

Rubber News- **Special Report**

Ernie Pouttu's leadership advice: 'Be yourself'



Ernie Pouttu

Ernie Pouttu has been with Harwick Standard Distribution and its forerunner, Harwick Chemical Corp., for just over 39 years. Come January he will have been president and CEO for 17 years.

Pouttu said it's important to have balance in your life and to give back to the community. And he definitely follows that path himself, as he is a marathoner, bicyclist and volunteers for a number of organizations. He currently is one of four honorary chairs of the Akron Bicentennial Commission and is on the Advisory Council of the Polymer Industry Cluster.

You've been in the rubber industry a long time. What do you see as the similarities and differences in leading people now, compared to earlier in your career?

Despite how technology has changed the way we work, in my opinion the fundamentals of leadership remain. Be yourself. To be anything else is not genuine. I feel the most reliable path and really the easiest path is to be you. Lead with empathy. Know that everyone is dealing with something. So try not to overreact when situations occur. Patience is the key.

I do not feel like I am leading differently than I have in the past. Although age and experience likely do have an impact. I am always trying to build on my experiences and feel like I am learning all along the way.

What is one thing you have learned recently from younger people on your staff?

Younger people are much more adept with technology than I am. Digital native is a term used to describe those who grew up in the presence of digital technology. The days of land lines, dial-in technology and fax machines is past. I am impressed at the skillful use of technology by our younger people. Their ability to move around a spreadsheet from program to program is amazing. However I feel texting and emailing is overdone. A recent Wall Street Journal article mentioned the most underused technology is the phone call. The next time you are ready to text or email someone, take a pause and ask whether a phone call would be better.

How would you explain your own leadership style?

I hope that how I would describe my leadership style and how others describe it would match. My goal is to be one who leads through working together.

What are you doing to groom potential upcoming leaders for Harwick Standard?

Harwick is a relatively flat organization. We do not have a large number of layers of management. Also, we do not have much employee turnover. Many employees have multiple years of service. However, we do need to fill positions as people retire. We provide employees with additional responsibilities and, in my opinion, allow them the opportunity to do more.

What advice would you give someone who would like to move up the ranks in their rubber industry career?

To move up the ranks be alert and be aware. Keep your eyes and ears and mind open for opportunities. Do more than what is expected of you. Get involved with our local rubber groups and remember to give back to your community. Balance is important so pay attention to your life outside of work and take care of yourself mentally and physically to avoid burnout. I believe we should always be ready to help each other as a rising tide lifts all boats. Myles Garrett of the Cleveland Browns recently said: "Heart means more than skill."