

Ep #266: Scott Leune - Leadership and Making The Tough Decisions



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Dr. David Phelps

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David Phelps: Hey, everyone. David Phelps from Freedom Founders and the Dentist Freedom Blueprint Podcast. I got with me a good friend and a long time industry leader, Dr. Scott Leune. For those of you who may not know Scott, and most of you should, he is now the Dental Whale Education Leader. He graduated from UT Health Science Center School of Dentistry in 2005.

David Phelps: His dental career began with three startup practices in San Antonio, which grew to 80 staff, 10 dentists and a call center in a very short time. These practices continued to average a combined and total of over 700 new patients per month and were all managed by Dr. Leune working a mere four days per month.

David Phelps: In 2011, Dr. Leune started seven practices in the Dallas Fort Worth area, opening them within a two month time span. Over the last four years through the Breakaway Affiliate Program, Dr. Leune has helped build approximately 90 startup practices nationwide.

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David Phelps: In the last eight years, Dr. Leune has lectured to thousands of dental professionals and executives sharing his proven systems, marketing and practice design leading to consistently sold-out seminars.

David Phelps: He's been featured in numerous dental publications and listed as the, 'Most subscribed to person,' on Dentaltown, premiere online dental community. Dr. Leune has also created and grown Breakaway Support Services and Affiliate Program to include over 400 practices nationwide. And in several more each day, he's continued to redefine practice management as the leader and expert in profitable dental practice systems to maximize success.

David Phelps: Scott, you certainly have a wealth of expertise, knowledge, background and experience. Well, all this sounds really good and I'm meaning that in a complimentary way, you share, we both know they going from ground up, which you certainly did back in the day, 2005, was not a straight shot. There has been dips and turns and coming back out from situations that are not identical to what practice owners are looking at right now, but you certainly have seen your days of tough times and feel like you're down in a hole and looking up, figuring out, what the heck do I do?

David Phelps: So let's just go back to 2005 and you're eager, getting out of school, you're going into practice, you're ready to hit the road like every other dentist and then you had something that pretty much well, took your legs out right from underneath you. So why don't you just remind, for those who don't know the story, just give us a little bit of that background.

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Scott Leune: Sure, yeah and then thanks for having me here. Yeah, I've seen a lot of ups and downs. So what you're referring to is right when I got out school, right when I opened my practice, I broke my back and for the following 12 years or so I was in and out of a wheelchair. I had surgery and that forced me out of the dental chair almost immediately.

Scott Leune: I've gone through ups and downs with expanding too quickly, going to multiple locations only to see profitability shrink or disappear. I have built locations, too many at once sometimes. I built them where I wasn't managing them properly from afar. I've built locations and managed them through the Great Recession. I have made millions and lost millions. It's funny how when you make the millions you kind of forget about it and when you lose the millions, you never forget what that tastes like and feels like.

Scott Leune: Today, we've got 19,000 dentists as customers of our companies. We also have an ownership stake in practices or have a partnership kind of relationship with dentists. There is probably about a hundred practices and in that division of our company. We have a ton of data, and so we're also consultants. We have seen a whole lot of ups and downs.

Scott Leune: The current down there we're experiencing is unprecedented temporarily. That's a beautiful thing actually. Unprecedented means that there are going to be some amazing opportunities coming out of this. Temporary means that life will return to normalcy at some point. And if we strategize properly, this won't take us out.

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Scott Leune: So while the rest of the world is paralyzed and fearful and may be acting in extreme ways, there is a small group here on our world that are looking at this with a level head and they're making sometimes difficult decisions, but they're making decisions that look at the longterm opportunity of what's in front of us, which can be significant for some of those people.

David Phelps: Yeah, no doubt. The opportunity to innovate and invent right now I think is also unprecedented because who is going to call anybody out if they quote, "try something new right now?" We'll talk about some of those strategies. Who is going to say, "Why would you try that?" It's a great time to test some new models to look to the future when practices do reopen again as to changing the environment. Patients will be getting used to it right now as they are, as all consumers are, to a different way of life.

David Phelps: Some of those things that we're doing right now will actually be good things. Scott, you've got a great young family and actually have some time to stay home with your family. Let's not lose the opportunity, right? Yeah, we have to focus on preserving and protecting and looking at the future, but getting out of this panic mode.

David Phelps: So let me go there first. You and I have talked a lot. I know just like you know me, life has not been a perfect shot by any means. When you go through some ups and downs, you lose a vast amount of your net worth. You probably have a short period of time and have to revamp. How do you talk to your other practice owners, the doctors who are talking to you right now on a consulting basis? I think it starts with your headspace, your mindset,

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how you look at what you're facing. So what do you tell people right now? Where should they be focusing in the midst of all this hysteria and panic when social media is blowing up and it's just a crazy world out there?

Scott Leune: Yeah. I think you focus on what you know and what you can control and you reassess more frequently as the world starts changing quicker. We should never lose sight of the longterm opportunity.

Scott Leune: So for example, what do we know? We know that other countries have had this virus before us and have all followed a similar pattern of what the government has said to do, and eventually shut down companies and have social distancing measures and so forth. So what does that mean? That means it's probably going to happen at some point to our local community and that means that we are going to see a huge drop-off in patient volume, okay. So what can we control? Well, we can control how we respond to a huge drop-off in patient volume. Whether it's a virus that's causing that, or a recession that's causing that, or who knows what can cause that, right, we can react to it properly.

Scott Leune: But before I talk about what to do, I think, what's interesting is I've heard CEOs of dental practice, which is usually dentists, I've heard them for years and years and years say, they don't have time to do what they know they need to do in their business. And suddenly when we're given time, they don't know what to do, right. But they've always known what they'd do if they had time when they were busy. Now is a moment where we are forced in some ways to have time.

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Scott Leune: So my opinion is, when it comes to the company, we need to minimize our cash losses, okay. When it comes to patient care, we need to do as much care as we can, right, because we are caring for people that need help. And if we don't offer services at some point, this patient population is going to overrun the hospitals for dental care. We should do as much care as we can. And so, those two things I think are what dentists are focused on right now.

Scott Leune: How do I minimize cash losses? What do I do about being a dentist, right? Once we decide what to do there, then it leads us into knowing what we do with our staff, what we do with our schedule. But then there is this whole other thing that says, we're going to have more time.

Scott Leune: So the third thing is, what do we do with our time, right? What do you do with cashflow, what do we do with care and now, what we do with our time? This time thing is a great opportunity to do some spring cleaning when it comes to the facility, when it comes to the business systems, educating our team, educating ourselves, creating a different career plan, life plan, retirement plan, trust, who knows what, staying home with the family, getting healthy. There is so many wonderful things we can do with extra time.

Scott Leune: Those three things, right, cashflow, patient care and time are today's decisions. Then we've got the last thing I'm thinking about is, what are the opportunities going to be as we start coming out of this? That's really exciting. So we got to prepare mentally and financially for those opportunities that are going to be happening as we come out of this.

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David Phelps: So we'll get to the opportunities in a second. I'm 100% with you, Scott. In dealing in the short run, the locale of a practice, the state, county, jurisdiction, state board guidelines, there is a pretty wide range of what's considered acceptable. I agree with you and anybody else who says, we're still frontline professionals. There are patients that need care. You decide based on the guidelines, mandates, whatever is being given to you as what that means to you. But no doubt that if this, if patients are taken care of, we have a mess, a bigger mess.

David Phelps: So working with staff, practices of different sizes, a solo doc with a smaller staff, docs with multiple practices, guidelines for how to work that when you're not necessarily, everybody is going to the practice at 8:00 AM on Thursday morning? Today when we were doing this interview, you're taking calls, you're triaging patients over the phone, you're using some teledentistry. What are some of the systems or tactics that you're advising right now that doctors and dentists in their particular practice modalities are using to maximize what they can for care?

Scott Leune: My opinion is not a right answer because obviously this hasn't happened 100 times where there is experts now that have learned on what we need to do. So all I can do is answer this type of question the best based on the information I have. I can tell what we're doing in our practices is, we are buying all of the proper protective gear and sanitation efforts we're putting in place, so that we can treat patients that are positive with the virus. So that means buying the right face masks. If the face masks aren't available, that means wearing normal face masks

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or face shields. That means additional sanitation steps that we're taking and we are treating these patients.

Scott Leune: Now, that's the first thing. Just because we do that doesn't mean we have doctors that want to treat patients. So obviously we're here to support a doctor. And if the doctor themselves say, "No, I don't want to treat patients, then we can't have a practice open without a doctor. So there is the first decision in this decision tree.

Scott Leune: Are we going to treat patients being protected or are we not? If we are going to treat patients, what we're going to see is low patient volume. So how do we respond to low patient volume? We respond by doing as much dentistry as we can on those patients that come in. We decide what that means and we have to reduce our schedule, so that we could reduce our costs. And as a business, this is meant to save our business financially.

Scott Leune: So it will mean that the company may not make any profit. We are just trying to do good for our patients while trying not to lose money. And so, we will lose our profit probably and our team members will see reduced hours. They may need unemployment benefits because of those reduced hours. We need to cut certain expenses that may not make sense. For some practices that might mean lowering the marketing spend, for example. So we need to go very quickly and cut those types of expenses.

Scott Leune: I can tell you that there is a whole lot of practices right now joining our savings network, so that they can get all of their supplies at a lower price, which they should have done a long time ago, but now they're prompted to do it. So we have to control those expenses. We have to cut

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our schedule down as our volume goes down and therefore, our staff are going to see less and less hours. Some employees may not even come in and that's okay. They don't have a job if they don't come in. Most practices cannot afford to lose money in the practice and be paying people that aren't coming. So we have to do the best we can with the people that will come in.

Scott Leune: I've heard one group call their doctors and their employees that are coming in fully protected to help patients, those are the heroes that are coming in, right. So it is doing good for the patient. It's doing good for the company. It's doing good to provide an income for those team members even though it's reduced hours. It's doing good in a lot of ways, if we're responsible about how we do it, right. So that's the, that decision that says we're going to stay open.

Scott Leune: The decision that says no, we're not going to stay open, right, that the doctor is not coming, the most we can do is immediately stop all expenses. If we have no revenue coming in, we must immediately stop all expenses. So that means cutting everyone, probably. That means stopping all types of things you paid for. And heaven forbid, it may even involve talking to the landlords about abated rent, looking at different local programs that are now available for disaster relief for small businesses just to minimize the bleeding.

Scott Leune: Having said that, what practices still need is insurance, claims processing and resubmissions because that is bringing in the money. I can tell you it's another example of what we're seeing in our companies. Front Desk DDS is one of our companies. They are doing claims

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processing, resubmission fighting old accounts receivables, old claims that didn't get paid to try to push more income, more collections into a practice that may or may not even be open right now.

Scott Leune: So that's that first decision, do we stay open or not? That talks about patient care and that talks about cashflow, right. Cashflow comes from minimizing our expenses while we do as much collections as possible. So we minimize our expenses by reducing our schedule down appropriately as our patient volume dictates. And of course, get smart about the things we're spending money on and not waste money on something that doesn't make sense right now.

David Phelps: Yeah. Great decision tree, Scott. So depending upon what a doctor and team decide to do, stay open, see some patients, close completely, talk a little bit about how you feel being proactive in terms of how you are communicating to your patients. Whether you're seeing them, you're seeing some of them on an emergency basis and not seeing them at all. What do you want to be doing right now as a practice that wants to survive this, coming out on the other side and still be strong and have an opportunity to ramp back up?

David Phelps: What should a proactive office be doing with whatever resources they have to maintain some line of communication to let patients know, they'll know you just didn't put a Closed sign on the front door and put your answering machine on go, "We'll see after the virus is over?"

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Scott Leune: Yeah. Well, I don't know what anyone should do, so let me just take that word out of the question. Here is what we think. This is what we think about what we're doing, once we decided to stay open in that decision tree, then we have a few more decisions to make. What patients will we see? That's one decision. We've heard the ADA come out with their opinion. We've heard the Texas Dental Association actually counter that opinion at times. Lots of peoples have opinions. Those aren't necessarily laws, right. Those are people's opinions.

Scott Leune: At the end of the day, I believe we need to do what's best for our local communities and our local providers within the law, obviously. So we are going to do the most ethical thing we know to do, balancing all of these things. For some of those practices that means following the ADA recommendations that says, "only emergent care." Well, what is emergent care? I'd say anything that is disease, infection, pain or anything that really disrupts the life of a patient would probably be emergent care.

Scott Leune: And if we don't treat them, they're going to find somewhere to go. They're going to find some hospital to do something. That might be a definition of emergent care. That might be any endo. That might be any sort of infection we see. That might be any kind of decay, right. That might even be a broken front tooth that is disrupting the patient's life. I mean, who knows what that is, but we have to define that.

Scott Leune: Once we have the patient in the office for emergent care really, we should probably do as much as we can on them even if it's non-emergent. They're already in the practice. We're already geared up. They're already here to get

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something done and they may not be able to see a dentist for a while. We don't want other things to create new emergent care. We might as well do as much as we can. That would be my philosophy if I were the providing dentist. I would do that type of middle ground that says emergent care patients and then anything else they need that specific patient will do.

Scott Leune: Then you've got the more extremist say, "No, we'll just do anything. You know, we're not going to stick to emergent care. We'll do any care as long as we take proper precautions, we're going to do that," or then you've got the opposite of that saying, "We're only doing emergent care procedures. Even if the same patient needs something that's non-emergent, we're only going to do the emergent stuff." So I think that's the decision now that we have to make is, which one are we?

Scott Leune: I personally feel very good about being in the middle in this situation. I'm going to treat patients that need care and while they're in the office, let's get other things done too. It's in their best interest. It's in our best interests. We've already taken on the risk of seeing them and we've already mitigated that risk with our process of seeing patients, right. That's my opinion.

David Phelps: Good. Thank you. All right, let's go to the opportunities. So whether it's four weeks, six weeks, eight weeks, whatever, whenever we're giving the green light to go back to quote, "business as usual," what do you see that looking like, business as usual? How does the economic engine, the supply chain, consumer behavior from your standpoint enter into what we look like on the other end?

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Scott Leune: Well, there is the free time we have now, what do we do with that? There is, when we come out of this, what might we see? So you're probably asking more about the second one. Let me address the first one very quickly and then we'll go to the second one.

Scott Leune: The free time we have now, that's the time to clean up the profit and loss statement. That's the time to analyze all the expenses. That's the time to paint the walls that we've needed to paint in our practice. It's the time to get all of the education we need. That's actually the big one. Get our team trained on Front Office Rocks. All right. Obviously, it has to be all on education.

Scott Leune: I can tell you, we haven't officially released this, but we are basically taking the entire Breakaway Seminar curriculum, thousands and thousands and thousands of pages and hundreds of hours of lecturing and we are putting it all online.

David Phelps: Wow! Awesome.

Scott Leune: Because we've got a whole lot of dentists that signed up for seminars and no one knows if those seminars are going to be allowed.

David Phelps: Right.

Scott Leune: And so, we are just going to give all of those dentists online access to all of our content. I'm working my rear end off right now to do it, to build it and they get to go to a live event in the future if they want to without added comps. We're going to make that available to anyone in the future. That's how we're responding because this free time, while we're still treating some patients maybe, this

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free time is the perfect time to invest in ourselves from the education standpoint. I believe business education will make a whole lot of sense right now.

Scott Leune: Now coming out of this, the opportunities and they're tough to talk about in a way because what's going to happen is going to be sad. We are going to see small businesses, restaurants, bars, big businesses like airlines, and we're going to see dental practices and doctor's office and veterinary clinics all go bankrupt. Companies cannot sustain fixed costs over a period of time without revenue coming in. People are going to be fired all over the country, laid off I should say, all over the country. They are already are because that's the only way the company can buy its time to try to out live this kind of mandatory quarantine period.

Scott Leune: So we are going to see companies shut their doors. That is going to create a triple effect. The economy is already tanking it away. You look at the S&P 500, we've lost 30% in one month. Crazy. And that means we've got people without a job, we've got the stock market going way down, and that may well create another big recession for us.

Scott Leune: But it's interesting because we've got the interest rates at 0%. The banks are full of capital. This is not a cash problem. This is not a lending problem, a financial markets problem. People aren't running to the banks to pull out all their money and stick it under their mattress.

Scott Leune: So we're actually going to have an environment where we will see probably huge real estate opportunities, whether in multiple fashions, not just owning, but even just being a renter. We will probably have landlords making huge

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concessions to bring in new tenants. We're going to see dental offices that for whatever reason decided to never reopen.

David Phelps: Right.

Scott Leune: And that means those offices have facilities that could be had at practically no cost. We're going to see displaced patients. We're going to see patients that have had a, maybe a buildup of dental need and that gives us an opportunity for starting practices as well.

Scott Leune: There is going to be a lot of companies outside of dentistry that are going to be closed and never come back and that also brings opportunity. Whether you want to get into a different industry or whether you want to be a landlord of a different industry, there is just going to be a lot of opportunity around that. From a marketing standpoint, what we're going to see coming out of this is most dental practices probably stop marketing.

David Phelps: Right.

Scott Leune: As we come out of this and as patients start needing dentists, they don't know who is open and who is not and no one is marketing and suddenly our marketing dollars will be a lot more powerful in our local community because we may be the only one telling a patient that we're open. We're not competing against other practices for this new patient. It's just a lot of opportunity.

Scott Leune: What's happening is sad, it is. We're all affected, myself as well. We're all affected by this. But, we could become a victim of it and be upset and sad and blame the administration for this or that, or blame bad luck on this or

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that, we can do that. That's so easy to do. We could find thousands of people to join us online and cry together, right. We can do that. Or, we can keep a level head and say, this is the situation. This is day one. How do we live, starting today, the best way we can? And that means let's really prepare to come out of this thing. When the rest of the world is going to be slow to get on their two feet, if we're ready, we can start running. So it's a huge opportunity.

Scott Leune: I've got to make sure that I'm clear here. I'm not for being opportunistic at someone else's pain. That's not what I mean. What I mean is that outside of our control, things are going to happen. Practices are going to close. Patients are going to be displaced. Real estate will have opportunities. We can choose to pick up those pieces and do something with it or not. I'm not wishing anyone ill will, so that I have an extra opportunity. There is going to be so many opportunities out there, we just need to have our eyes open and find an appropriate opportunity to take that is good for people, good for patients, good for us. Someone else, unfortunately could not take that opportunity and now it's sitting there and we can do the right thing with it.

David Phelps: Well, Scott, you're exactly right. I mean, this is the country that we are. We're a country of grassroots, small business entrepreneurs. We're the ones that pick up the pieces. Right now, everybody is looking to the government to bail out everybody, right. I'm not a big fan. I think we have recessions. We have these cycles for a lot of reasons, but part of it is, it's a cleansing. There has been a lot of exuberance in the markets in the last years in businesses.

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David Phelps: Frankly, again, I'm 100% with you. I don't want anybody to suffer pain, but there is a lot of people, I shouldn't say people, there is, people are businesses, but there are a lot of businesses that frankly shouldn't be in business. I'm just going to say, they shouldn't be and they're going to get cleaned out. Those who are proactive and step up and take the steps you talked about in terms of preserving cash, cashflow right now, being proactive with the care that they decide is right for their practice or their community, and then focusing on the time opportunity.

David Phelps: Coming out of this is like a startup, right. I mean, it's just like a startup mode. You're going to start a practice. It's an opportunity to reset. Whatever you've had in the past, whatever your model has been, however it's worked or not worked or been functional or dysfunctional, this is your chance to reset completely as much as you want to. Take this time, build a plan, educate your staff, decide what your model wants to be. Come out of the gate ready to roll. Don't wait until someone says, "Okay, now you can go back to, this isn't a winner, what do I do?" That's not the time to do it. The time to do is step up now.

David Phelps: Leadership, Scott, and you know this better than anybody, requires making tough decisions. You cannot wait for somebody else, some guiding body or force other than the law, which we have to follow, but you can't wait and have everybody else say, "Well, it's okay. That's okay." If you wait, you miss the opportunities. If you wait, you become part of the majority and the majority are going to suffer greatly. It doesn't have to be that way.

Scott Leune: Yeah, and you know what? Maybe this only applies to a few people listening to this, but I know that there is a lot of

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dentists that want to become entrepreneurs and there is a lot of associate dentists that are waiting for the right time to become an owner.

Scott Leune: I know, for example, there has been hundreds of dentists laid off by BSOs this week, hundreds of associate dentists. So if I'm wanting to become an owner, what we're going to see is actually today is the right time to start the process of building a startup practice. By the time this thing opens, it would've taken advantage of a lot of opportunities and it'll open after, probably after, this whole thing subsides. It's the perfect time.

David Phelps: It is a perfect time.

Scott Leune: Or, I want to buy a practice maybe. There is going to be so many opportunities in buying practices because there is going to be plenty of dentists that were on the fence about selling their practice and the stress and strain and financial aspects of this environment has caused them to say, "You know what? I'm ready to sell my practice."

David Phelps: That's right.

Scott Leune: There is not going to be a lot of buyers in the beginning because everyone is still going to be kind of fazed and dazed of what happened. So for the associate dentists, oh my Lord, this is a sign. This is the time to do it. For an entrepreneur who wants to own multiple practices for the same reasons, this is a big opportunity to now start that path as well.

David Phelps: Yeah. You just thought you had trouble finding good staff and doctors. It's going to be wide open out there. You're

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going to have the pick of the litter. You're the place to be and you show leadership, you're going to have the pick.

David Phelps: I'm going to do a little pitch for you because I get to do that because it's authentic. Scott, you invited me down to one of your Breakaway Practice Seminars two or three years ago. As a non-clinical, non-practicing dentist, I went because I love the business side of anything. I love the business side of dentistry.

David Phelps: You have, through your experiences, you put together great seminars. I mean, I'll just say, great seminars. And so, would you let me let Lindsey know when you have your virtual online program available? Because anybody who is thinking about going forward and thinking proactively, one of the first things I do is get ahold of your materials. If they haven't been to your seminar, then I get ahold of your materials because guarantee you, that's a guide path with the frameworks, the pathway to whatever you want to be. It's wide open now. Take advantage of it.

Scott Leune: Yeah. We have specialized seminars in how to start a practice and how to buy a practice. The first seminar that we're releasing online, so people can watch it during this downtime, is our Business Masters course, which is our flagship event, four or 500 pages of content that teaches dentists how to excel and grow a practice even in a down economy.

Scott Leune: So it's the thing I'm actually in my entire career is one of the things I'm most proud of is, how that one course has changed so many people because it's just such a great course. It's the highest quality thing I've ever built in my career. That's the one we're releasing,

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breakawayseminar.com is our website to see it, breakawayseminar. It's going to be released within the next month and I am working with an entire team to build it as quickly as we possibly can right now.

Scott Leune: Boy, I don't know if people can see me today, but if you look in my eyes there is a few circles of gray under my eyes because I am working like crazy right now to try to help dentists sooner with this digital product because right now is when they need it.

David Phelps: All right, well, I'm taking some of that valuable people time. I thank you for what you gave me today. But, I'm going to turn you loose, so you can go back to doing good for a lot of people. Scott Leune, thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate your insight, your expertise, and giving people that want it a pathway going forward. This too will pass, it will.

Scott Leune: Yeah. Thank you so much for having me and gosh, thank you for doing this for everyone. Your topics here are so refreshing to listen to. Gosh, now is actually the most perfect time to listen to stuff that you're teaching, so thank you.

David Phelps: Pleasure, Scott. Talk to you soon.

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