

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

Lawrence Neal: Lawrence Neal here and welcome back to highintensitybusiness.com. This is episode 239. Today's guest is Luke Carlson. Luke is the founder and CEO of Discover Strength, a fast-growing personal training business based in Minnesota with five training facilities. Discover Strength offer a variety of strength training sessions facilitated by educated and expert trainers. Their facilities are among the highest volume and revenue training facilities in the United States. Luke, welcome back to the show.

Luke Carlson: It's always a pleasure to join you, Lawrence. Thanks for having me.

Lawrence Neal: Pleasure is all mine and been excited to cover this topic with you today. This is going to be a shorter episode and we're just going to focus on a single question and that question is, are you a trainer or are you a business owner? Luke was... Me and Luke go back and forth on email and I was asking Luke, what are the most common questions you get or challenges you see in the industry? And this was something that you mentioned as being something you wanted to address and felt that the listeners would find very useful. So where do you think we should start with this? How do you want to start talking about this subject?

Luke Carlson: Well, I mean I want to just maybe share a little bit of the struggle that I had or the identity crisis that I had because I just know that your listeners, or I assume that your listeners have experienced a similar identity crisis. And as I address it, I want to be clear, and this is true every time I'm on your podcast, but I think it's more true with this episode that I'm just opining. I mean I'm just sharing my thoughts and raising some considerations for your listeners. These

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

are not like the hard and fast answers. I mean I have no empirical evidence. I didn't learn this in a course. These are just my thoughts when I think about this particular problem. So I can remember, and it's just topical right now, Lawrence, because this afternoon myself and nine of our staff will fly from Minneapolis short flight to Chicago, just about an hour flight to attend the Club Industry Conference.

Luke Carlson: So it's the second biggest health club conference in the United States and it's actually shrunk. I mean it used to be so much bigger, but Chicago is close by and it's a fun time to be together and see some industry colleagues and just spend some time together. So I can remember being at this conference in 2006. I'm 26 years old. Discover Strength has been open for just a few months. And what I used to do then was you could drive to Chicago in like six and a half hours. So we'd get up at 03:00 in the morning and all of my trainers would drive, we'd rent a van and we would drive six and a half hours and get there a little bit early, change our clothes and back then you could buy a package where you just heard four presentations and each presentation was an hour and a half long.

Luke Carlson: And back then Wayne Westcott, Dr Wayne Westcott always spoke at Club Industry three separate times on three separate topics. So we would go and we'd listen to Wayne speak three different times and we're talking four and a half hours of content and then we'd pick one other speaker that we wanted to listen to. And it was just gold because it was a great opportunity for my whole staff to hear Wayne Westcott. And he did that year after year after year and for whatever reason, they no longer have him speak, which is just

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

heartbreaking to me because I think 40% of what I learned about exercise up through the age of 30 was from those presentations. It was just incredible. Just slide after slide, all of his latest research, things he hadn't published, but he still did the research on it was really cool.

Luke Carlson: So, where I'm going with this is we would get to Chicago, I'd listen to him speak and I can remember hearing him speak. And then at the same time meeting or hearing Joe Cirulli speak, who's the founder and CEO of Gainesville Health and Fitness Center. And to me at that time, that was the preeminent resistance exercise researcher, like the source of knowledge in high intensity training. To me, I mean Wayne knows more about strength training than anybody on the planet. And then number two, it was the other guy was, I think the guy run the best strength training business. Now clearly it's more than a strength training business, it's a health club, but you have one of the best executives in any industry and one of the best leaders in any industry on the planet. And then you have truly the source of knowledge in strength training.

Luke Carlson: And so I can remember calling my girlfriend saying, "Which one of these am I supposed to aspire to be?" I always want to have a model of kind of the direction I'm moving and I want to not put someone up on a pedestal, but I want to be able to understand who can I emulate, who should I be learning from, who do I draw inspiration from? And I was conflicted. Am I supposed to try to be Joe Cirulli? Or am I supposed to try to be Wayne Westcott? And even at 26, I mean we had one studio and I was doing most of the

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

training and we had a couple of trainers and I was constantly learning a little bit about business and constantly learning about exercise. And that was really fun. But I just knew at 26 that at some point it was going to have to split.

Luke Carlson: And that was the original consideration. And I remember my girlfriend at the time said, "You're supposed to be like Wayne Westcott." And by Wayne, I don't mean I was supposed to be a researcher. I mean I was supposed to be all in on strength training, not all in on understanding how to run the business. And so she said, "You need to be all in on strength training because that's ultimately what your customers are purchasing." And I didn't say it to her at the time, but she was putting a ceiling on me because she looked at the business as, her parents were small business owners, one small business. She looked at it as, don't lose your focus. You've got to focus on the strength training workouts that people in your one studio. And I thought, "Well, what if I want to grow beyond this? What if I want to have two studios or three studios or grow this in some way then wouldn't I need a different set of skills?"

Luke Carlson: And so I almost disregarded her advice because I thought, "Well you don't understand where I want to go." And frankly I didn't understand where I want to go. So that was the query for me. That was the question. Now I'll interject and say that Matt Headman brilliantly had someone approach him early on and say, "You can either be an expert in strength training, you can be the guru or you can run a great business, but you cannot do both." And so Matt made a concerted decision to grow the business. And so Matt is

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

absolutely smart enough to become just a world class academic in exercise science. I mean he could be James Fisher and James Steele and Wayne Westcott and all these other names that we reference. He has that level of intellect, but he made the conscious decision, "I want to grow the business." And my goodness, he has grown the business. So Matt Headman is a great example of someone who made the choice. And I think maybe what your listeners have to struggle with is they just have to make a choice.

Luke Carlson: It doesn't mean that you can't be knowledgeable in strength training and grow the business. You can be in, the way I liken it is most of the big healthcare or medical, the hospitals, the different medical groups in the US are often led by a physician CEO. So it's a former surgeon who is the CEO of that system. And they gain credibility among the physicians and the other medical practitioners that they lead because they in fact are a physician. But frankly 8% of what they do in the week is actually anything to do with patient care. And a lot of them will do one day of surgery per week or one day of surgery every two weeks to continue to have that credibility and to have one foot in the craft.

Luke Carlson: So to me, that's the best way to actually blend it, is to say, "Well, I'm still going to sharpen the saw. I'm going to still going to improve, move toward mastery in my craft. But frankly, I'm running the business right now." And those healthcare systems, those medical systems, they need a leader who understands the business. I mean they need that more than they need a really good physician leading

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

the business. So I'll stop just opining there and you can ask whatever questions you want, Lawrence.

Lawrence Neal: Is Joe Cirulli still your model? Still your kind of hero in that sense?

Luke Carlson: Yeah, so it's interesting. So he is, because there's three humans that I put up on a pedestal as the greatest leaders of men that I've ever known personally. So like, I never knew Winston Churchill, clearly. I never knew Ronald Reagan. They may actually be up there, but there's three individuals that I've ever met. One happens to be a church pastor, one's a football coach, and one's Joe Cirulli. And Joe could lead, in my opinion, any type of organization. I think he could lead any type of team. I think he could lead any type of military unit. And I think he'd be successful. He has made a conscious decision that he doesn't want to scale the Gainesville Health and Fitness Center.

Luke Carlson: And so from that standpoint, I no longer model myself after him because he tactically, he fundamentally hasn't been where I'm trying to go. But frankly, if I look at someone that knows how to lead men or lead human beings better than anybody I've ever met, that has an insatiable desire and passion to learn, someone who absolutely is living life in crescendo, meaning Joe I think is 63 years old right now, maybe 61 or 65, he is better now than when he was 55 and he is more relentless now than when he was 45. He just can't decelerate. He's just constantly accelerating. So he's a role model in all those ways, but not tactically in terms of how he runs the business because I'm trying to do something very different in

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

the business. I would say the one area that he's a massive role model for me tactically is that he doesn't want to exit his business.

Luke Carlson: So everyone talks to me, what's your five year plan? Who are you selling the business to? When is private equity coming in? And I learned from Joe, Joe told me this word for word that you can only say that this is his quote. You can only sit at Starbucks so many days in a row before you're going to get bored, after you retire or exit the business, you need something to go to work on. And I just thought, "Okay, that's what I want to do. I want to be like Joe." And I have since then, I mean Joe was in my ear on that early on.

Luke Carlson: Since then, every entrepreneur I know has an exit plan and wants to sell the business after a certain number of years. But I think that's because, Lawrence, they're running businesses that they don't love what they're doing. I mean they're just doing the technical work as something that's not very interesting. If I sold the business, you know what I would do within two days? I would grab someone and say, "Hey, let me take you through a workout." And I'd try to buy a machine and I'd buy another machine and I would just accidentally get back into it.

Lawrence Neal: Yeah. So the people obviously listening to this who might be having a dilemma related to the question of this podcast, and they might be a trainer, they may be unsure if they want to just focus on becoming the best trainer possible or become a business owner. You've already talked about your own story around that in a way, but I just wondered, do you have any view on how one can go

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

about evaluating their own ambition and their own goal and know if they're a good fit for either one of those?

Luke Carlson: Well, I think you can develop the skills, you can acquire the skills to be able to do either one successfully. But I think it all comes down to the question. Just centers around, what does the business need at that time? I mean that's the key because I see so many high intensity training studio operators who want to just run the business, but the business needs them to be a trainer. The financial model doesn't work unless they're the trainer at that time. And then I also see plenty of operators where they are trying to be a trainer still, and there's a ceiling put on the business, there's a governor put on the business because they're not stepping into the role of actually running the business and being the president or the CEO or the leader of that particular company.

Luke Carlson: So you've got to understand the needs of your business. And so much of it is just financial. It's, well how many sessions do I need to be training and need to be covering in order to grow? And by me taking a few more sessions right now, is that actually hurting the business because I should be spending time on other things? I mean your listeners can relate to this. It's just if you look at your day and if you look at your week, what percentage of your time, how are you spending it? Are you spending it in the areas that allows a company to move toward its stated goal? So of course you have to have a stated goal. And I think this is where we have identity crises around, "Am I trying to open up more studios?" And I think the most uncomfortable thing you can do is run a studio for an

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

extended period of time and think that eventually you're going to open up a second or third studio or fourth studio and you continue to operate that one studio.

Luke Carlson: You're constantly almost in pain. You're almost in disappointment that, why haven't I opened up the second or third studio? When in fact you should probably just lean in and say, "I just want this one studio." Now, understanding what the future looks like, one studio, I can lean in and build the life and build the daily and the weekly schedule that allows me to really maximize not only my happiness and my engagement, but my return on investment and my financial wellbeing by operating this one studio. Does that make sense, Lawrence?

Lawrence Neal: No, it does. It does certainly answer the question around if you're a business owner and you're the only trainer or you're still spending a lot of your time training clients, then the transition that you need to make to grow the business effectively and scale that business and move away and transition away from training people. I guess the other way I wanted to ask this question is for those people who are perhaps employed or contractors personal trainers who are in that place where they're like, "Do I want to one day be a business owner in this space? Or do I want to continue on this track as a trainer and master my skillset?" Have you got any thoughts? Because I get a lot of people listening to the show who are trainers from all sorts of different businesses who are wrestling with this question. So have you got any advice for them on how they can evaluate that and how

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

they can make sure that they understand the reality of a being a business owner, which is not always fun and games.

Luke Carlson: I think maybe, from what I've noticed is the expected career path in the UK seems to be, and I'm just picking the UK, seems to be that if you're a personal trainer, you ultimately should own a personal training studio. That's not as common in the US and I don't think that's a logical step. I mean, why is it that fitness, if you like it and you're interested in it and you become an expert in it, expert practitioner, you're supposed to own the practice? I mean that's just not true in so many other disciplines. You don't have to own the practice. So I think that's the wrong assumption that if you're good at one thing, you should aspire to do something that's frankly completely different. And so just owning the business is so different than training.

Luke Carlson: And I think it's the amount of work, it's the amount of worry. It's on your mind to some degree, 24 hours a day, the emergency is always going to come back to you when you're running the one studio. It consumes such a huge part of your life. Now, it's still a massive source of pride. So there's just a lot of considerations there to understand whether or not it's the right decision for you. And frankly it's a huge financial risk. I mean, if you look at the percentage of businesses that fail in the US and worldwide, and it's just the chances that you're going to stay in business and make any money are slim. And then Lawrence, you know this, a lot of times you're purchasing a job. I mean, almost all of your entrepreneurs build businesses so that they could exit them or sell them at some point.

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

And I know I almost made that sound like a negative thing before, but it's actually healthy in that it's your exit plan. And I've actually literally met no high intensity training entrepreneur. I've never even heard of one that's ever sold their business and done well.

Luke Carlson: And so that is a scary thought. I know plenty that have closed their doors and lost massive amounts of money, but I haven't known anyone to sell their business and make a lot of money. Now I'm sure there is somebody, I just am not aware of them. But you've got to think about that too. What's your exit? The rest of the world does what? They go interview and get a job and that job pays them. When they leave the job, they go get another job. Where if you're running that studio, you're spending, in some cases a few hundred thousands of dollars to get a job. And then when you're done with that job, you're just on to trying to finding another job. You didn't have any financial reward when the business was sold. Does that risk make sense? Am I saying that in a way that makes sense?

Lawrence Neal: It does. Can I play devil's advocate for a moment with you, Luke?

Luke Carlson: Of course.

Lawrence Neal: So people will go, "Well, Luke's going to..." I mean you made some great, great arguments there, but they're also going to think, "Well Luke would say that because he's the owner of Discover Strength and he perhaps doesn't want his trainers to go off and start their business." Or what have you. So how would you reply to that?

Luke Carlson: That's a great devil's advocate. Yeah, well I've had, I was just counting last night. I think I've had five trainers that have gone to

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

open up training studios and right now, I think they're all open still. Yeah, they're all still open. So if it's something that you're interested in doing, my goodness, absolutely do it. I've seen a few people start studios that don't have an interest in running a business. They just thought that was the next logical step. And there's a lot of regret around, "Oh, I did this because I thought it was the next thing and it was not supposed to be the next thing. And no one ever told me it wasn't the next thing. I just ended up doing it because it was assumed."

Lawrence Neal: And does it bother you at all?

Luke Carlson: When someone goes on to open up a studio?

Lawrence Neal: Yeah.

Luke Carlson: Oh no. Absolutely not. I mean I want them to be successful in a way that's how they define success. They do something that they're passionate about, that they can pour themselves into. And if we're really getting personal here, I enjoy it more when I'm involved. And by involved, I mean when they call me late at night or text me late at night and say, "Hey, I'm thinking about this piece of equipment." I have one guy that worked with us years ago that would say, "Hey, can you just come out and meet me at this site? Because I think I want to sign a lease in the site. Would you walk through it with me?" And I would always do that. Just check out a space, talk about equipment, whatever was going on with him. Talk about pricing. That was really fun. I mean this is just me being selfish. It's a little bit more sad when someone goes on and does it and they don't keep

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

you abreast in what's going on because it's just fun. You want that person to be successful. And you want to hear about their success.

Lawrence Neal: Sure. And this one reminds me of the Q&A we did recently in the membership, which was just fantastic thanks to you. And one of the things you said, which is just so ingrained in me now is the idea that, if a trainer doesn't want to grow in your organization, they really don't have a place in your organization, which is so counterintuitive because I just know of so many businesses that struggle to keep hold of the personal trainer and to retain them and to keep them motivated because they maybe don't have a plan for them or don't have tears for greater compensation or greater opportunity in their business. And so they're stuck trying to keep this person at this level and then no doubt, obviously eventually they will leave. And it's just so interesting to me how you're like, "Well, if they don't want to progress then they're probably not a good fit for us." And I just thought that was so inspiring and I think that's inspiring to a lot of the listeners of this show.

Luke Carlson: Yeah, and I think what you touched on there maybe relates to the answer of this whole entire question. So for me, am I a personal trainer and a master of my craft and the best that there ever was, or am I running the business? Comes down to, who do you want to think about most of the time? When you're the trainer and master of your craft, you will think about two different parties. You will think about your clients and you will think about yourself. Okay? When you're the owner of the business, you will think about your staff and you also think about yourself. And so there's just no way of taking

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

out the fact that you're going to spend some time thinking about yourself.

Luke Carlson: But if you get more of a kick out of daydreaming about your employees and serving your employees than you do serving clients, then that's maybe the way that you should go because you will struggle if you have five employees or 25 employees and most of your passion lies with your clients and you're constantly thinking about your clients. So that's a great, just do a clarity break and sit and think about, "Who do I ultimately love to serve? The client or the staff member?"

Luke Carlson: And by the way, if your answer is client, you're still going to have days where you're upset with a client. And if your answer is staff, it doesn't mean that it's perfect every day. You're still going to have a staff that rips your heart out of your chest and you're depressed over it for a few days. I mean, there's still going to be ups and downs and bumps and bruises with either route or either party that you really are drawn toward.

Lawrence Neal: Yeah. What a wonderful mindset shift and decision filter for thinking about what path you take. That was, I think a great way to wrap this one up, this mini podcast. Unless you've got any final thoughts on the topic of, am I a trainer or a business owner Luke, before we wrap up?

Luke Carlson: The last thing I would say is, when you make a choice or when you're making a choice, your reading and your study should reflect whatever choice you made. So every Saturday, I know that I'm

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

running the business right now. So every Saturday I read for three hours like clockwork and it's always two hours on business, one hour on exercise and it's like a timer. We'll do one hour on exercise, but when that one hour is up, no matter what journal article I'm reading or book I'm reading, I will stop and I'll get to two hours of business because ultimately I can't spend three hours of reading just on exercise because I have to read on business. So just make sure that your reading and your study reflects the decision that you made.

Lawrence Neal: What time do you read on a Saturday?

Luke Carlson: It totally depends. It depends on, am I on an airplane? Am I at home? Did I run 20 miles in the morning because I'm training for a marathon? It just depends, but it doesn't matter what time it is, it's going to happen whether it's 9:00 PM to midnight or 5:00 AM to 8:00 AM in the morning.

Lawrence Neal: Wow. Do you ever miss it?

Luke Carlson: Very, very, very, very rarely. The times where I miss it, it's just the strangest travel day ever where I didn't sleep the night before. And so I'm sleeping on a plane and I should be reading on the plane. But frankly, when I get off the plane and I have to go to something else and I'm going to just be exhausted, so I end up sleeping on the plane. But it's very rare.

Lawrence Neal: Awesome. Luke, this has been great and yeah, interesting to do a little experiment, do something a little shorter, sort of bite sized

[239 – Luke Carlson – Are you a Personal Trainer or a Business Owner?](#)

podcasts for people. Best way for the listeners to find out more about you?

Luke Carlson: Yeah, they can always go to our website, discoverstrength.com you can always shoot me an email just directly luke@discoverstrength.com. And then we'd love people to attend the conference that we host each year, which is the Resistance Exercise Conference, and there's a website for that as well.

Lawrence Neal: Yeah, and that's resistanceexerciseconference.com isn't it?

Luke Carlson: Correct. Thank you.

Lawrence Neal: And we'll link all that in the show notes for this one. You're welcome. And for everyone listening, to find the blog post for this episode, please go to highintensitybusiness.com and search for episode 239 and until next time, thank you very much for listening.

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