

GROWERTALKS

Growers Talk Production

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Restructuring

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Saunders Brothers is a family-owned and family-run business with a father and four brothers at the helm. Each of them is responsible for a different facet of the company, and for at least the last 30 years, they've all met once a month to discuss the farm as a group.

Our centennial in 2015 was cause for celebration, but also introspection and the family began to think in earnest about succession. They decided to bring in a consultant to help ensure the business saw another 100 years with family and non-family leadership.

The consultant strongly suggested they look at restructuring the management chain so it was clear, more linear and less interwoven from top to bottom. We also looked at what each position should do versus what they actually did. We've always been a multiple hats kind of place and over time, people ended up wearing hats that didn't relate to each other. Each responsibility made sense at the time it was adopted, but over time, they end up being a collection rather than a sensible combination of responsibilities for a given position. First, there was a thorough review, then the shuffling started.

The brother in charge of sales became the GM (we hadn't had a dedicated GM previously). A sales person moved into the Sales Manager position, another employee into the now vacant sales position and so on until five people upstairs had a new job. Similarly, the brother in charge of woody production became the dedicated head of all container production, the flowering shrub grower became the woody grower and so on until five people downstairs had new jobs. Add to that five new hires (two new positions and three to replace vacancies due to attrition) and 15 people had new jobs before we started spring.

From my seat in the middle of the company's hierarchy, 11 months and a full growing season later, the new structure feels like a logical, good and healthy change, but it was (and is) a challenging transition. Half of those with new jobs were learning their new position while also teaching someone else their old one. Since we made the changes at the start of the year, there wasn't much time to get up to speed before spring hit and everyone just held on. Spring was rough, but we didn't let our customers see it. And we largely avoided the temptation to revert to old responsibilities, even during the busiest seasons, which I see as a measure of our commitment. The process wasn't one and done like a Band-Aid—it took (and still takes) a commitment from the whole team.

Not every change in responsibilities or personnel was a good one, so we've had to make additional adjustments throughout the season. There was some wash out, but it led to great new hires. The potentially awkward transition of peers becoming supervisors wasn't met with much pushback and none of it lasting.

Communication is better within and between departments, but there's still room to improve, as the process didn't

inherently fix all communication problems and there was sometimes a lag between a responsibility being set down by one position and picked up by another. In some cases, processes we thought were being completed a certain way weren't being done that way at all. Now we have a better idea of what everyone does and where we need cross training. We also found at least one instance where the job wasn't possible for one person, so we split it up.

Overall, the whole process engaged our team to be more involved and to take more responsibility. It revealed a path for advancement. As a youngish person in the industry with a lot of my career ahead of me, I'm hopeful. We're looking to the future and working towards it as a team. **GT**

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