GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Business

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Healthy Change

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Change continues to be the one constant in many of our lives. I remember hearing “The more things change, the more they stay the same" hundreds of times and over many years. In our business there have been several times I've wondered how things will work out, much less how we might be better, when tough decisions I've made or helped with led to unexpected or harsh change. My own mantra for a long time has been centered on “Change is Good,” and as I think about it, I'm sure that's accurate.

In Maryland, an entire campaign for governor to "Change Maryland" proved successful, and nearly 70% of Marylanders surveyed now believe the state government is on the right track—up from just 20% a year ago. I had a health wake-up call nearly a year ago, and changed my eating habits as a result. If it’s on the menu and I love it—I just can’t order it. While this has resulted in a real lifestyle change it’s been relatively easy to realize the improvement that the doctors suggested would keep me breathing. Change isn’t always easy, but most often good.

I'm convinced that, provided we manage those things in our lives that we have direct control over, changes to our own norm can most always lead to good things. Comfort around change can be a relative or different thing, and for many being comfortable in a relationship—personal or professional—is a motivator, though it can also lead to complacency. Embracing change can be really difficult, especially for those of us where routine may be particularly important. I reflect on my own examples around that statement but always come back to the same feeling that change is good.

In my own experience, changes we don't control or impact are often the most unsettling. Society used to recognize and reward longevity in position or career, where 30-, 40- and 50-year careers were the norm. Today we look at experience gained along someone's career path that might include four or five jobs over a ten-year period. What was once considered job-hopping is now experience enhancement, often adding value.

Working with large retailers as some of us do, we've gotten used to changes over the years that have been

extremely good for consumers and for the green industry. Whether or not we know individuals in positions of authority who impact our ability to succeed, or we like particular advertising strategies or packaging requirements, millions of new gardeners have been introduced to our products and become regular consumers since the largest retailers first engaged in stocking and advertising our products. Working for many years with Home Depot, we've learned that we adapt to change whether we control it or not. Contacts retire or otherwise move on, promotions occur, and individuals we deal with change. We accept these things and move on, always with an eye towards new opportunities or new ways to look at things that may develop, and with the commitment required to always be relevant, and drive growth and return on investment. There's no place for complacency in any of our businesses, and change around relationships always reinforces that point. We each need to be the best we can be, every day.

When I think back to our first delivery experience into a Home Depot and the gratification around seeing those products go through the cash register, I remember my father's early advice well—he reminded me no matter how good we might feel about what we do or have done, that "we're only as good as our last delivery." He wasn't actively involved in the business at that time, but I really believe this particular advice has helped us maintain an edge. We talk about it internally, and with regularity.

"Confidence is the feeling just before disaster" was something else Mike [McCarthy, Gary's partner] and I heard from him during our earliest days—and those two statements work well together. I remember the moment I first heard the advice. I was unloading our second-ever Home Depot delivery of a hundred New Guinea Impatiens baskets at store 2503 in Catonsville. I wish I could calculate how many New Guineas we've sold through Home Depot—it has to be over 10 million in various forms. Walking through the greenhouses or through our loading areas, I find myself thinking how important it really is that we continue to operate with that simple philosophy. We tend to be able to meet or exceed expectations when we operate with simple, consistent expectations.

For Bell, we will always remember that we're only as good as our last delivery. The more things change, the more they stay the same. **GT**

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