

# In Focus: Leadership

## BUSINESS

# Going With the Flow

● Rob Smith, founder of The Phluid Project, shares his insights into leadership, mentorship and the future of retail.

BY ARTHUR ZACZKIEWICZ

**Gender-neutral retailer** The Phluid Project opens its social code with, “We celebrate what makes us different and we cherish what makes us the same.” It’s a mantra that’s infused at the company, and practiced by its founder, Rob Smith, every day.

Smith encourages everyone to “leave their assumptions at the door” as an antidote to ignorance-based fear. And it’s working. The retail store is evolving into a brand as well as a social movement. Here, as part of an ongoing series of executive interviews, Tim Boerkoel, founder of global executive search and strategic consulting firm The Brownstone Group, talks with Smith about the origins of the company, what makes it tick, and what informs his leadership style and approach.

**Tim Boerkoel: Rob, you launched The Phluid Project one year ago – congratulations! Can you describe the brand’s growth from conception to today?**

**Rob Smith:** After 30 years in the retail space spanning corporate institutions like Macy’s, Levi’s and Nike, I decided to leave my job, put on a backpack and experience the world. My intention was to honor my individual freedoms and ambitions, and do so without the constraints of a traditional professional environment. While being away, and tapping into passions most true to my heart, I realized I wanted to create a gender-neutral shopping experience, and spent the following nine months creating and bringing to fruition that exact vision.

In March 2018, I launched The Phluid Project, and it has become so much more than the world’s first gender-free store. We are a brand, a movement, a community and platform based on activism, executed through the lens of fashion, and committed to challenging the ethos of traditions past and rather encouraging those which embrace and celebrate freedom and self-expression. It is a world where gender is a spectrum and expressed authentically and individually through fashion, community and activism.

The Phluid Project highlights and normalizes the beauty of gender expression like no other space. In the tangible sense, my study of the consumer and demographic to which I cater lets me understand that a space like The Phluid Project is the future of retail. Phluid offers community outreach beyond retail including panel discussions, showcasing emerging designers, hosting fund-raising events, comedy nights and poetry readings, while sharing our community room, which is free of charge.

**T.B.: It is a very inspiring story and business. Who inspired you during your earlier career, preparing you to be able to do groundbreaking work today?**

**R.S.:** Mentorship spans for me. As far as professional mentors, I’ve been graced with the opportunity to learn from retail



The Phluid Project’s spring campaign.

icons my entire career. Terry Lundgren, Allen Questrom and Howard Socol saw my potential from an early age and guided me for decades. Janet Grove inspired me and always had my back. She was and continues to be brilliant, authentic, direct and supportive. There are dozens more I wish we had time to share.

Socially, my life teacher is David Mixner. David is a civil rights activist, fights for half a decade for just causes from civil rights, the Vietnam War, ProPeace, and HIV and AIDS, a truly inspirational leader who has always believed in fighting for what’s right, despite the repercussions. David’s in his 70’s, still fighting and more relevant than ever.

In the broader sense, I am fueled and inspired by the outlook and philosophy of younger generations, Gen Z and Millennials alike. I would describe their perspective and demand for equality for all and appreciation for our planet as the driving factor in my creating Phluid. These generations want to wear clothes that make them feel empowered and demand that brands reflect their values and principles. And this includes my incredible staff at The Phluid Project. My team inspires me, and I learn from them every day.

**T.B.: What are some of these most recent lessons-learned? How has The Phluid Project’s young and progressive staff impacted your leadership?**

**R.S.:** I have made it a priority for myself and all staff to embrace and learn about our community. I hired a diversity coach, Aaron Rose, who truly taught me the nuances of appropriate language and the importance of pronouns. It is our job as humans to share the knowledge we have with others and to practice patience with those who require. The sentiments we live by, our 10-rule social code, was a labor of love, and one central to the heart of Phluid. Honoring our values is what makes us a safe, inviting and free space that the world needs now more than ever.

Experience and history have taught us that tolerance is unfortunately rare, a privilege – and this is a reality we as a brand, as activists, fight and challenge. Ignorance encourages fear and hatred. At Phluid, we celebrate what makes us different and we cherish what makes us the same. In our mission, to challenge the

boundaries of humanity, we recognize that we are all teachers and students, checking our assumptions at the door, and listening and communicating with care. We also have an initiative called “Plus 1.” Since the start of the business, junior staff has had the opportunity to work with senior staff, and truly hone their craft in encouragement and support of their career ambition.

**T.B.: We’ve talked about your leadership, your mentors and learning from younger people. Do you view The Phluid Project as a leader amongst brands? How do you go beyond the physical space to make the impact you want to make?**

**R.S.:** This year we are focused on digital and wholesale growth. Our intention is to replicate online the success of Phluid’s store model. It is paramount for us to translate the community, energy and feeling we have created in-store to be shared digitally, and therefore globally. The use of the word Project in the name is meant to signify that we are a work in progress in an ever-evolving social and political climate. We are about working together with people collectively and making the world a better and more inviting place. The reality that gender is a spectrum will have a dramatic impact in the future of the retail industry, cultural, societal and political climates.

Phluid has spent its premier year cultivating and nurturing a community of activists, of humans dedicated to having a voice, making a change and sharing their knowledge and experience with those who may suffer the restraints of the binary, of the restraints society has inflicted. With this, Phluid expands a business and serves as a platform, a platform for change.

In addition to leading by example and inspiring people to speak up and make a difference, we collaborate with brands such as Gypsy Sport, Chromat, OneDNA and Palomo Spain to further grow the conversation. For instance, we’ll be collaborating with Frankie Grande and Alok Menon for a capsule collection for World Pride – which is also a reflection and celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. And at the corporate level, I’m speaking to companies such as

Nike, whose leaders can then take what they’ve heard and learned – on topics such as The Future of Gender – back to their teams. It’s important to understand this new generation as they will account for 40 percent of spending power by next year.

All of this takes resources, however. The Phluid Project is in the process of raising capital in an effort to replicate the brick and mortar experience online, heighten Phluid’s e-commerce and continue to expand with new locations worldwide.

**T.B.: We recently both attended The Retail Summit in Dubai, where we heard from and spoke to a wide variety of global leaders across hospitality, retail and entertainment. This included our panel on Gen Z. Can you share what it was like to share The Phluid Project in such a forum?**

**R.S.:** It takes courage to learn about other cultures, to appreciate their history, affiliations and understand their perspective. America is an adolescent country in comparison to the rest of the world. The beauty in this truth is that despite its infancy in age, its economic power allows and encourages change. Social justices are more prevalently realized in the West because in many ways, there is less historical combat to endure. The depth of an unlearning and relearning is so much steeper elsewhere. With that context, it was beautiful to share my realities, a cis-gender white gay male, and my view on the future of retail, with a great understanding of the Gen Z and gender non-conforming and trans demographic, specific to the U.S.

The Retail Summit did a fantastic job in curating a diverse range of speakers and businesses. We can all learn from one another, and the environment created at The Retail Summit in Dubai was exactly that. Being able to share the stage with people unafraid to speak about gay rights in the Middle East, as Sir Richard Branson did, was definitely a highlight.

**T.B.: You have clearly learned a great deal during your founding of The Phluid Project, in addition to all the great experience you collected in your earlier career. What words of wisdom would you give to young professionals?**

**R.S.:** Don’t compromise yourself and who you are for work. If you do, your personal suffering will outweigh your personal growth, and the giveback you’re capable of sharing will be hindered. Show up every day and do your best. Go a step ahead of what’s expected of you. It’s not a job, it’s a reflection of you, your passion and your determination.

Treat everyone with respect – everyone. Each person has a vital role in the team. Trust me, if I didn’t show up for a week, people might not notice...but if the trash collection didn’t show up, every single person would notice.

And learn people’s names. Their spouses, kids and pets. It matters.

Value the importance of work/life balance. I’ve learned this at a young age and see it in my team. I see how that balance affects their inherent happiness and permeates through their professional attitude and doings.

Lastly, to continue to be authentic and original. As one of our campaigns said, “You Do You.” I’ve always been myself, and worked for confident people who appreciated me.

Be yourself, no exceptions.

Oh, and don’t forget to have fun. Seeing a smile or hearing a laugh at work brightens every heart.