



Leaders ...

MAKE IT
YOUR BUSINESS



**Local
leaders
share their
views**



Aim

The aim of this publication is to present 8 very personal views from local leaders and their experiences as managers of firms of different sizes, different industries and different regions. The one common denominator is their underlying and at times understated passion to build a successful business. It's who leaders are and what leaders do. **They are achievers.**

The stories are different, the personalities are different, but there is a tremendous similarity in the key management and leadership approaches they adopt:

Creating a Vision
Building the Team
Product or Service Excellence
Customer Focus
Continuous Market Intelligence
Innovation – in the product and in the process
Good Reporting and Financial Systems
and
Continuous Development of the People

These actions could be straight out of a text book but then there is nothing as practical as a good theory!

What makes it all gel together is altogether another matter. What separates these leaders from those who falter or are mediocre are some very personal characteristics summarised as follows:

Self Awareness – warts and all
Self Belief – and building that in others
Self Determination – and enthusing others to be the same
Life Long Learning – for themselves and their people
Adaptability – resilience to changing circumstances

As you read these stories we hope they will provide insights that will inspire you and help you to **Adapt, Adopt and Achieve.**

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Contents

Funeral Services N.I. James Brown	Page 4
Fleming Agri-Products George Fleming	Page 6
ION Online Marketing Niall McKeown	Page 8
Mash Direct Martin Hamilton	Page 10
TNS Media Intelligence™ MediaMarket Peter Fyffe-McFadden	Page 12
Re3 Debbie Boyd	Page 14
Vita Liberata Alyson Hogg	Page 16
Munster Simms Patrick Hurst	Page 18

Funeral Services N.I.



THE reality of a family business may not always be plain sailing but one family name is truly an enduring institution in East Belfast. On reflection for James Brown the lesson for today's entrepreneurs is not necessarily to learn business his way – but that's not the full story.

Living history of working class mobility

Aside from a large amount of what was, by his own account, misapplied early ambition, James Brown has had a career that his grandfather could never have imagined when he started business in 1904.

“My Grandfather was a poor man, a labourer working on a coal quay. He then saved up some money, his wife was a stitcher, and they bought a horse in harness, then they bought a cart, got into the coal business, became furniture removers and bought a car. To pay for the car he did some taxi work. He bought a bigger car and did weddings and in the early 30s he bought a hearse and went into the funeral business with his four sons.”

Early Start

James joined the business from school in 1960 and learned things the traditional way.

“It was mainly furniture removals then with a reasonable funeral business but over time

that grew. Without going into all my escapades as a crazy young entrepreneur, I took the business as close to bankruptcy as is humanly possible to be. I then decided, having got some external advice that what we should do was to concentrate on our core business.”

That conversation which today might be called mentoring, caused significant action.

“Our most sustainable business was the funeral business so we got rid of our car dealership, the travel agency, warehousing, fridges, continental haulage; which took a number of years to pay off all the debt.”

As the financial situation stabilised the firm began to expand with a number of new funeral homes and the acquisition of a Bangor firm John Grey. However there were major changes afoot in the industry.

“There was a lot of consolidation taking place and the family had difficult decisions to make but decided that this was the thing to do. There was no fourth generation and so we sold at the beginning of 1988.”

New start

That might have been an end to James' career in terms of growth and development but in fact it was to be the start.



That company merged with another PLC in 1989 and in 1991 James was approached to work in England to help with a turnaround process. American company SCI acquired that business and merged it with another PLC with James becoming MD now with 584 locations.

Final Journey

“The final chapter of my story is that in 1999, when I was 55, I decided to come back to Belfast. We had 14 funeral homes and a year later SCI decided to dispose of us and we then became part of the co-operative – United”.

“That was an extremely interesting experience because you are back into an ethos where profit is not the ultimate maxim rather meeting the needs of people in different ways is what drives the business forward”.

“We now have a network of 18 operations employing 120 people, a limousine fleet of 30 and 20 other vehicles. Our turnover is just over £7 million with a return on capital employed of around 12%.”

Although the ethos of the co-operative may differ the fundamental principles never change. As MD, James embarked on a significant management and leadership journey to differentiate his business from the competitors.

“You achieve results through people and that’s the bottom line. The skills and attitudes of the people in our business are fundamentally important but I recognised there might be a role for ISO in funeral services. We attained ISO 9002 accreditation and that brought a great sense of achievement. Then, looking at our training programmes, we engaged with the National Training Awards and were delighted to be recognised for the business performance we achieved through training”

Next it was suggested he should go for the EFQM. Not knowing what that was James discovered it was the European Foundation for Quality Management being championed by the Centre for Competitiveness.

“We started to engage with them and we were arrogant enough to go in at level three and got a mark of excellence. We got a

higher grade the next time and two years ago we obtained a Northern Ireland Quality Award.”

James was quick to recognise the benefits.

“EFQM has brought a structure to our approach and strategy so we now create our strategy and business plan using the EFQM model which has been a really good experience for us.”

James’ involvement with the Management Leadership Network began then too.

Receiving the MLN Leadership Award for excellence under the EFQM Leadership Criteria

“I was really thrilled to receive this unexpected accolade and how I got involved with MLN. I now present on their Roadshow series which is fun as many managers would not expect a funeral business to be run on a recognised professional basis.”

The other bottom line he reckons is that many business owners or leaders are still too slow to take advantage of the help and guidance that is available.

“Our business would not be where it is if we had not adopted some of these approaches. Building management and leadership capabilities and investing in the



right people will inevitably produce positive results for any business and it certainly has for ours.”

Now aged 64 and with no intention of retiring James is still 100 per cent committed to the old family firm.

“I had some amazing experiences, not all of which were nice, but it was nice to get a phone call to say would you like to be the Managing Director of the largest funeral business in Britain. I don’t mean to be boastful because it was a humbling experience too, but it wasn’t the case where people were saying you’re only where you are now because your father was your father”.

TOP SECRET

Fleming Agri-Products



FOR almost a century and a half the Fleming family have been establishing their business, but as George Fleming tells Richard Sherriff growing up in the family firm is no compensation for some real training and management guidance.

Like many young men George Fleming and his brother James grew up in the family business founded by their great grandfather. The firm now has 73 staff, a turnover in excess of £7 million and markets in Europe and Australia for its range of machinery aimed at the small to medium sized farmer and other commercial agri-markets.

However, despite learning the basics on the job, George is quick to highlight the management and leadership development he has undertaken that enabled him to fine tune and grow the business as a profitable concern.

“My great grandfather started the business in St Johnston, Co Donegal in 1860 to produce basic products such as potato or fish boxes and sometimes custom-built products for the area along with the manufacture and repair of flax mills.”

That was Robert John Fleming who was followed in turn by George’s grandfather James Taylor Fleming and his own father, also Robert James.

The Succession Issue

In the early 80s the brothers set up Riverside Engineering in New Buildings with three employees as a general engineering shop and a short time later James and George split the business with James retaining a steel stock holding business.

They dealt with the succession question right at the start.

“My family was coming on, his family was coming on and in another 20 years time it would be cousins dealing with each other,” says George “We were in control of both businesses and we agreed to separate. I took control of manufacturing in New Buildings and he stayed in St Johnston.”

At that stage, the business was still doing general engineering as well as the agri products but all was not well.

“My father always said: ‘Never refuse meat or money,’ so anything that was coming my direction I would have made it. As the agri sector product range started to strengthen it started to put pressure on us so we had to make decisions as to what direction we wanted to go. We were always busy but we weren’t making any money.”

It was at that point that George sat down and with the aid of an external management course took a hard look at the way the firm was operating.

“Until then we had never done any sort of a business plan – it was hand to mouth. In the early 90s I was persuaded to go on the LEDU Marketing Awareness Programme and it was actually very good. I was very apprehensive because I thought that everybody else had to be smarter than me and I discovered a whole range of other companies that were in exactly the same position.”

One of the key tasks he recalls was an analysis of telephone calls for two weeks.

“I discovered that 80 per cent of my time represented 25 per cent of my turnover but it only represented one per cent of my profit. I discovered I was taking more phone calls selling steel, which had such a low profit margin that, by the end of 1993, I stopped.”





A few months later he also stopped doing general engineering but the reasons were very positive.

“Within 18 months I did away with 50 per cent of my turnover and it was quite nerve-racking at the time, but the benefit of going on the course was to be able to stand back and see that if I did that I could spend more time making products that I had a ready-made customer for.

Understanding what the customer wanted rather than what he could make was a big learning curve for George

“When I made a fire escape, I made one fire escape. I had to draw it all up and when I was finished I had to put those drawings in the bin as I was never going to make another one the same. When I made a transport box I could make a hundred of them and when I had that 100 sold I could make another 100 from the same set of drawings each time”

George’s learning journey led to a whole set of management and leadership decisions

which brought about improvements in production flow and a change in direction.

“I set out to be a general engineering works and it turned out to be a factory. It sneaked up on me but we started to make products in bigger batches and we got a bit more production flow.”

From this the whole company was gaining in confidence and with a growing backlog of orders the business began to become more structured and more professional. One crucial element was to develop a Business plan for the first time

“I hadn’t a clue what was going to happen tomorrow and to actually try and plan sales of maybe £50,000 or £100,000 next month – how do you do that?”

Today setting the Business Plan is at the heart of the vision and direction for Fleming Agri Products which is driving their success

Having benefited from his own development George spearheaded a remarkable training and development initiative for rest of the management team and the entire company and is rightly proud of the outcomes

“If you go back to 1991 we didn’t have anyone who had a third level education and now we have seven plus every member of staff has an NVQ relevant to their needs

We have an ongoing training programme should it be for sales training, IT training, engineering training; it’s an ongoing process

with us. We have many accolades for this including IIP and National Training Awards but the greatest measure is what I am able to see on the bottom line”

Over the years George had also developed a relationship with organisations such as the Management Leadership Network that has become a two-way street.

“I believe in what MLN do for the SME community. I do attend their events and I also present on the Roadshow series. We look to take advantage of the courses that are relevant to us and sometimes that’s with the MLN, sometimes it’s Invest NI and sometimes it’s the Chamber of Commerce. We also have a strong commitment to develop our own courses in house”

Creating a learning culture is one of the key roles of an owner or a managing Director.

As George summarises

“It’s a never ending journey and there’s no such thing as ‘getting there’, because once you do you discover there’s a whole lot more problems because you’ve got to that level.”



LEARNING

ION Online Marketing

NIALL McKeown, managing director of Belfast-based ION Online Marketing is passionate about his business and has an infectious energy that is inspirational in both the difficult times and better days.

He can be controversial

“I can’t see what all the fuss is about, because in my experience our customers are seeing no real effects of the current slowdown,” says Niall.

His core business is email marketing, search engine optimisation and online PR, and he describes the company as “a full services online marketing agency that’s simply brimming with creative ideas”.

ION’s email marketing tool is simple, eloquent and powerful, equally important, it is delivered with exemplary customer service.

Niall is a visionary, setting up the business in 1999 at the age of just 26, and steering it through the trauma of the 2001 dotcom bubble bursting – largely intact.

And from those humble beginnings, the company has grown to nearly 20 staff, with its 2008 turnover coming in at a healthy 40 per cent increase on the previous 12 months.

“I put down much of our success to constantly improving our internal

management and leadership,” he says “And because our business is online, this applies to us more than most, as we have competition from all over the world.”

So how has ION undertaken developing management and leadership?

“We understand our people’s personal goals and try and help them achieve these through focused training and personally developed programmes. What we have here is a learning culture where leadership is demonstrated at all levels and our managers are determined to help each employee unlock their potential”

He is clear that what is good for his people is good for his business

“For example, we have recently helped an employee gain a professional qualification in accountancy by providing finance as well as time off to complete examinations.”

ION is also very clear about the benefits of networking as a learning opportunity as well as getting more business. Niall was keen to highlight his experience with MLN, which he says has helped ION connect with other business leaders, which in turn has led to it developing new business.

“MLN helps grow the expertise of managers. People often assume that either a person has management skills or doesn’t

– this is not the case, as effective management skills can be taught – and I am fully behind the efforts of MLN as they encourage owners and managers to develop the management talent we have in NI.”

Niall is very conscious that for smaller businesses the many challenges that present themselves often make it difficult to take time out for personal management training or improving management within an organisation. He is very honest to admit that he fell victim to that syndrome himself as there always seemed something more important to spend money on.

“But over the last few years we have found that investing money in better management can lead to substantial gains in business. Strong direction and leadership is frequently what is lacking in SMEs, and we have found that gaining the abilities to lead can greatly enhance the business.”

His conviction is that investing in management and leadership development is even more crucial in times of economic struggle.

“We are, in fact, benefiting from the economic downturn as businesses are



turning to online marketing to grow their business. That is not to say that we are complacent, but I feel that it is crucial to keep investing in training and development. There is a significant responsibility on the management team here to lead the business forward.”

That commitment can be seen in ION’s support for Management Month, firstly because Niall believes this is an important contribution to the economy but also the company intends to use it as a launch pad for future success.

He is concerned that many firms have considered online marketing but just don’t know where to begin, who to turn to, or how to go about it. His mission is to spread the word to owners and managers whenever he can. His assertion is that gaining the ‘know how’ is one of the new capabilities owners and managers must develop for the digital age.

Businesses learn best from other businesses is one of Niall’s favoured approaches to development. He asserts that “managers have to be comfortable with concepts such as Online Marketing, Website design and development, Social Networking, Search Engine Optimisation / Internet Marketing, CRM, Email Marketing, Online PR, Business Solutions, Online strategy development and implementation, and insights into future marketing.

“We are constantly innovating with products such as a new online PR service which again will bring many benefits to customers – especially SMEs.”

He is still controversial

He added: “We’re seeing that people are moving away from what I would call ‘lazy

advertising’ like billboards and print media to ‘moving’ adverts. Those who utilise this type of media will definitely stay ahead of the game in this recession.”



ion online marketing

ACUTE

Mash Direct



You say potato...

The humble spud could be forgiven for feeling a little worse for wear at the moment. Little wonder given the past 12 months of celebration during the United Nations International Year of the Potato.

While it might sound like just another marketing campaign, the idea behind a full year of potato celebrations was deadly serious. So serious in fact that the United Nations refer to one of our most established carbohydrate sources as the “Food of the Future” capable of sustaining the world’s growing food needs.

But it, and other locally-grown vegetables, was looking more like a food of the past on the Comber farm of Martin and Tracy Hamilton after the couple watched the market value of their farm produce fall steadily over the years.

The solution to this oft-repeated adage of the farming community is to diversify or close but not this one! Their response was not to stop growing crops, but to add value to them; and so, in 2004, Mash Direct was born. So was the management team, with Martin and Tracey at the centre. Their vision then for the company was simple “Mash Direct produces an innovative range of quick-serve products with the taste and texture of home-made food,”

Mash ‘Direct’ Marketing

In essence, Mash Direct does exactly as it says: produces mashed potato and other vegetables. Thirteen products are on offer including the inimitable champ, carrot and parsnip, mashed turnip, colcannon, red cabbage and beetroot, broccoli with a cheese

sauce, creamy garlic potatoes and ‘neeps and tatties’. For Martin, there are key components “Quality in every aspect of the business is uppermost linked to the customer experience”

Importantly for a small firm the management team are very much in tune

“The process involves unique, purpose-developed steam cookers that maintain optimum flavour and nutrients,” Tracy said. “No artificial additives, preservatives or colourings are added. The end product looks attractive and the packaging has been designed to allow the customers to see what they are buying.”

As a means of differentiation, all Mash Direct’s products can claim to be healthy and given the factory’s location on the farm, the products are gently cooked, packaged and on supermarket shelves within 24 hours of harvest, a boast that few other food manufacturers can manage. As Mash Direct has grown so has the management team but each member fully understands the significance of managing the ‘brand’ “Its not just the logo” says Martin “for us it is everything we do and they way we do it, as well as good marketing such as incorporating the ‘five-a-day’ and ‘0% additives’ branding,”

Martin is very keen to emphasise the need for a strong selling ethos in the company “this is a crowded market and I cannot underplay the need for great sales people – at all levels” Selling is an area where Mash Direct have paid significant attention as Martin believes that many small firms including his competitors, pay little attention to doing sales well. This is a feature he highlights when he now speaks at business forums and networking events. At an

MLN Roadshow Martin was quick to admit that they haven’t always got it right, but they always learn from their experiences. These have helped Mash Direct develop innovative approaches along with building very strong relationships. Martin has been seen with Mash Directs BIG BUS at various outdoor events including rock concerts for example where he also ‘interrogates’ the customer on the way out to see if they enjoyed the product. That is ‘direct marketing’

Growing More

All these positive aspects combined with the convenience of Mash Direct’s product offering has proved extremely popular and the company is now supplying all the major supermarkets and independent outlets in Ireland, Scotland and Northern England. The expansion doesn’t stop there. In February 2009 Mash Direct is looking forward to selling mashed ‘swede’ to the Swedes with a first delivery to Scandinavia.

Fairly impressive stuff and even more so when you’ve been given the backing of a couple of television’s most famous Essex boys, Jamie Oliver, who visited the farm in 2007, and Jimmy Doherty, the star of Jimmy’s Farm, who recently filmed footage at the site. And that’s not to mention the long list of awards heaped on a company only four years old. They include ‘Small Company of the Year’ in the UK Food Manufacture Excellence Awards, Ulster winner of the ‘Family Run Business’ award in the 2008 Ulster Bank Awards and six gold stars in the ‘Great Taste Awards’ from the Guild of Fine Foods. “The awards are great but for us the recognition and market profile they bring is



where the real value is. They also help us to constantly challenge what we do and that's where we get innovation"

Growing pains

As any company boss will tell you, such rapid growth and success tends to bring its own set of challenges which need to be dealt with rapidly if the rate of expansion is to be maintained. That's where effective management and leadership is essential and it's something that Mash Direct hasn't overlooked.

"No business can survive without good management and leadership; it is the key element," Tracy said. "As a business grows, the challenges change and management has to respond to these changes.

The couple have set out some of the core elements for their approach:

- The product has to be really good
- The people have to be the best for the job
- Everyone is involved in the selling process – and sales are key
- No one knows everything but lets make sure someone knows what you don't
- Good relationships with all Customers – wholesale, retail and end user will bring them back time and time again.

Both Martin and Tracey agree that "In this business an informed management team is paramount. There's no room for ego when it comes to management and leadership development. This is a family business and our people are part of the family. When we invest in training and development it has to be based on value for money and help us achieve a non-hierarchical management style"

So what, specifically, has Mash Direct done to develop its own management and leadership?

Martin provides a clear example of this as he readily points to his need for external mentoring and coaching "At Mash Direct we have an appointed board with a chairman who is deliberately a non-executive appointment with a clear remit to ask the difficult questions and to challenge the business management," He says. "We pride ourselves on our detailed management reporting and accounts that we now understand well and are produced by day 10 of each month which enables quick and informed decision making"

And it doesn't stop there. Mash Direct have put a high priority on developing individuals from the factory floor into supervisory and management positions and where required carefully hiring skilled and experienced staff who will add value to the business.

For some in the business world, the thought of investing hard-earned cash in such development during the current economic downturn is petrifying. They'd prefer to batten down the hatches and try to weather the economic storm rather than investing in initiatives that could make the organisation more efficient.

Again, not so at Mash Direct.

"Yes, definitely (investment in leadership and development) is even more justified," Tracy said. "In difficult times leadership is absolutely vital."

Phoenix from the mashes

It is clear that this family business has grown out of a real need to transform a fairly typical Ulster farm in to a thriving 'new' business. Yet all or most of the ingredients were already there. What has made the difference has been the initial recognition of the problem, the desire to create something out of what they already had, the vision to see a new opportunity, the determination to succeed, the focus on quality and the customer and a really great product. Combine these with the development of a team of skilled and capable people to make it happen and you have a very potent recipe for success.



TOGETHER

TNS Media Intelligence™ MediaMarket

THE global, 24-hour media machine is something of a monster these days and you'd imagine having the job of keeping an eye on it would be quite daunting, if not impossible.

Not so for Peter Fyffe-McFadden, general manager of the Belfast branch of MediaMarket, Ireland's largest provider of media monitoring, analysis and evaluation services. It's a management and leadership role that gives him a lot of freedom to run the business in his own style whilst making sure the business is aligned with head office.

Enthusiasm

It's immediately clear from speaking to the 36-year-old that his enthusiasm for the job is overwhelming. He happily points out that he nearly didn't join the company's production department in January 2007 as he had "no interest in the media whatsoever" given his background in IT. It was after meeting with Michael Farrelly, managing director of MediaMarket, that he decided to take the job, marking the start of a rapid rise to his current position. No doubt Peter's own enthusiasm along with significant technical ability had some part to play in his appointment. It is also clear that he carries this with him each day

"We have a team of 14 staff and two students in Belfast and we're very close-knit. It's hard to inspire the people around you if you have no enthusiasm or love for what you're doing. Sitting with a big, grumpy face and not doing much is an attitude that will only filter out. You need to constantly be full of beans. I think a genuine enthusiasm and passion for the business and a positive work ethos is what every good manager and leader needs."

MediaMarket, established in Dublin in 2002 and expanded to Belfast in early 2007, monitors, evaluates and measures media coverage for a wide range of companies and establishments. The MediaMarket mantra is to provide a fast, accurate and efficient monitoring service to the market.

It was the first media intelligence agency in Ireland to build a full electronic production facility as part of its strive towards greater accuracy and speed.

Knowledge

Peter played a principal role enhancing the technology used by the company within broadcast monitoring, making the most of his IT expertise in his leadership role.

"The company has invested heavily in the latest technology to provide our clients with accurate and timely delivery of media coverage in digital format. In Belfast through the creation of a strong capable team, we have introduced technology which has radically changed how quickly companies can access broadcast coverage," he says. "At the click of an email, clients can now receive television and radio coverage, shortly after it is broadcast. The days of typing up and receiving transcripts hours later are becoming a thing of the past. Our goal is to guarantee that our clients can access, assess and evaluate their coverage minutes after it appears in the public domain."

The Executive Information Service at Stormont for example is one of its biggest clients along with a diverse range of household names in the public and private sector. These include names in banking and construction, supermarkets, local councils, PR companies and schools. InterTrade



Ireland, Northern Ireland Water, the Fire Brigades Union and Queen's University Belfast are also on the list of clients wanting to track every mention they get in press, radio, television and internet coverage.

The busy father-of-two says his greatest skill is his own time management. It would also seem his infectious love of the job and ability to turn his hand to a wide range of tasks also sets a good example to colleagues.

"Attention to detail, an innovative attitude and people management are paramount to good leadership. My own qualities are diverse but the single biggest skill that is required is personal management of my time. This directly and indirectly influences my ability to perform all the other required skills," he says.

He has an ambitious personality for both the business and himself.

"I have the kind of personality that leaves me always looking for a challenge, always looking for something new to do," he says "my team know that I am always looking to the future and that's what creates the buzz"

Peter believes in this environment a hands-on approach is another important part of being a good manager.

"The team knows I'm always on hand to deal with any problem – from the breakdown of a PC, to advice for a client," he says. "And I take my turn in making the coffee. Apparently, my coffee's not too bad but maybe they're just saying that so I'll keep making it for them."

This approach however is balanced with an understanding of the need for good management practices. Since becoming general manager Peter has made significant changes to re-structure MediaMarket's management team in Belfast.

"I've created a management team who report to me on a weekly basis. This involves an office manager, a production manager, a broadcast supervisor and a client service team lead," he explains. "This has freed me up to concentrate on what I need to. I also make sure I get the best from people's skills and talents by making sure we know what they are best at and that they're in the right job."

Adaptability

Despite the economic downturn, MediaMarket in Belfast has seen remarkable growth in recent times. Its list of clients has quadrupled under his management and places a lot of store in the company's ability to respond to the many client demands.

He agrees that the worst step a business could take in a recession, particularly a small business, is to let investment in his management team and his people slip

"That would be a recipe for disaster. There is always an element of luck to every business and to deal with this element it is essential that you have the dice loaded in your favour, that's where great people play a vital role," he says. "Adaptability is a great attribute to have in any organisation but especially the IT and media industries"

The all-Ireland operation was recently acquired by Taylor Nelson Sofres plc (TNS), a world leader in market information, boosting its market share in Western Europe and giving the Belfast operation links to 80 countries. MediaMarket is also the only media monitoring service licensed by both the Newspaper Licensing Agency and Newspaper Licensing Ireland.

So what for Belfast's future in the international operation?

Peter is quite clear about the key to future success

"We are the best at what we do. My ethos is that we must always strive to be the best at what we do."

THE BEST

Re3

WHILE most of us plan to fill a bin a fortnight, Debbie Boyd's new waste reprocessing plant will turn garbage into a business opportunity at a rate of 20 tonnes every hour.

Re3

In most people's minds there can be fewer less original stereotypes than the teenager who can't wait to get out of school but Debbie Boyd's story quite literally rubbishes any such notion and proves emphatically how misleading cosy preconceptions can be. After a career spanning the carpet industry, the hotel trade and the post office, she now heads an exciting new recycling business and holds a visiting professorship at the University of Ulster to boot.

The Re3 Group is now poised to roll what she describes as the first truly commercial waste recycling plants in the world, the first of which has recently been commissioned in Limerick.

"The Re3 group started about three years ago and its ambition was and remains to develop innovative technologies that could be applied to waste treatment and renewable energy," she says. "It followed 12 years of detailed research looking at a full range of technologies that could be applied and brought to Ireland and eventually we decided to go down the route of using steam autoclaving".

Debbie has a pragmatic approach to all things and likes to keep things simple and understandable

"It's basically like your mother's pressure cooker except on an industrial scale and what we do is we cook domestic, municipal and commercial waste using this technology and we turn it into a clean, renewable biomass fuel so it's something that could be used to replace wood

pellets in a boiler or coal in a fossil fuel power station."

Debbie knows her stuff and is an enthusiast both for the benefits recycling can bring and for the fact that she has developed a very exciting business. Re3 are working on the basis that about 15 per cent of the materials that are processed will end up in landfill. That sounds pretty good until you hear how the general recycling system works at the minute and then it sounds faintly incredible.

"In Ireland at present we only recycle somewhere between 22-25 per cent of our waste stream and the other 75 per cent goes to landfill. What we're looking at is being able to offer an alternative system for processing it in industrial batches. It's the only technology that I'm aware of that can achieve and recover a recycling rate of 80 per cent plus."

Even though she is now a visiting Professor Debbie's own story begins in Portadown with 13 O-levels and a major disinclination to stay in education. That's not the same as not wanting to continue learning. Its worth noting as she says that being adaptable and looking forward have been key characteristics that have seen her through good time and not so good times.

"I had a severe dislike of the educational system," she declares. "They just wanted to pigeonhole me so I went out into the big bad world and did like every good Portadown girl, I worked for Ulster Carpets. I then went to work for the Post Office thinking that a civil service career might be something that I would like but I was bored rigid after nine months and left."

With a typical understatement Debbie explains "The next natural step, of course, was to get married and go to live in Amsterdam as you do,



mainly because '79 was serious time with the Troubles and I really didn't see a long term future for myself and my husband and any family we had in Northern Ireland."

She and her husband worked for the Hilton (he was a chef) and came back in 82 primarily for Debbie to gain additional qualifications in computing that would allow her to take up a post in Singapore. That didn't work out so well and as someone who looks forward – not back with the recession at that time she took a position as receptionist with the waste disposal firm Clearway.

"I brought the management skills which I gained at the Hilton to what they described it as then as Steptoe and Son and basically we started to build up the structure of the company from there."

Within eight weeks of joining the firm, Debbie became office manager and after four years she became the company secretary with responsibilities for business strategy and developing export potential. Debbie would say that she has always been known to be inquisitive and this natural trait was easily exploited as she began to investigate the marketplace and understand the opportunities

"I quickly discovered that it was a very strong business and there was a lot of influence coming from the European Union. The whole environment sector was one that was going to be a fast growth sector over the next 20 years and so we put in place a strategy to ensure that Clearway became the number one metal recycling company on the island of Ireland and achieved it within 10 years. I believe that about three years ago the company was valued at about £65 million and when I started it was turning about £400,000 and lost money.

Debbie is also appreciative of the opportunity she had to develop a much broader role during this time

"It was an excellent environment in which to learn and during that time I represented the company through the CBI and IBEC/CBI joint council for example."

Ultimately the relationship came to an end in 1992 by which time Clearway had reached a £20m turnover and a 95 per cent export quota.

"It's no secret that I asked to become part of the organisation in terms of having a long term interest and when that was declined I left to set up on my own. Re3 came out of the belief that the largest volume of waste materials being produced on the island of Ireland was garbage. When I looked at the potential for growth I realised that it was to be found in being able to do something with landfill or incinerator destined waste."

That vision along with her determination has taken her from a standing start to the commissioning of a major advanced recycling plant

"The research and development side is based in Northern Ireland though the first physical facility is in Limerick. We intend to roll out

through further operations the island of Ireland and the UK with each facility costing between £12-15m and will create around 50 jobs."

Going forward Debbie considers the need for excellent management and leadership to be crucial to making this expansion a success. She is aware that as each facility opens up the management teams and the workforce have to be aligned to the vision and values that are at the core of the existing business. Having already created the Re3 ethos in Limerick this further expansion will be a new challenge but one which she is looking forward to. Key to that success will be the ability to get the best people and bring them on board progressively. That will demand significant management and leadership supported by excellent training and development as both the time to get started and the need to achieve the required expertise will be crucial.

Of necessity Debbie has had to expand her knowledge and her own abilities but at the core of her philosophy is self belief.

"I learned at the coal face in a new industry which was growing and developing. 25 years ago when I was starting off nobody wanted to know. The environmental goods and services sector is now recognised as being a sector in its own right and is a major element of European Union policy"

Looking at her own journey there have been some approaches that she adopted that have made the difference over time.

- Make sure you know what it takes at each step
- Break it down and work on it every day
- Write your plans down – for your business AND for who you want to be in 5 years
- Get a mentor and know what you want to

achieve from that relationship

- Learn every day – build personal development plans as well as organisational ones
- Invest in People – that's what makes the real difference
- Be a leader and an entrepreneur not a manager – allow the business to grow WITHOUT you
- Communicate, Communicate, Communicate – with your people
- Network, Network, Network – with your customers, suppliers and business colleagues
- Understand the legislation – and look for the business opportunity.

"There's no day goes by that I don't learn something and I'm a great believer in lifelong learning. I do believe that whilst they teach you the ABCs at school, when I made my first presentation for MLN I told them that they should be teaching the CBA. If you can **conceive** an idea and you **believe** in it then **achievement** is there for you. But you have to be passionate about what you want to do and you have to be clinical in your assessment of the concept and if you believe that you can achieve it – then there's nothing can stop you."

"We believe in what we do. Re3 stands for Resource, Recycling and Recovery so we take waste, we treat it as a resource, we recycle it and recover about 80 per cent of it. That's where we believe the future of recycling lies and it helps us to know that we might just be helping to protect the planet as we do it."



VITA Liberata

Solid foundations

Some of the world's best businesses can trace their roots back to pinpointing genuine need, often by chance. Vita Liberata is no different.

Managing director Alyson Hogg retired from the world of modelling, television and radio presenting around the big 40. Her business idea stemmed from a frustration she felt every time she had to go to the bathroom cabinet. Alyson just got fed up with the plethora of beauty products on offer most of which were ineffective and complicated. So, with an eye on the old business mantra that – simplicity is key – she decided to source and produce her own. Her initial foray in to the market place was with the anti-ageing Coral Silk Skincare and Self Tan systems.

The route to market, while initially arduous, was underpinned with flexibility and adaptability.

“I got started through a circuitous route that included sales on shopping channels, big ideas, little knowledge and whole lot of vision,” Alyson said.

While the name may hark of the Mediterranean, Vita Liberata is actually based near Parkgate outside Ballyclare and local lady Alyson has since built up the company to rival some of the biggest names in an already crowded industry. As a result, sales to customers throughout the

world have grown significantly in the last few years despite the well-publicised slowdown in the global economy.

“We quickly recognised that our core business is making women more beautiful and, as a result, more confident and happy in themselves,” Alyson said. “We know we can only do this by creating really excellent products in the cosmetics, skin care and self tan markets”

Hand on the tiller

While success for the local company has followed given the presence of a sound business plan and red hot product offering, Alyson has also realised the importance of having a proactive skipper with a steady hand on the tiller. Given she had little practical business experience before starting Vita Liberata, she has fresh and in-depth knowledge of the importance of implementing a sound management and leadership strategy.

“Management and leadership are vital to the success of any business. Lately, I have found this can mean getting – literally – down on to the shop floor.”

Alyson points to some key messages and would suggest that people need –

- to be focused;
- to be actively encouraged to use their own initiative;

- to take ownership of their jobs and therefore the business;
- to see the connection between what they do and the profitability of the company;
- to understand that the better we are, the more likely everyone is to keep their jobs.”

In an ideal world this approach would work easily with all employees but in practice, Alyson realises sometimes there are some who won't fit in with the business plan. She advises small businesses to take decisive action in order to keep moral high with the rest of the people contributing to the business.

“If you have people who continually find it difficult to work with the team in this manner, they will only undermine everyone,” she said. “Deal with it. Let the good, positive guys see your support.”

Keep close

So in practise, how has Alyson developed management and leadership at Vita Liberata?

“I have been working more and more closely with my team, watching, learning a lot and leading from the front. I have also benefited from a number of practical



development opportunities and I use the customers to help me understand my business better. I have some great people in my network of friends and business colleagues that I look to for guidance and support which is vitally important”

This intimacy with her workforce allows Alyson to offer advice and to keep her finger on the pulse of a vital part of the business.

“My people are generally young and very bright. They need me for experience. I encourage them to ask questions all the time. First mistakes are readily forgiven but then, I now know the members of my team are as committed, focused and energetic as anyone could be. All they need is guided in the right direction, if they haven’t already found it for themselves!”

Such commitment to management may be all well and good but there have been suggestions from some quarters that development in this respect is only for the prosperous times. Not so, said Alyson.

“It (management and leadership development) is more important than ever (during a downturn) because there is absolutely nowhere to hide. Weak management will be exposed in seconds.”

Local approach needs improving

Vita Liberata has a client list based throughout the world so Alyson is well qualified to give an opinion on how well the local business community has embraced what some describe as a modern approach to management. Sadly, the comparison with our global neighbours isn’t flattering for Northern Ireland.

“Unfortunately, it has been my experience that some Northern Ireland businesses – not all – can be very aggressive and seem to interpret management and leadership as requiring the skills of a sergeant major. Perhaps it is how they cope with the current climate but I do not believe such aggression is necessary or even productive.” Indeed, this approach may actually be counter productive.

“My experience is that negative behaviour leads to barriers that make the doing of business much more difficult. In the past, however, I know that I could have been accused of being too soft and much too quick to doubt my own judgement.

“Through a series of tough times I have learned to trust my gut feelings, not to accept negative behaviour and negative energy and that minor problems can become chronic when not dealt with. A little pain now can avoid death’s door illness at a later stage!”

Vita Liberata success is undoubtedly grounded in its popular product offering but the passion Alyson has for the business along with developing management and leadership capabilities has been, and looks likely to, propel the company to worldwide success.



VITA LIBERATA

Munster Simms



MAKING sure management and leadership development comes top of the agenda is a difficult enough job when operating a business in a buoyant economy never mind during times of economic downturn. But for those with foresight and a desire to thrive, it's never been more important.

Under the leadership of MD, Patrick Hurst one such company which follows this ethos is Bangor-based engineering firm Munster Simms, now known by its brand name of Whale Pumps.

Whale of a time

The business is focused on offering a wide range of products and services linked to water systems. From its Bangor base it designs, manufactures and sells pumps, valves and facets for application in mobile or low voltage environments. Most of its market is focused on the caravan,

motorhome, leisure, marine and industrial markets and it supplies some of the world's leading power and sale boat manufacturers. As a result, its products tend to operate in the toughest environments imaginable and it's for this reason Munster Simms designs, manufactures and tests all its own products from the site in Bangor. This company bucks the trend as they have brought a lot of the production back from Asia to do it – better and cheaper!



Patrick is very driven by the desire to create a company that can have its destiny in its own hands

“It is critical to ensure strong leadership and management skills are deployed widely and effectively in light of the difficult market conditions the majority of companies are operating in today, Ensuring, all employees in the company are fully engaged and committed is a key leadership and management priority in Whale Pumps to help us meet the challenges of differing market conditions and especially any downturn we face.”

Patrick is well placed to comment on such matters given he manages 120 people at Munster Simms as well as being an independent business advisor for Invest NI and a number of privately-owned manufacturing companies. Patrick has also been a senior member of the Wrightbus team.

It's no coincidence he sees an obvious correlation with a company's success and the quality of both the management team and the workforce.

People first

“At the heart of a company are its people,” he said. “The better they operate at each level in the business, the more successful it will be. This comes from having sustainability and growth in the leadership and management of the company.” He is very clear that

“Investing in quality training and support for up and coming managers and leaders is important to help the business flourish and that has never been truer than now.”

This is stitched in to the firm's vision

It reads: “Our vision is to add value to our customers' businesses by providing them with innovative, market leading products and with professional, proactive support services. In achieving this, our employees will consistently act with integrity and honesty, and radiate a passion for our company, our culture and for our customers.”

Guiding Principles

This company has evolved significantly since it was founded in 1810 by Paul Munster. In the early days, the Munster Simms group of companies included a distribution side dealing in corn, barley and flaxseed but the sale of these businesses after World War II saw a move into the manufacture of pumps, initially for the marine industry and subsequently for the caravan sector.

At present it exports to around 48 countries throughout the world including North America - where it has a base – all European countries alongside Australia and South Africa. Its reputation for product innovation has grown in recent years and has been independently recognised by awarding bodies in both the USA and Europe.



Patrick is rightly proud of the achievements and recognition gained which he is keen to detail “Our brand business has probably grown most in the last 10 years, partly because of water systems becoming more sophisticated, through good product development and also an emphasis on Quality and Branding. The company can boast of having ISO 9001, ISO 14001 and OHSAS 18001 accreditation,”

If anyone knows the company inside out it's Patrick as it was at Munster Simms that he started his career as a student in 1989. His initial role was the development of international markets, product development and the establishment of a subsidiary company close to Boston in the US.

Now back as managing director of the company that gave him his first break Patrick recognises that the experiences he has gained elsewhere have helped him develop a more rounded view of his role. His key principles for management and leadership can be summarised as

- Honesty and integrity – are not optional.
- An open mind and – an open door

- Do the whole job – not just the bits you like
- If you think you have communicated enough – you probably haven't
- Having the best people – and people doing their best, is fundamental
- Keeping the customer happy – means keeping customers
- Our Brand is our value – everyone is part of the brand.

Patrick is a firm believer in the benefits of networking and being associated with Management and Leadership Network for example. He has taken part in some of the organisation's recent Roadshows and is sought after as an external advisor and mentor by many companies.

This is his way of showing leadership through learning. To demonstrate his commitment to life long learning and to building management and leadership capabilities he is currently working to complete a PhD in Strategic Leadership in Dublin.

So, as expected from someone with such an interest in the development of management and leadership, he ensures the staff at Munster Simms are well catered for.

Developing success

“Over last two years, all members of staff have received training in the innovation, creativity, leadership and management. In addition, the senior team have been

involved in more intense training in this area so as to improve overall management competency in the company.”

Such attention to detail is impressive but not necessarily the route followed by other companies in Northern Ireland. Despite this, Patrick felt there is definitely a realisation that management and leadership is key to developing a successful, long-term business in this day and age.

“As a result of the excellent work being carried out by the likes of the Management and Leadership Network through their Roadshows, owners and managers in Northern Ireland are, in general, much more aware of their role in developing management and leadership capabilities,” he also believes that “As a result, I get the feeling there are more companies in the region working to improve the skill set in their own organisation and that can only be a good thing for their future prosperity.”



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