

Lessons learned from 10 years in a family business

Ryan Leiterman for *Progressive Dairy*

AT A GLANCE

Day-to-day activities and interactions between dairy farm family members provide lessons that last a lifetime.

I spent nine years in college before entering into what my dad refers to as the real world. It was only after college I realized how little those nine years had prepared me for the road that lay ahead.

For the past 10 years, I have been fortunate enough to work alongside my parents in our family business. I've learned more during that time than I did in all those years of college. I've also learned a lot from

working with our clients and their family businesses. Below are three of the most important lessons I've learned so far.

Lesson No. 1 from our accountant: Disagreement among business partners is normal and necessary

Ed was our accountant from the day my parents started Crystal Creek to the day he died, three years ago. Ed filed our taxes, but

he was really a trusted business adviser, confidant and friend. Ed had regularly scheduled visits to our office every quarter. On one of those days, he arrived about an hour after my dad and I had a big argument. He could tell I was upset, so he came into my office and shut the door. The conversation went like this:

Ed: "It's pretty obvious that something is bothering you. Want to talk about it?"

Me: "Sure, but there is not much to talk about. My dad drives me crazy. I swear he has to be the most stubborn person on the planet. Honestly Ed, I'm not sure I am cut out to work with my parents."

Ed sat there for a while without saying anything. Looking back at our conversation, I am not sure if he was just giving me time to finish fuming or possibly giving a long pause for dramatic effect. Maybe he was trying to find the right words to kindly tell me to grow up. Either way, what he said next was simple yet profound.

Ed: "Correct me if I'm wrong, but the company's board of directors is made up of you, your mom and your dad, right?"

Me: "Yeah."

Ed: "Well (another long pause) ... the way I see it, if the three of you agreed on everything, the board wouldn't need two of you."

It's such a simple statement, but I've remembered it all these years later. Ed understood that each person on a team brings different viewpoints, and it is valuable to have a diverse team. In hindsight, some of the best business decisions we've ever made have come from what could be described as rather "vigorous debates" between my parents and me. As long as family members treat each other with respect, disagreements will help explore alternative ideas and ensure all possible options are investigated before a decision is made.

Lesson No. 2 from my dad: Tuck in your shirt

Anyone who has ever met my dad knows he always has his shirt tucked in. He does it out of habit, out of discipline. In college, I never tucked in my shirt, but when I started in the family business my dad made it very clear: "If you are going to work here, you are going to start tucking in your shirt. Period."

My dad believes little disciplines in life are important. "How you do the little things is how you do the big things," he would say. My dad explained that he can tell a lot about a person by how they wear their shirt. He said someone with a shirt that is tucked in likely has good attention to detail. It signals that they want to look professional and are more likely to act professionally and take pride in their work. I thought he was being a

bit dramatic, but nonetheless I tucked in my shirt just to keep him happy. I never did fully buy into his theory until we hired a gentleman named John.

John was a new hire to our warehouse team. As a company, we try very hard to interview thoroughly and make good hiring decisions – but admittedly we don't always get it right. Shortly after John started, we noticed a problematic attitude and performance issues. He also had a significant problem with having to tuck in his shirt.

One day, he asked me, "Hey, why do I have to tuck in my shirt? I think it's a dumb policy, and I don't want to do it." I explained to him that our policy had nothing to do with the shirt itself. It's about having the discipline to do the little, seemingly unimportant things well so it builds habits to do the big things well. It's about taking pride in your work, both looking and acting professional when interfacing with customers. It's about attitude really. Despite more coaching attempts, John's attitude worsened, and his employment was terminated.

John's poor attitude was reflected in his untucked shirt. Dad was right: How you do the little things is how you do the big things, and a person's attitude matters.

Lesson No. 3 from a dairy farmer: Forgive and be grateful

Sam is a dairy farmer, and one day I got an emergency call saying he had a barn full of heifers down and sick with grain overload and he needed me to come out quickly.

Sam bought the farm from his mom and dad years ago, but his dad still liked to work around the farm. His dad was in his 80s at the time and was suffering from memory loss and confusion, but Sam couldn't stand the thought of putting him in a nursing home. Instead, he kept his dad at home on the farm where he could take care of him. He gave his dad little odd jobs to stay busy and make him feel like he was still helpful. Earlier that day, Sam's dad was going to surprise him by helping feed the heifers – but instead of feeding the normal ration, he dumped a few skid-loader buckets of corn in the bunk.

Despite the fact we did everything we could do to save the animals, Sam ended up losing 13 of the 19 bred and breeding-age heifers in that barn. It was an economically devastating blow to his farm.

Two days later, I was out to the farm checking up on the six animals that survived, and we were discussing everything that had happened. Sam never once expressed anger toward his dad for the mistake that killed all those heifers. In fact, he said

repeatedly he was happy his dad was still on the farm and he felt grateful he was still able to work alongside him. He reminisced and told me some funny stories that involved him and his dad from his childhood. I drove away from that call amazed at how easily Sam could forgive and how he felt gratitude instead of anger or resentment. It was an impressive thing to witness.

In the day-to-day grind, it's easy to take things for granted, get

stressed out and lose sight of the bigger picture, but Sam did not. He understood his dad would not be working on the farm forever, and instead of getting mad about the feeding mistake, he chose to be happy for the time he still had with his dad. It's family that makes a family business.

I've learned a lot in the past 10 years working with my parents and alongside other family businesses. It will be interesting to see what the



Ryan Leiterman

Director of Technical Services
Crystal Creek Natural LLC
drryan@crystalcreeknatural.com

next 10 years will bring. Maybe then I will write another article describing the lessons learned over 20 years in the business. 🐄