

Keeping It In The Family — Succession Tips From Those Who Lived It, Pt. 2

PMPA members share some tips to avoid getting burned when passing the business torch from one family member to another.



In November’s issue, I talked to John Detterbeck, an outgoing leader, and Travis Donaldson, an incoming leader. This month I talked to their counterparts, incoming leader, Kyle Detterbeck and outgoing leader, Glenn Donaldson to get their perspective on succession in a family business.

Work Your Way Up



Kyle Detterbeck is the president of Lester Detterbeck Enterprises in Iron River, Michigan. He went to college for construction management and started building houses after graduation. Once the market fell in 2008, Kyle looked to the family business for a job. His father, John Detterbeck, the president at that time, did not invite Kyle into the office

for a job. To hone his problem-solving skills, Kyle worked on the shop floor for over 11 years, learning the business and how to run each machine. It’s also where he realized how much he loves manufacturing. Kyle shared the following advice:

- Work somewhere else before you commit to the family business. It’s important to experience the employee’s perspective with a boss that isn’t related.
- Set boundaries. Mixing family and business can be tricky. Kyle and John agreed to not talk about work outside of the shop.
- The business is like another child for the parent and letting go may not be easy. But it’s imperative that the employees see one decision maker. The transition of leadership should be clear.
- This decision takes a lot of consideration by all parties.

Family First

In 1989, Glenn Donaldson and his wife Joan started Donmac Precision in Foxboro, Ontario, Canada. Glenn’s first 10+ years in the industry were spent working for a business



owned by brothers and their father. As Glenn states, “The dysfunctionality that was brought around from them working together was well illustrated by one of the brothers refusing to accept visits from his family shortly before he succumbed to his illness midlife.” To maintain his family, Glenn was determined that his children would not work at Donmac as a career.

However, his son, Travis, was working elsewhere and expressed interest in working at Donmac. After much deliberation, Glenn and Travis agreed to try, but promised each other that family would always come first. That promise was put to the test as the succession plan came to fruition. They had similar personalities and clashes were inevitable.

Glenn also experienced the struggle of letting go of a business that he had grown and worked at for 35 years. But he realized that if he didn’t let go then no one benefited. Both he and Travis needed a chance to grow into their next stage in life. As Glenn states, “It may be the hardest years of your business owning career ... but if you persevere, like you did so far to stay in business through those unavoidable valleys ... you will enjoy the personal, financial and family rewards.”

Common Threads

Even though the journey was different for John, Kyle, Glenn and Travis, I did find some common threads. Emotions and personalities are a big factor when going through a succession plan. It takes years for a succession plan to come to fruition. And it’s important to remember that family is always more important than business. **P**

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