

The path to LEADERSHIP

Reflections on family business, a backpack and one very large tree

BY KATIE RUCKER



PHOTO BY KATIE RUCKER



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One thing I've learned about leadership is that it frequently involves being pushed to the limits of my comfort zone. But when I agreed to join an outback leadership course replete with adventure and trees, I hadn't fully processed that I was saying yes to a weekend of total vulnerability and gritty adventure. As I boarded the plane to Seattle a few months later, that reality hit, and my anxiety started to kick in.

Once I arrived, however, the anxiety quickly switched to excitement. The scenery was breathtaking, the people were incredible, and my thirst for adventure overtook any sense of nervousness.

Our group of eight set off for a three-day adventure. Just a few miles in, we were instructed to pause and be truly present in that moment. As I looked around, I was drawn to a beautiful, towering tree surrounded by saplings.

That large and beautiful tree has a story. It has strength. It provides opportunity for growth and continuation of the surrounding ecosystem. Down below, the young saplings sprouted in a circle around its base as if to say, "We are here to learn from you and grow in this next chapter." At this moment, I smiled, realizing that I was looking at nature's version of a family business. There is the generational leader — the one who stands tall and proud. They hold the legacy, ultimately bringing the next generation into the organization and encouraging their growth and success within the business.

Then, we have those next-generation family members — the saplings — who look up to and greatly benefit from their ancestors but will eventually need their own sun to shine in. While rooted in the same ground, they may end up growing in a different direction. And that is what makes the big-picture scene so unique and memorable. Just as the forest is a diverse and complex ecosystem, so is a family business. There is a delicate balance of interdependence and self-sufficiency through which the past, present and future can exist in harmony.

As I continued along the trail to our camp, I saw yet another metaphor for a different phase of a family business. Where the large tree and its saplings represented the coexistence of multiple generations, this one represented how the end of one chapter provides the foundation for a new chapter to be written. There before me was a fallen tree covered in lush, vibrant green moss and hundreds of baby mushrooms scattered across. I was

struck by the fact that while this fallen tree may no longer be living as it once was, its legacy continues by providing a strong and necessary foundation for new life to begin.

Where the fallen tree is both a disruption and an opportunity for new life, so are market shifts, evolving consumer demands and changing competitive landscapes. For a multigenerational family business to maintain longevity as surroundings change, the original structure may need to be transformed or come to an end. When a business has had such a rich history and strong influence, this transition may be difficult to process. But my hope would be for the family to understand and embrace the natural evolution of an ecosystem. While the shape and appearance may change, the foundational lessons, achievements and legacy provide the fuel source and nutrients needed to begin the next chapter of the family business.

I first signed up for this leadership experience with the intent of learning more about business systems thinking, risk management, culture and values. There was a lot to be gained from spending time with a group of creative, forward-thinking, business-savvy guides. However, I found that the most impactful guide on the trail was Mother Nature herself. There in her “classroom” I was encouraged to see things from a different perspective, to better appreciate the harmony and interconnectivity of new and old. And ultimately, I was reminded that being a part of a family business is a privilege. We have the opportunity to continue growing a beautiful, breathing, evolving ecosystem that — if we are lucky — will live on for generations to come. **FB**

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