisher to help them get their IP into the hands of needing educators.

CEO CFO: *What is next? What might be different a year from now at Solution Tree?*

Mr. Jones: The ability to provide content through technology tools to save schools time and money is going to be more critical than ever in the next decade, and we are very excited about the release of Global PD. GPD is a very unique product built around a utility function that assists teacher teams in answering the four critical questions of a PLC, templates to create common formative assessment, data analysis and grading software, a collection of PLC-centric videos and a system to schedule and manage virtual coaching. We also are digitally streaming our events around the country. We could have an event in St. Louis, MO, with an additional 12 sites watching it around the country, usually in the same time zone. We call it a Hybrid because we always have a live associate on site to work with the educators and do a live customized. We are working hard to make all of our content available to educators as simply and as quickly as we can so that if funds and time are limited, they can have a similar experience while under travel restrictions. They can save time and save money.

CEO CFO: *What is the key to evaluating the available technologies for you as you get more and more into that arena?*

Mr. Jones: We hire really smart people. We have a vice president of technology who is one sharp guy. He has a great team of people who have their fingers in all the different areas of technology being developed, and as we expand into technology, we have a fail quickly and succeed incrementally mentality. We are not trying to save the world with one shot; we are in it with schools for the long haul. We want to grow incrementally and succeed consistently. Education is not a fast-moving market, and there are a lot of tradition ingrained in school systems that are tough to tear down. Educators see so many shiny new wonderful

solutions that end up as a big flash, and then disappear. What they want is high quality, proven, consistent solutions. If we can stay focused on this, then we can help an educator, who helps a kid, who changes a life, who impacts the world.

CEOCFO: *Why is Solution Tree an exceptional company? Why pay attention?*

Mr. Jones: Solution Tree is different because we focus on our authors. I think I said that our mission statement is to advance the work of our authors. They are our number one customers. Solution Tree as an organization does not crank out curriculum, like some organizations do. What we do is go find the best and the brightest, take their intellectual property, starting with a book, and deliver it in any medium in which an educator needs it to help them find the right solution to a problem they are facing. On the right hand, we have phenomenal experts who are taking their life's work, their research, their passion and putting it into a strategy or practice that will help an educator. On our left hand, we have a lot of educators out there who are fighting day in and day out to try to find a solution for a kid or kids with specific needs. If we can broker the author's content with the needs of the educator, we have a perfect combination to help the kid and EVERYBODY wins. As long as we focus on the author as our number one priority, and producing the highest quality of deliverable available in the marketplace, then we can help educators. That is what puts us ahead of everybody else. Helping authors and educators, that is why we do what we do.

BIO: Jeffrey C. Jones of Bloomington, IN, is CEO of Solution Tree, Inc. Jeff, along with business partner DG Elmore, purchased Solution Tree in 1998 after working for sixteen years in higher education administration at Indiana University, Dartmouth College, and Tufts University. Jeff is also the Co-Founder/Chief Operations Officer of Marzano Research Laboratory, and sits on various Boards across the country that are business, education, and faith related. Jeff is a pilot, snowboarder, and fly fisherman. He and his wife Margaret have four children.

