

MONDAY MANNA

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SPANNING THE GENERATION GAP

By Robert J. Tamasy

In recent years it has been my privilege to write several books telling the histories and legacies of multi-generational, family-owned companies. Two of these trace their beginnings to the early 1930s, and today they are transitioning into a fourth generation of family leadership. Their stories are inspiring.

Statistically, only a small percentage of businesses even pass to a second generation of family ownership; reaching a third generation within the same family is more uncommon, and successfully transferring leadership to a fourth generation is the exception. So how did these companies achieve such a rare feat of longevity?

Certainly they have been fortunate to have members of four successive generations that shared interest in continuing to work in the same industry. They have weathered economic storms through the years, as well as many changes technologically and culturally. But a key to their success has been maintaining an agreed-upon focus on what they might call “the basics.”

Early on, both companies adopted mission, vision and values statements they have revisited frequently through the years. Since these statements were formally written and adopted, reviewing them on a regular basis has helped to keep everyone literally “on the same page.” This has helped them maintain a consistent corporate culture, as well as to affirm the principles and values that have helped to sustain and build the companies from their humble beginnings.

Both businesses placed high priorities on hard work, innovation, excellence in performance, and customer service. Succeeding generations were well-schooled in these principles, impressed with an understanding that membership in their families did not “entitle” them to simply profit from the labours of others. Whether we run our own businesses, or work for established companies, we all can benefit from following the same philosophies. We find these concepts taught repeatedly in the Bible:

Share a common mission. What is our purpose? Why are we here? These are questions everyone in the organisation should understand and be able to articulate. Jesus modelled this with His followers: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19).

Embrace a common vision. Another good question everyone should be able to answer is, “Where are we going – and how will we know when we get there?” Again, Jesus left His followers with a clear sense of where they were headed: “And you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Adopt common values. It is said that values are more easily caught than taught, but they still need to be articulated as well as acted upon. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:5-7).

Postal Address:

PO Box 8168,
Woolloongabba, QLD, 4102

ABN: 42 005 622 515

Office Address:

Suite CBMC,
Sung Do Lawyers,
12 Annerley Road,
Woolloongabba, QLD 4102

Email:

admin@cbmcaustralia.com.au

Phone:

07 3172 9365

Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever worked in a multi-generation, family-owned company, or done business with one? If so, what were some of the characteristics that you observed?
2. Why do you think it is so difficult for a successful company to survive the transition from one generation of family ownership and leadership to another?
3. It is stated that having clearly articulated, written statements of mission, vision and values can be very important for perpetuating an organisation on a long-term basis? Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. From a spiritual standpoint, how do the concepts of having a clearly understood sense of mission, vision and values apply? How can those spiritual principles relate to how we carry out our roles and responsibilities in the workplace?

NOTE:

If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

- Numbers 15:38-41;
- Joshua 1:6-9;
- Ephesians 2:10;
- Philippians 4:8-9;
- 2 Timothy 3:16-17

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