

Leading Edge Aviation Services

This company was built on a mantra that required its team to always say yes to every opportunity. Mike Manclark explains.

Always Say Yes

A photograph of a man, Mike Manclark, smiling and looking towards the camera. He is wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored, vertically striped button-down shirt. The background is an airport tarmac at dusk or dawn, with several private jets parked in a row. A larger commercial jet is visible in the distance, and the sky is a deep blue.



Leading Edge Aviation Services is a Santa Ana, Calif.-based aviation services company that's grown over the years as a result of simple mantra: always say yes. "We have built the company on the philosophy of always saying yes to every opportunity that comes up," explained Mike Manclark, president and CEO. "Even if we don't know exactly how to do what we've been asked, we figure it out, do it, and make sure to exceed all of the expectations that are in place."

Leading Edge is the world's . Manclark established the company, which specializes in commercial, private, and military aircraft painting,

"I always wanted to be an airline pilot, so when I was growing up, I came to the airport and started fueling jets for corporate aircraft on the weekends at a relatively young age," he said. After graduating from high school, Manclark went to college, earning bachelor's degrees in both aeronautical science and business.

"I was washing and detailing aircraft on weekends at that point," he continued. "In the early 1980s, auto detailing emerged. People were already washing cars, obviously, but they weren't really detailing them until that point. I was never interested in cars, so I go into detailing aircraft."

Before long, Leading Edge took off, and the business began to boom. "The next thing I knew, I was taking care of airplanes for large oil companies, Frank Sinatra, Bob Hope, and almost every other celebrity in the Burbank area who had a private jet," Manclark said.

McDonnell Douglas, which, at the time, was a major American aerospace manufacturer and defense contractor that produced a number of famous commercial and military aircraft, approached Manclark and his team (the staff consisted of roughly 10 individuals at the time) and asked them to do a KC110 heavy-check maintenance clean.



No one on Manclark's team knew exactly that meant, but they knew what their answer would be: yes. "We didn't know exactly what a KC110 was at the time, but we wanted to take advantage of the opportunity, so we said took the job, and I think that's one of the reasons we've been so successful throughout the years. We have always said yes to everything we've been asked to do; after accepting a job, we figure it out and get it done," Manclark explained.

Unsure of what to do, the team at Leading Edge decided to clean and detail everything. The McDonnell Douglas aircraft was a corporate plan—it was huge—but the team treated it like a leer jet.

"We didn't know what we were supposed to clean, so we cleaned everything," Manclark said. And it worked out in the end. The team at McDonnell Douglas called him over after they saw the plane and said it was cleaner than when it was originally built. It was a case of overachievement, and it paid off. When the company's contract was up, they moved to South Carolina and insisted Leading Edge Aviation went with them, which is exactly how Manclark and his team got into that market.

The next step

Soon after, Leading Edge started taking on jobs stripping airplanes, removing paint for maintenance, and from there, its team began to take on paint jobs. One of the biggest breaks its team experienced came unexpectedly when Manclark received surprising news from one of the US's biggest airlines.

"I was sitting in a hanger one day and wrote up a proposal to United Airlines to see if we could get any paint work from them, not expecting anything too big," he explained. "Next thing I know I'm being called into a board room in San Francisco and asked to sign a nondisclosure agreement."

Manclark was only 22 years old at the time of his big break. When he visited the United Airlines corporate

offices, he was informed that Leading Edge was chosen to design the company's new brand image. The biggest catch was that they wanted to release it just 11 days later, at The Superbowl. Up for the challenge, Manclark found a hanger to lease, put together a crew, and took on the job.

"They didn't know who I was. I never misrepresented myself, but they just assumed I was a manager or something," Manclark said. "I distinctly remember thinking about how they would feel if they were aware they had assigned such an important project to a 22 year old."

Today, Leading Edge carries out its painting and fuel system support at four U.S. facilities, in Victorville, Calif.; Amarillo, Texas; Greenville, S.C., and Greenville, Miss. Through a partnership with Malaysia Airlines, the company also has a facility in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia,

Manclark might have felt a bit overwhelmed when he first saw the 747 aircraft being rolled into the hanger he was leasing, but everything worked out well in the end, and risks like this are exactly what have allowed Leading Edge to grow to where it is today. ■

-Ashley McGown

Congratulations to Leading Edge Aviation Services, Inc. and Mike Manclark on its 20th anniversary!



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