

Business News And Notes

Fourth Generation Of Family-Owned Company, East Penn Manufacturing, Succeeds Because It Heeds Grandfather's Words

(NAPS)—Family-owned businesses are the bedrock of the American economy, but keeping them going is no small feat.

An Inspirational Organization

One firm that's defying the odds is East Penn Manufacturing, largely by continuing to reinforce the values and principles of its late founders, DeLight Breidegam and his son DeLight Jr., who launched the company in 1946, when DeLight Jr. came home from the war.

The privately held company, based in Lyons Station, PA, just west of Philadelphia, now employs more than 10,000 people and is the second-largest producer of lead batteries in North America. The family's fourth generation, in their 20s and early 30s, say their mission is to keep East Penn privately held because it allows them to protect jobs for the future and best support customers.

"As my grandfather would always tell us: 'The No. 1 rule is that it's all about the people,'" said Tim Miksiewicz, a project manager at the company. "We see ourselves as stewards of East Penn—we're here to keep the company healthy so it can continue to provide thousands of well-paying jobs, support our community, and do right by our employees and customers."

It's a matter of keeping their grandfather's and late mother Sally's legacies alive. "It's important that we stay private and family-owned—almost at all costs," said Dan, Tim's twin, who works in Personnel. "It allows us to have a deeper connection to our employees and to make decisions that are in their interest. My grandfather instilled this philosophy in us."

Sally's youngest child, Matt, recently moved to Michigan to help share East Penn values with the lithium battery manufacturer the company acquired. "We want employees here to know they can bring concerns and problems to the leadership team. My Mom and grandfather spent a lot of time talking to people on the factory floor and never put themselves above anyone else. We're all trying to keep that legacy alive. We care about the employees. We want their feedback."

The focus on employees has served the company well. For 20 years, it has been named one of the Best Places to Work in Pennsylvania. *Forbes* called it one of America's Best Employers. Nearly 40% of employees have worked at East Penn for more than 10 years and about 16% have been there 20 years or more.



Companies today can learn a lot from a multigeneration firm that heeds the creed of its founders.

Beloved and revered by employees, DeLight Jr. put a priority on taking care of his workforce, manufacturing innovations, and reinvesting back into the business. He knew workers by name, would ask about their families, and how he could improve the company and their jobs.

"He liked to see people promoted and moving up. He would encourage them to grow and try new things," said DeLight's son, Dan Breidegam, who has worked at East Penn for nearly 50 years, most recently as vice president of metals and commodities management before succeeding his dad as chairman in 2014. He described DeLight as the "Will Rogers of Berks County" because of his kindness, patience, and storytelling prowess.

Employees say they were devastated in 2015, when DeLight Jr. passed away at the age of 89. They still celebrate his birthday with cake the first week in October.

His death came a year after the fatal accident in 2014 that took the life of his daughter, Sally Miksiewicz, whom DeLight had groomed as his successor. Named CEO in 2009, Sally was instrumental in developing new leaders and advancing the company into emerging markets and new technologies. She was devoted to employees' health, safety, and advancement, while also serving as a role model by volunteering in the community.

Like her father, Sally was beloved by employees, who describe her as bold, compassionate, outspoken, and feisty, navigating the factory in her high heels and kicking them off in most meetings. "She loved the business," said Sally's daughter Kate Kline, who considers herself an entrepreneur like her grandfather and is founder of a baking business. "She was so natural—and such a natural-born leader."

The deaths left a huge void. "Suddenly those big people were gone and there were very big shoes to fill," said Matt.

Dan Breidegam stepped in as chairman, and deputies of Sally's became officers, including Chris Pruitt who was named CEO/President in 2018, after almost three decades at the company.

The Company Today

Today, Dan Breidegam, Pruitt, and the top leadership continue many of the traditions started by DeLight Jr. Breidegam meets with new employees to talk about the company's values, the opportunities, and the future. Like his father, he sends employees messages of encouragement in the company's monthly newsletter. Pruitt and the leadership team initiated the Guiding Principles that govern the workplace and incorporate DeLight's values, employee feedback, and management's vision for the future. They frequent the production facilities to connect with employees, as Sally and DeLight both did, and honor employees with such events as Employee Appreciation Week, where management serves meals to the work force.

Of the family members, only Dan Breidegam currently sits on the board, although his nephews often sit in the meetings as observers. "We have to train these young leaders right, we have to continue to give them the proper foundation," he said.

The grandchildren all want to be more involved. "I don't have dreams of running any particular department," Dan Miksiewicz said. "I just want to keep learning. I try to think about how my grandfather and Mom would handle a situation. I emulate them. I will never fill their shoes, but I can try, while contributing to the company in my own way."

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