

Kari Yuers of Kryton International On 5 Things You Need To Run A Highly Successful Family Business

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As a part of our series about 5 Things You Need to Run a Highly Successful Family Business, I had the pleasure of interviewing Kari Yuers. Kari is the CEO of Kryton International, a global leader in concrete waterproofing and protection technologies. With a background in engineering and business management, Kari has been instrumental in driving innovation and expanding Kryton's market presence. Under her leadership, the company has launched several groundbreaking products and forged strategic partnerships worldwide. Kari is known for her visionary approach, which includes a lot of listening, and her commitment to sustainable building practices,

positioning Kryton as a key player in the construction industry. Her leadership style combines strategic insight with a passion for fostering a collaborative and forward-thinking corporate culture.

Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Before we dive in, our readers would love to learn a bit more about you. Can you tell us a story about what brought you to this specific career path?

Kryton international Inc. was started by my father, Ron Yuers, in 1973. He saw a need for products that would permanently waterproof concrete, so he helped invent what is now known globally as our Krystol technology. I started out as a kid working in the plant to label pails and sweep the floor along with my older brother, Kevin. (We still call it our slave labor days) In my teenage years I worked in the summers making products and helping in the laboratory. In my later years, after working in various other occupations, I approached my father over lunch to suggest an arrangement where I came back into the company. I felt that our Krystol products and concrete solutions could grow more substantially. So, in 1991 I took a role in Technical Sales and became the General Manager of the Canadian Operation.

Can you tell us a bit about your family business and your role in it?

Kryton Manufactures award winning concrete durability solutions. We invented the world's first crystalline admixture, Krystol Internal Membrane (KIM) and for 51 years have been providing Krystol products and systems for permanently waterproofing new and existing concrete structures. We export these products to distributors in 50 countries with offices and people in Canada, USA, Singapore, Dubai, London, Mexico and China. In 2017, we acquired Cementec Industries who manufactures the award-winning product, Hard-Cem. This is an Abrasion and Erosion control admixture with over 80 million square feet of concrete treated in projects like warehouse floors, dams, spillways and industrial applications. I have been the President and CEO of Kryton since 2001.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began this career?

In 1997 I started to spend more time in China in our newly formed joint venture. When I arrived in Shanghai, I found myself looking out of my hotel window on the 24th floor at the bend of the Huangpu River. I could see dozens of construction cranes lining the horizon of my 180-degree view. The new Pudong area was across the river with skyscrapers poking through the clouds. I was amazed to think that this was only farmland 7 years prior. I remember thinking how lucky I was to be here at this significant time of change.

We were just in the midst of building a 50,000 sq foot factory north of Shanghai in Kunshan city.

During one of my visits to our building site, I took the opportunity to inspect the work completed already. At that point the main factory building was already erected, but they were still building a secondary building to house the workers. This was a 3-story condo made of concrete and brick. I had an entourage of about a dozen people from the contractor, engineer, designer, project manager and a raft of assistants and helpers. And of course, my translator as well as our Chinese partner. I noticed that they recently finished the roof, so in wanting to make sure that it was built properly, I started to ask a lot of very detailed questions. Not sure that I was understanding the answers, I suggested that I go to the roof to view the work myself. Everything was being translated, but this time a back-and-forth debate broke out and I could tell that something was an issue, so I asked my translator what was going on. She said that most of these people hadn't been up there and if I went, they would have to go too, which seemed quite clear that this was not anyone's preference. I offered to go alone, but, needless to say we all climbed up the precarious scaffolding and through a hole in the roof. Except for my translator who was relieved when I said that I could ask my questions when I came down. My pumps weren't ideal for this, but they stayed on my feet. I'm glad I went up... everyone eventually got down off the roof safely, but I'm sure I gave them all an experience they wouldn't forget for a while.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that? As a young woman in a male dominated industry such as concrete and construction, I suppose I made lots of mistakes. It's hard to learn without them. I was keen to change the way people built and so I called on engineers and contractors to try to convince them to specify or use our KIM waterproofing system in place of membranes and surface applied products. One day I was at a deep excavation where they were building many stories below the ground and I was trying to get a Project Manager, Bud French, at PCL to switch to using our KIM. I was talking as fast as I could about why KIM was better and could seal cracks and why it would save him some time and actually work to keep the water out. He was an experienced Project Manager, and this was a big high-rise project so I was pitching my solution as fast as I could fearful that he would throw me out of the construction trailer at any moment. He slowed me down and said "Kari, there are way more reasons for me to use it than just that" he said, "if I use this integral KIM material, then I have many more savings than just labor. I don't have to create space for a subtrade, provide garbage disposal for them, I don't have to schedule them and he went on and on naming the beneficial impacts to him and the project." I just listened and wrote down as many as I could. He helped me learn an important lesson which was to learn, understand and speak from the customers issues and impacts versus me just talking about how great my product was. We did that project in 1992 and have done many other PCL projects since.

What do you think makes your company stand out? Can you share a story?

We have a great culture of teamwork. Everyone feels like they are part of the family. Just this Spring, we took the entire company for a 4-day vacation in Mexico as a reward for achieving our revenue goals last year. That was so much fun.

Are you working on any exciting new projects now? How do you think that will help people?

Progressive field in Cleveland OH just underwent major renovations using our award-winning Krystol Internal Membrane or KIM for the concrete construction. This helps to create a safe and healthy venue for fans to watch the MLB Guardians play and keep water and corrosion from deteriorating this important stadium for decades to come. Whether it is seawalls, water tanks or building foundations, we can make our world's infrastructure last the test of time and climate change.

None of us are able to achieve success without some help along the way. Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to where you are? Can you share a story about that?

One person that had a profound influence on me was Bob Sinclair.

Bob became my coach for two hours every month in my first 10 years of being the CEO of Kryton. I know what you're thinking, that's a lot of meetings, but Bob helped me process issues, be my sounding board, but mostly helped me understand my blind spots. For instance, expecting everyone to view things the way I do. Hahaha.

He challenged my solutions and brought to my attention the best practices of other effective CEO's. He was always willing to introduce me or challenge me to call someone and ask them to share their experiences. A good coach doesn't let you slide. Bob helped me mature in my role as CEO and provided me with encouragement and positive feedback when I needed it the most.

He helped me to understand that in a family business, it is important to manage the family dynamic, as well as the business strategy. So, it is important to put things on the table, before they become a problem.

How have you used your success to bring goodness to the world?

I suppose the aspiration is to leave the world in a better place than you found it. I try to encourage other young women to swing for the fences and to particularly be perseverant when people try to tell you what you can't do. I'm proud that our organization has brought innovative sustainable building solutions to the world and helped to improve the way the world uses concrete.

Ok thank you for that. Let's now pivot to the main parts of our interview. How do you define a family business? How is a family business different from a regular business?

I define a family business as a business that thrives due to passion and belief in what they bring their customers and have a long-term view and stake in its success both financially and reputationally. I suppose it is technically a privately owned and operated

business with a family member at the helm and may have other family members involved whether they are in the same generation or of various generations. I believe that all businesses, family run or not, are mostly all the same. Where I see that they are different, is that family owned and operated businesses have a family management and leadership dynamic that can be different than public companies. Family businesses can take a long-term view to strategy and invest now for profits longer down the road. Depending on the family, they may put people and culture ahead of just profits. There can be differences in decision-making when you are not chasing quarterly (short-term) profits.

In your opinion or experience, what are the unique advantages that family-owned businesses have?

Trust. In my experience family businesses thrive in both good times and bad due to the team atmosphere of being part of the family. In tough times, our team hunkers down and finds ways to save money and find new revenue and growth areas. In good times we share in the profits in our profit-sharing program and celebrate our successes like recently when we all went to Puerto Vallarta on an all-expense paid trip to Mexico for reaching our growth goal. Family businesses can be more flexible or agile to customers' needs or changes in the marketplace. New generations can offer new ideas or approaches to growth, building off the previous generation's foundation. Commitment can be very strong due to this ownership dynamic. The values of the organization often mirror the values of the family business leader. Family businesses can feel more authentic and connective to employees and customers.

What are the unique drawbacks or blind spots that family-owned businesses have?

Drawbacks or blind spots of family-owned businesses can result from disfunction in the family itself. Sometimes this is simply a lack of clarity as to who owns what, who makes the decisions or sometimes family members can rise to positions that they are less qualified to hold than a professionally managed organization.

What are some of the common mistakes you have seen family businesses make? What would you recommend to avoid those errors?

The biggest mistake I see made in family businesses is that there is a lack of communication or clarity to what the plan is for the organization, what the plan is for the family or family members or feeling of equity between the family members. There is a distinct difference between governance, ownership and management of the organization. In some cases, family members are involved or responsible for all three, in other cases, they are family members who may sit on the governance board with or without ownership. I define ownership as "are there shares in your name"? Not mothers or fathers saying, "one day this will all be yours". Which by the way, is what I think gets many family businesses in trouble in the first place. I think the lack of clarity as to which roles they hold, and the responsibilities attached to each role can cause some issues.

I believe to avoid these challenges, it is incumbent upon the family leader to make it clear as to what the plan is for the organization, communicate often and early to get alignment to the plan. Don't leave family members guessing or worse, have them believe a different truth. Sometimes things change so it is even more critical to communicate amongst the group on a regular basis, perhaps including the next generation who is not yet involved in the organization. When I became CEO of Kryton, I started a regular "Tuesday Lunch" with my father and brother. We never missed a lunch together unless we were travelling. These lunches were an opportunity to hear from everyone on what they thought, what their goals and desires were, and how we can align our plans so that we all have a common goal. This was not easy at first as the founder of the business had a different vision than I did, but, over time, we were able to come together with a united vision and plan for the future. It created clarity on how all family members would be treated and how we could make room for future generations.

What advice would you give to other CEOs or founders of family businesses to help their employees to thrive?

Communicate, communicate, communicate. Communication is a two-way street. Sometimes new CEO's parachute into an organization and they may dismiss the previous management or leadership. I think it's important to find out what made the organization tick and what are the concerns or desires of the family members, not just the founder or CEO that is stepping aside, but all the family members and non-family members of the team. Also, having a process or mechanism to receive open and candid feedback from employees on a consistent basis is important to staying informed and aware of ideas and concerns. Take their advice and implement changes based on the feedback so that your behavior demonstrates that you are listening and that you acknowledge that they have good ideas worth actioning. Chances are that you will get more good ideas going forward.

How do you define "Leadership"? Can you explain what you mean with a story or example?

Leadership to me is about strong character and genuine curiosity with the courage and initiative to take action. With this definition, we can see that leadership should be encouraged at every level — no matter how junior the role.



Here is our main question. What are the “5 Things You Need To Run A Highly Successful Family Business”? Please share a story or example for each.

1 . A sense of humor. Being in business can be challenging at times. Having an international business and working around the globe is not for the faint of heart. No matter what the crazy challenges are or things that appear to come out of left field, you must laugh and find humor in it. Sometimes things are out of your control so, there is no sense in getting mad. Laughter makes it fun for both you and the folks around you.

When we parted ways with our Chinese Joint Venture partners in 2000, we found ourselves trying to get our trademarks back and keep the 50,000 sq.ft. factory from being taken from us. After years of cost and expense taking legal action, we would prevail with the Chinese courts finding in our favor. Then we find out that while they were appealing the ruling, they sold the factory and ran away with the money. My friends can't believe that I would laugh while telling that story, but sometimes the crazy stuff just happens. At least we finally won our registered trademarks back about 20 years later after many challenges. You have to celebrate the wins and laugh at the journey.

2 . Passion for the business and industry. Passion is one of our values here at Kryton along with integrity and expertise and together they spell PIE. For us, Passion is demonstrated when we change the way people build and help the great folks in our industry solve problems and find better ways to innovate. We see this all the time in the extra efforts our Krytonites go to all over the world to help our customers. When I heard that members of our technical team got up at 3 am our time to help with a presentation in the Middle East to support an important association of professionals, I knew it was due to their passion for creating change. Their passion comes through when you hear them speak about concrete and what Kryton can do to improve their results.

3 . A dedication to lifelong learning. I believe that Expertise is a finish line never achieved. I think it is important to stay curious and open to learning new things every day. If we strive to be better each day, then we share the power of growth and set positive examples. Learning about oneself is key to learning and adding value to others. Both my brother, Kevin and myself still belong to peer learning leadership groups. We meet regularly with leaders from diverse industries to share experiences and to get our answers questioned. I often feel I am too busy to spend an entire day out of the office for this group meeting, but I am always grateful afterwards that I made the commitment to participate. Some of my greatest learnings are from helping someone else with their issue. You also need people you trust to help you see your blind spots.

4 . Perseverance. My father used to say, "If it is to be it is up to me". He faced countless obstacles and setbacks in his life, but he always persevered in trying to be successful in everything he did. I think his perseverance was a good role model for developing teams that persevere in achieving goals. I think it is true that if you have an attitude of never giving up, that can make a big difference over time. When I first went out to try to get our KIM admixture adopted into projects, I was told that nobody is asking for an integral solution to waterproofing so I should just give up. I was told that it would never fly. I'm glad I was so stubborn and felt that I was right and persevered to keep working on getting specifications and demonstrate the value of a waterproofing system that really worked. It led me to joining the American Concrete Institute and help write reports and guides on the use of specialized admixtures for concrete. These innovative integral materials are now used in virtually every country globally. Good thing I didn't give up or listen to the naysayers.

5 . Empathy. I think everyone thinks of themselves as empathetic, but I think true empathy comes from an awareness that you don't know the whole story. That you may never know the whole story or where people came from. I think empathy for people and situations can go a long way to building relationships and making the right decisions in the end. And besides, who wants to work for an uncaring tyrant?

We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them :-)

I would love to have lunch or a gin cocktail with Ryan Reynolds. Sure, Ryan is a movie star, but I love that he leveraged his success and had the courage to enter business ventures such as American Gin and partnering to buy a team in Wales without knowing anything about football. And I mean anything. That is courage. His wife might call it something else, but, hey, if you don't try things, how will you know if they can be something one day. I like that he is a good role model for working hard, but also to put work aside for family. I'm sure I could learn something from him.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)

This is probably the most boring thing, but, where I live, we recycle everything. I mean every bottle, container, cardboard, clothes, virtually everything is sorted, and we have a good system for reusing and recycling stuff. When I travel, I see a lot of stuff hit the trashcan. I'd just like to see more recycling programs and waste reduction culture created in every town, city and country. I think this would go a long way to help our world be more sustainable. I'd also like to see everyone use reusable coffee cups. Single use coffee cups and lids are not recyclable.

How can our readers further follow your company online?

Linked in

X (twitter)

Instagram

YouTube

Facebook

New Website: www.kryton.com

Other?

Thank you so much for joining us. This was very inspirational.

The original article can be found [here](#).