

OVERLAND RESOURCE GROUP
Profiles In Collaborative Leadership Interview Series

Interview With Robert Hughes



List of Participants:

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Interview With Robert Hughes

Speaker: Welcome to the Overland Resource Group Profiles in Collaborative Leadership Interview Series. Over the course of three decades working with labor and management leaders, Overland has had the honor and privilege of working with leaders who have applied the principles of collaboration to help their organizations overcome daunting challenges, seize transformative opportunities and achieve operational and quality of work life improvements.

Overland is pleased to share these stories with you and let you hear from the leaders who live them and saw firsthand the tremendous power of the results born of collaborative processes. Thank you for joining us.

Ms. Wright: I'm Cathy Wright, vice-president of Overland Resource Group. And I'm joined today by Robert Hughes who is founder and has served as president of our firm since 1996. Robert is a trusted advisor to CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, to presidents and board members of international unions and executives of federal agencies. He is as likely to be found navigating corporate headquarters as he is in union halls or on factory floors.

For 15 years prior to founding Overland, Robert worked in a variety of capacities with our predecessor firm,, W.P. Dolan And Associates as a consultant, principal, vice president and ultimately as its president. For two years, he consulted to leaders from Ford Europe and five British trade unions on establishing a pilot process for employee involvement.

Robert has also managed long-term projects with labor and management leaders in American Airlines, the Federal Aviation Administration, Ford, Goodyear, Boeing, Corning, among others.

In addition to having an amazing breadth and depth of experience helping labor and management collaboratively lead organizational change, Robert has himself modeled collaborative leadership at the helm of Overland Resource Group. He's a living example of someone whose actions match his words, who practices what he preaches and who leads by example.

Robert, it is a real pleasure to have you with us today.

Mr. Hughes: Thank you. I'm happy to get to have this opportunity.

Ms. Wright: Let's start at the beginning. As president and founder of Overland, you've got an amazing breadth and depth of experience. And I'm interested if you could share with us, Robert, what led you to this line of work?

Mr. Hughes: Well, I think actually it was just the quirk of growing up in the right home. My dad was a sheet metal worker at one of the large aircraft companies. And as he went through his career, back in those days people just advanced from being a member of the work force to being the crew chief, to being the lead man, to being the supervisor. And at that time, there wasn't the same kind of level of contention between union and management.

So people who were in the workforce actually wanted someone who had done the work, knew the work, knew them, to move up into those positions. So it was not considered an evil act of crossing over to the other side of the table when you became a supervisor, member of management, whatever.

Eventually, at the end of his career he retired as -- he was the VP of manufacturing for the company. And because in those days OSHA was not a factor, as a young junior high boy when my homework was done after dinner if my dad was heading back out to the plant to check on things on second shift, sometimes I would go along. And there was a lot of freedom to walk around with dad, see how he related to people, what the work was like.

And later in my college years, I worked as an assembly line worker. And the whole experience began to show me that there was something going on there that was missing - That people in the workplace really knew things that would have made the job so much easier. But unless, they happened to have a manager like my dad who wandered around and talked to people and listened to people and had an interest in what their ideas were, you just missed those ideas. You didn't capture them at all.

And it was very eye opening to me. When I got to be an assembly line worker I realized it was not only a missing piece for the company, but it's very frustrating as a worker.

And, so I just -- I grew up in that environment. I thought, you know, it is possible I think to be able to have these dialogues with people who are in the workforce at sometime other than just negotiations. That you could have a thoughtful discussion about how to work together and not just wait until negotiations time to have an official conversation. So it was -- it just pulled me right into it.

Ms. Wright: That's a great story, Robert. And so, now, 30 years later you've been doing this work and spending a lot of time helping labor and management leaders figure out what that missing piece is and work together to discover all the value in that.

I'm curious, Robert, as you've gone about these many years doing this work, is there a particular time or situation in which your role as a neutral third party was most tested,

but when you were ultimately successful in helping clients achieve their intended outcome? Any stories in particular come to mind?

Mr. Hughes: That's a great question. The one that most readily comes to mind is back in the early '80s, one of the large auto companies had decided that they now understood enough about employee involvement through our work there that they were going to try to open a new facility and do it with management that was trained to work in that kind of environment. And a new workforce hired specifically into that facility and see if they couldn't start with the culture they wanted rather than have to recreate it from a site that had been an old sort of warring site.

And we were invited because we had been working with them in their other locations to help them do that. Unfortunately, as it turned out, the economy took a turn for the worse. Other plants in the area had to lay people off. And so to be fair to the workforce, they ended up starting the plant up by recalling people from layoffs that had been in the other facilities including management folks who had been laid off from other facilities.

So rather than start with a new workforce and a new specially skilled management team, they started with a mix of people from three different facilities, three different local unions and three different styles of management and tried to make the change.

And it was a difficult uphill battle for them; much union politics going on in the place, very difficult for the place to settle down. We had some false starts along the way. But eventually, we were able to get the beginnings of what we would have called at the time, a steering committee, a joint steering committee. And that was union leaders and management leaders to begin to meet and try to guide this process.

And one of the first steps along the way was training for union and management leaders. We would bring them into the training room and spend two days with them and their counterparts jointly thinking about how they wanted to do business differently in this place.

And I specifically remember one day walking out at lunch time and out in the hall to meet me was almost the entire union bargaining committee.

Ms. Wright: Wow.

Mr. Hughes: And they didn't look particularly happy. And the head of the group was this older gentleman named Ernie. And Ernie had quite a reputation. Ernie had this ability when things weren't going the way they wanted them to go as a union, to take a stroll through the plant and without really talking to anyone somehow everything sort of slowed down inside the plant.

And the management guys could never figure out how he did it or how he was signaling these guys or what was going on. But everything was sort of slowed down until the problem got solved.

And so Ernie was standing out there and he said, 'Robert,' he said, 'we're having a problem with management. And I just want you to know that you can finish this day of training but we're going to tell our guys at the end of the day not to come back tomorrow.'

And so I was -- it stopped me in my tracks obviously. And I'm a young guy and looking at this very experienced old union negotiator. And I just said, 'Well, Ernie, that's your perfect right, to tell them what you think is the right thing as a leader. But could I just ask you this one thing. That steering committee that we started, have you thought about just going and asking them to come together and have a discussion about what's going on? And it seems to me, if you don't do that you're giving up this possible whole second method of looking at the problems that occur in the plant that aren't really grievance problems, they're just other kinds of problems.' And he kind of got quiet and thought about it a little bit. And he said, 'Okay, I think we'll do that,' in his nice gruff, deep voice.

And so I went back in the room, ate my little box of lunch and worried all afternoon. And at the end of the afternoon I came walking out and there was no committee out there waiting to meet the guys and tell them not to come tomorrow. So I started wandering around looking for anybody who knew what was going on. And wandered down to the conference room where the steering committee normally met. And there they were. They had been meeting all afternoon. They had made headway not only on that issue but on several other issues. And everybody came to training the next day.

And it was one of those moments where I realized, you know, we keep telling these guys that it's possible that they could be as thoughtfully structured to collaborate as they are to negotiate. And guess what, they can be. It was just a night that you went home with a smile on your face after worrying all afternoon. And it was a great lesson for me.

Ms. Wright: Absolutely. Robert, a lot of the collaborative leaders I've talked with also share stories about a time when a light bulb went off or they had some type of transformative experience when they were really struck by the notion of collaboration and how powerful it can be. Is there any particular story or a time when you recall having one of those moments that you could share with us?

Mr. Hughes: Definitely, definitely. Again, back in some of the early startup work on employee involvement, it was highly suspect. And, we were not necessarily considered by everyone to be a helpful friendly ambassador in the place. At first, we were looked at with suspicion and often times by both members of management and the hourly

workforce. And the facilities of the steel and auto companies, they called their effort employee involvement and shortcut for it was EI.

I can remember walking through the place. And there was a particular guy who really, really didn't think it was a good idea. And every time I would walk by his work station, he would start singing EI-EI-O as a way to give me some grief. And generally if I had time I'd wander over and challenge him a little bit. And he would tell me all the reasons why I might be a sincere guy, but this was crazy stuff.

So the situation was that I was away from the place for a couple of weeks, came back in one Monday and was told by several people, you have got to go see this guy and have a talk with him. And I thought, I have a talk with him every week, what are you talking about? And they said, no, this is going to be different. And I said, well, can anybody give me any heads up and they said, no. You just need to go have a talk with him.

So I wandered out into the plant, found him at his work station, asked him how things were going. And he said, really good, really good. And I said, what was really good? So it turns out he tells me this story that, a couple of weeks before this they had had a problem with their product as it was being installed in one of the assembly plants. And they came to him as one of the senior experienced people who works on and made the product and asked him, if he would be willing to travel with the engineer to the assembly plant and go talk to people in the assembly plant about what the problem was and see if he could help figure it out.

Well, that was a big first. In their experience, generally, you load a couple of engineers on the plane along with the supply person and you go in and talk to the assembly people. The engineers try to figure it out, they redraw something, come back, hand it to a supervisor who takes it down and tries to tell guys on the shop what to do. And it may or may not work. So the good news was, he went out there and solved the problem. And of course, you can imagine under those conditions there's no way he was coming back unless he solved the problem. He had his reputation on the line.

But the underlying story was this; he said, 'You know, after they asked me I went home that night to dinner. And after dinner at the dinner table as everybody was getting ready to depart, I made a little announcement.' Now this guy had two teenage sons. And he said to them, 'I'm going to be gone for a couple or three days; I'm not sure exactly how long.' And his kids and wife say to him, what's up? And he explained to them that he was being chosen to go to this assembly plant with the engineering staff to figure out what was wrong.

He said, 'Now, son, you have to understand I'm an assembly plant worker. I take my lunch in a lunch pail to work every day. My kids see heroes on TV and they think I'm nothing.' He said, 'That night, when I told them that their dad was going to go to the assembly plant and fix the problem,' he said, 'I'll tell you what, you don't have enough

money to pay me for the look I saw on my boys' faces.' And what I realized was this guy was completely engaged now, that he was so motivated to make things happen differently than they had in the past, and he realized that this wasn't a trick. This was actually somebody realizing that he had information that would be very useful to them. And that if they respected him, that he could give them that information in a way that was very useful.

And it was just -- it was one of those great moments when you realize it isn't the classroom where people get changed, it's in the workplace when things start happening differently. And they realize they could trust this stuff, there can be a big change that can happen. And that kind of collaborative work enables people to get engaged and that's where the benefits multiply. It was great.

Ms. Wright: What is the greatest challenge in bringing in labor and management together to work collaboratively?

Mr. Hughes: You know, Cathy, I think it's the lens that they're looking through. And what I mean by that is that the management folks are looking through a lens that says that union people want to drag the job out, get as many new jobs on the line as they can, those kinds of things. And the union guys, after a history of events that lead to distrust are looking at management folks and saying, these guys don't really want our help, they just want some efficiency and then they'll get rid of more of us. And so they have these lenses on that lead to attribution.

And part of what we've realized is there's a whole lot of business education and communications that has to go on if you're going to help them see differently than they see at the current time. And that turns out they're not just [a need for] business education for union folks about the inner workings of the business and the financials of the business, but it surprisingly turns out to be that management really doesn't understand how unions work and what the bylaws and the parameters of the politics are over there. So business education [is needed] on both sides. It takes time for them to get enough understanding of the other guy and his circumstances that their lens changes. But initially, their lens is colored by attribution.

Ms. Wright: Robert, one of the things we hear a lot as we do this work is skeptics who will say that collaboration requires management to give up control and it requires labor leaders to drink the kool-aid and really set aside their primary responsibility in representing interests of members. What do you say to those skeptics? I'm sure you've heard this over the course of your career, how do you respond to those assertions?

Mr. Hughes: Well, I would say that they're confusing collaboration with capitulation. And those are not the same. We talk to folks about a two-track model, where one track has the traditional work duties of unions and management in that track where grievances take place, negotiations takes place, fair representation takes place,

management's right to hire and fire and make decisions, all of that stuff takes place in that track.

And the other track we talk about is the second track is the collaborative track. And as people begin to work together in this space, what the leadership sees is an extremely high percentage of their interests are actually mutual interests. From a union point of view, it's very difficult to have good things happen for your membership in a plant that's going the wrong way. And so collaborating to help make the plant go the right way is very useful. And from a management point of view, it's very difficult to have a workforce that feels that you don't trust them, do the kind of work that you really want to have done if you're going to run a world-class kind of facility.

So, I don't think you need to capitulate your responsibility in order to collaborate with folks that have the same interests as you do. And I think that's -- where the twist is.

Ms. Wright: And what would you say are the most difficult pit falls? When you have labor and management leaders and they're beginning to try to learn to work together to have a successful collaborative environment, what are the biggest pit falls they encounter typically, Robert?

Mr. Hughes: Well, it kind of goes back to that lens question. And it's that they make attribution about what the other guy is going to think, do or say before they actually have discussion. And this is a big -- it's a big thing that happens with leaders and especially the way we've educated people in the country. Because we're not really taught to listen, we're taught to have answers and to know what the solution is. And when you look at people that are lauded in the trade magazines as great leaders, typically, people are saying what a great brilliant idea this guy had-- that sort of thing-- as opposed to, this is somebody who was a great listener and got the brilliant ideas of all of his or her people working together.

But it, generally, I think it's just that we don't -- we're not very good at starting from a listening position as opposed to starting from a I-know-what-you're-thinking position and I know the solution to this.

Ms. Wright: I had dinner recently with a colleague who said something that really stuck with me. He said that he thought the biggest challenge in creating a sustainable culture of collaboration is keeping labor and management from settling for respectful relations instead of real achievement. Would you agree with that?

Mr. Hughes: Yeah, absolutely. Respectful relations are -- those are positive accomplishments. But they're not really the end goal in any business. And since the bottom line is for both parties to have a business that's going the right direction, if it's not going the right direction respectful relations are very difficult to maintain.

And organized labor can be very, very catalytic in a turnaround or any other kind of step forward if they decide to collaborate. But, the just stopping at respectful relations, it's just not enough, just not enough.

Ms. Wright: Robert, based on your experience as a collaborative leader and having worked with lots of other leaders in this capacity, what advice would you give to organizations that are really struggling to get in this mode and stay there?

Mr. Hughes: I think the simplest advice is to admit it. Just admit it first to yourself and then to your team; if you're the union president, to your executive board or bargaining committee; if you're the facilities leader, to your management team. Admit that you're struggling and that the place is struggling.

And then the big twist is, if you can go sit down with your counterpart and admit it to your counterpart. Because it seems like in these efforts, honesty of that kind is step one. And it catalyzes the other side to step into the space with you to try to do something and make something different happen when they begin to see that you're willing to be that vulnerable. So, I think admitting it is a pretty helpful little tool.

Ms. Wright: So, Robert, what skills do you think are most important for leaders to have in order to be effective at collaboration and what skills are hardest to master?

Mr. Hughes: In short hand, I would say good ears and a slow trigger finger would be the best skills to master. If you're a leader with good ears that you're really able to listen and understand what's going on before you react by pulling the trigger.

We have established in our practice the skills based training for leaders that includes interest-based leadership where we teach folks that the right thing to do in any conversation is try to ascertain what the interests of the other party are and help them understand what your interests are so that you can both work toward a solution that will meet everyone's interest in the process. And that ends up being a solution that installs more easily and lasts much longer as a rule than any other kind of solution to any sort of difficulty going on. So, interest-based leadership skills are great ones I think for anybody in a work place that's going to try to lead an effort of this kind.

Ms. Wright: One of the biggest challenges we see organizations really struggling with is that they want to quantify the impact of their collaborative efforts. What ways have you seen organizations find to measure their success as they do this work?

Mr. Hughes: Well, on the labor relations side, we look for signs that labor relations is improving. And initially, that often means that there are less grievances than there used to be. And that second step would be that issues are now being addressed before they actually get to the point of being a grievance.

Beyond labor relations, we look at the workforce itself and say, is this a more engaged workforce than it was previously? Are there people out there that are clearly putting in their discretionary energy, their extra effort to making this place the kind of place where they want to work and the kind of place that can be a high performing place.

And then they -- on the business end, we look at the parameters for whether or not this thing shows up as a healthier business. Are they performing well, is the quality improving, are they showing breakthrough opportunities that will turn their facility or their effort into one that's very difficult for others to easily compete with?

Last for me would be sustainability and adaptability. So, are they doing things that they can continue to do? And when it doesn't work, are they smart enough to stop doing that and get together and find a new adaptation that will take them where they need to go.

Ms. Wright: And always being able to continue to have the dialogue about what's working and not working, right?

Mr. Hughes: That's it, that's it.

Ms. Wright: Robert, quite often -- and this is a two-part question. We hear from management having pressure from marketplace critics who believe they'd be more profitable if they were less collaborative, and for labor leaders who live in a political world being elected representatives responding to critics who believe they might get more for their members by choosing a traditional more confrontational approach. How do you counsel your labor clients and your management clients to deal with those kinds of criticisms?

Mr. Hughes: That's interesting and it seems to be one of those issues that just doesn't want to go away. And for both sides, but particularly for management one of the first things I say is, let's sit down and talk our way through the Eastern Air Lines story. Because here is a company that spent 26 years never missing making a profit. And then went through a whole series of unfortunate decisions and behaviors on both sides of the table that led to a point where Eastern Air Lines was no more.

In fact, a management team that thought they were driving the company to where it would be much more successful drove the company to a spot where it didn't even exist any longer. And a collaborative effort had been made at one point along the way and it showed terrific results. And a new leader came in and went the other direction. And eventually the bankruptcy court actually removed that new leader. But it was too late, it was too late.

So, on the union side, I would say that the view that you're giving up something if you do this collaborative work in addition to your traditional work is a view that's kind of based on a pendulum theory of economics that is going to -- you know, economics is a

pendulum that's going to swing back and forth, we're going to have good years, we're going to have bad years, that sort of thing. And you just bargain hard in the good years and get everything you can and in the bad years you stonewall them and hang on to everything you can hang on to.

Unfortunately, for unions what they're discovering is, the pendulum is a bit stuck right now. And, we're competing globally with places that don't have the same economy and economic movement at the same time as we do. And really beginning back in the Regan years, the laws and rulings of the courts shifted the balance away from the middle. So the pendulum never swings much past middle if you're a union person.

So, I think the answer is just, you need to remember as I said earlier that 90 plus percent of your interests as union and management are truly the same interests. And that you can collaborate to achieve those interests. And it does not mean you don't do a clean job of doing your negotiations when it's time to negotiate. But -- a union person, I think they need to look at this as an additional tool, a new tool that will help them get done more for their members in addition to what they're able to do at the bargaining table.

Ms. Wright: Yeah, I remember too, Robert, one of our labor leader clients in the aviation sector was really clear in talking with his members to say, hey, I've got a whole bunch of tools I'm really good at using; grievances, negotiation, arbitration. And this gives me a whole new set of tools. And his point, which I thought he made really well, was to say, why would I not want to use all the tools I have at my disposal. And he saw this collaboration track as a way to really have a seat at the table where those business decisions are getting made. And when he was at the table, he was better able to represent the interests of his members than when he didn't have a seat at the table.

Mr. Hughes: Absolutely. That's a great -- that is a terrific example of somebody who gets it.

Ms. Wright: Robert, in addition to supporting collaborative work among key clients, you've been a model of collaborative leadership throughout your tenure at the helm of Overland. I'm curious if you can share with us what the sort of key principles are that have guided your thinking and your actions as you've built and shaped this successful enterprise?

Mr. Hughes: It's been a really fun journey. And part of why it's been a fun journey is because we've -- we have been able to do it the way we've done it. And I would say step one is to surround yourself with smart people who want to accomplish the mission as much as you do, because then you don't have a motivation issue to begin with.

Step two would be, listen to them. I'm just always amazed when we go places where they've done such a careful job of hiring very smart folks into their team. And they don't provide any opportunity to listen to those folks. Our approach, we actually -- in

every client space as you know, Cathy, we put some of our smart people together as a design team to say, let's talk together about what's the best intervention for this client. And it's always better than if just one of the partners came up with the design.

Three for me is turn them loose. They're as motivated as I am, they understand the plan and have helped design it. So, just get out of the way and let them do what they know how to do to make it happen inside of the client's system. Because things are moving around in there every day. And if they have to check with us every two seconds before they do anything different, it's not going to have the same kind of velocity.

And the last one for me and this was a more recent learning in the past few years was to create a channel for annoyance. We have a tendency to get very comfortable, doing what we do again because it worked before. And we decided that the way around that was to assign one of the senior folks the responsibility to be watching the journals and watching the research and to come to us and say, hey, that's really good what you're doing, but here's something that might be better. And even though it requires a change and change isn't comfortable you better look at this. And that's turned out to be just a lot of fun for everyone.

Initially, it was a little difficult for us to get used to. But I think it's made us able to truly live out the idea of tailoring our interventions to the situation that we're in with a design team and then an annoyer behind us. Well, that's been -- it's really been a fun journey.

Ms. Wright: And it reminds me too, Robert, one of our long-term management clients, his encouragement to us as the consulting team was, don't become part of the furniture. And I think his intention was to say, keep it fresh, keep it new, keep pushing us and doing that both for management and for labors. It's good counsel certainly.

Mr. Hughes: It's great -- that's great counsel. And you have to love having a client that recognizes it.

Ms. Wright: Absolutely, absolutely. Robert, if you could have dinner-- and we have a lot of dinners I know-- but if you could have dinner with a collaborative leader who you would admire a great deal, somebody current or an historical figure, who would it be and why? And what would you want to ask him or her?

Mr. Hughes: Well, there's two kinds of folks I'd love to chat with. One would be, if I could find who in the legislative branches of the federal government, who are the new Arlen Specters and Ted Kennedys and people who know how to reach across the aisle and get something done even though there are some philosophical differences. Because I think that parallel really works inside of the work we're doing.

But as far as someone specific I would choose the current leader over at General Electric, Jeffery Immelt. I think he's a very interesting person who has a reputation for running a business well. And contrary to the other CEOs and other businesses, he has strategies where he believes it makes a good deal of sense to bring work back on shore and put it back into union locations, union represented locations if they meet certain criteria.

And one example of that is their big appliance park in Louisville, Kentucky. And to have a person like that in this economy thinking that way says to me, he's got some special ability to think through what needs to be different and not just follow the trail everybody else is blazing. I'd love to have that discussion with him.

Ms. Wright: Robert, any other thoughts before we wrap up? Any other thoughts on collaboration and the important work that you do with labor and management clients, anything else you'd like to share?

Mr. Hughes: Well, I think all of this kind of comes down to is, as you well know, Cathy, from all the effort you have spent inside the client systems helping this occur, that it is possible. It truly is possible to be as thoughtfully structured for collaboration. And as people over the years have structured themselves for negotiations and that collaboration and paves the way for engagement. Everybody wants employee engagement. And engagement creates the opportunity for employees to invest their discretionary energy. And that investment is the sign of a motivated workforce and it's - it inevitably results in improved performance.

So, it's a very natural chain or flow that we see in other places, besides just the work places we're in. But, I think behind it all is that our theory of our practice there that says that union and management can bring something together that they cannot bring separately. And it always turns out to be fun.

So, thanks for this opportunity.

Ms. Wright: Thank you, Robert. Thank you for sharing your perspectives and the wonderful insightful stories. And especially thank you for the model of collaborative leadership that you have brought to us. It's a pleasure.

Mr. Hughes: Indeed it is.

Speaker: This Profile in Collaborative Leadership Interview was brought to you by Overland Resource Group. For more success stories from collaborative leaders, please visit our website at www.orginc.com.