



Legacy & Leadership

John Nelson is chairman of the board of directors of Nelson-Jameson, a nationwide “one stop shop” food, dairy, and beverage processing plant supplier, headquartered in Marshfield, Wisconsin. The family-owned business, operating for more than 70 years, sources more than 50,000 products — both direct and indirect — specifically with the food processor in mind.

Nelson, a graduate of the University of Illinois, moved his family in 1975 from Urbana, Illinois, to Marshfield, Wisconsin, to pursue a career in the family business. He worked on numerous projects during his early years with the company, including sales and route delivery and product management of the chemical line. He was instrumental in starting the company’s laboratory supplies line and participated annually in physical inventory counting and reconciliation.

Nelson became company president in 1982 and chairman of the board of directors in 1998.

In addition to leading the company, Nelson is actively involved in the dairy industry nationally and the Marshfield community locally. He is a lifetime member of the North Central Cheese Industry Association, a former board member of the International Association of Food Industry Suppliers, and past president of FISA, an association composed of distributors and manufacturer members who serve the high-purity and sanitary industries.

When asked about his accomplishments, Nelson says his greatest accomplishment is he and his wife Susan’s three children.

What motivates and helps company leaders in growing their businesses? What attitudes and approaches have been fostered throughout the careers of successful business executives? *Cheese Market News* is pleased to profile industry trailblazers in our “Legacy & Leadership” segment, a conversation with industry visionaries who have helped propel the industry forward.

This segment explores the thinking of these executives so that aspiring dairy industry leaders may reflect and assess their own perspectives and capabilities as they build their own legacies.

Q What advice would you give someone going into a leadership position for the first time?

A Care about the people who make your enterprise possible. Your customers, your suppliers and your coworkers can all support your success or undermine all your efforts. If you care about them, they’ll want to support your efforts and your organization.

Q What is one characteristic that you believe every leader should possess?

A There is no one path to any destination, and there is no one characteristic which every leader needs to succeed. There are many characteristics most leaders share, however. Intelligence, energy, empathy, optimism and courage are frequently mentioned as leadership

traits. I would add another which is a less commonly mentioned trait: future orientation. If an individual has a clear picture of what is going to happen, it’s a lot easier to stay ahead of things.

Q Please comment on the importance of accuracy, product quality and reputation to the longevity of a business.

A Accuracy is the main contributor to efficiency. Mistakes made by inaccurate work lead to three times the work of mistake-free work: the original work, the work to undo the mistake, and the effort to re-do the work correctly. Product quality results from doing things right the first time and constantly improving the product over time. Reputation is from a variety of positive behaviors including accuracy and creation of high-quality products. Having a good reputation engenders trust and gives one the room to work with confidence.

Q What are the most important decisions you made/have made as a leader of your company?

A The single most important decision I’ve made in this company is to grow. In my opinion it is much easier to manage a growing enterprise than one which is stagnant. Your employees see the growth and are motivated to improve; they also can be promoted as more folks are hired to accommodate the growth. Decisions can be multiplied as the scale of those decisions increase. The whole organization benefits from what I call the calculus effect: also known as robbing Peter to pay Paul. You just plain have more wiggle room in a larger organization.

Q How do you encourage creative thinking within your organization?

A I’ve heard it said the root of creativity is laziness. That’s a pessimistic way to say that folks who look for better or more efficient ways to do things may succeed in winning themselves extra time. What

they do with it is their business. With that time they could go home earlier, or they could get more done. I’ve always encouraged people by making it clear that they can decide how to use the extra time they can get with creative solutions.

Q How do you communicate your company’s “core values” and encourage others to do the same?

A Everybody does things differently, and everybody explains things differently. We have a standard explanation of who we are and why we do things, but don’t insist on everyone articulating those things identically. We clearly have a good culture here which has been easier to maintain than create. But maintaining it has been critical. The leaders here lead by example. The new folks see the examples, see the culture, and behave accordingly.

Q What was an obstacle you faced for your business and how did you overcome it?

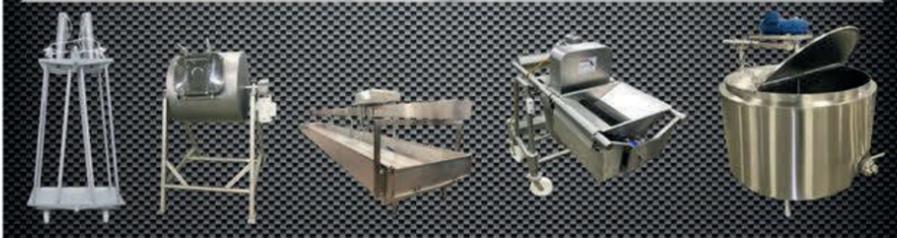
A One obstacle all family businesses face is becoming ingrown. We realized this was happening and was creating a bottleneck as we grew. The solution to the problem was to create an outside board of directors which had real power. Though the family can nominate new board members once a year, the board can make binding decisions.

Q They say “you learn from your mistakes.” Please share an example where this was relevant for you.

A I’ve made more mistakes than I can remember. The best mistakes, though, are the ones you correct before you pull the trigger, or at least before they can hurt you. One big mistake was to create a marketing effort when the target market was growing fast. We took way too long to hire people and to roll out a marketing effort. By the time we were ready to go, the market had shrunk and the only customers we got were ones who couldn’t get credit elsewhere. From that experience I learned to be conservative in creating time lines for new endeavors. CMN

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