

Outside the Box: The Barn

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Constructed by German prisoners of war (POWs) — remnants of Rommel's elite Afrika Korps, who had been captured as the allies established the momentum that would allow them to first retake control of northern Africa and eventually defeat the axis powers — the

yellowed brick and mortar barn was well-used. Its roof showed the effects of some 70 years of Texas sun and storms, though the expertly crafted concrete foundation and floors were in exceptional condition. However, the entryway to the small office and storage room required a substantial

refit due to the combined effects of termites and the 2017 flood.

In search of a project in the midst of a trip to visit in-laws, my son Trae, a 24-year-old construction manager, and I had agreed to take on the work. Our two-day project was destined to be more than completing a weekend repair job; it would mark a small but significant shift in our relationship. He would be in the lead, and I would play a supporting role.


Over the course of the project, he created the design, handled the communication with the clients, did most of the craftsman work and established the time line. I ran extension cords, swung a hammer, drilled a few holes, and all the other tasks that less than a decade previously my son would have accomplished.

Succession in a family business requires a similar process of teaching, learning and gaining experience, but ultimately its success depends on the willingness of one generation to yield authority and for the other to assume it.

The project had its challenges: The tools were borrowed — and by the aspiring titan builder's standards, more bare-bones than he was used to. There was the extra pressure of wanting to please a client who was family; and, of course, I couldn't help but add a bit of unsolicited advice from time to time.


Each time I see that barn in the future, it will remind me of those two days and the challenges of parents and children who choose to work together. Family business is complicated because it involves roles that ultimately must change. Each stage of maturation

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of the relationship can be wonderful in its own right if we embrace the inevitable transitions that accompany the human journey.

The path to that barn had begun with small boys tagging along as fences were fixed, gates were hung and chores were completed. Those early experiences gave rise to the adventures of childhood when play and profession are merged during the process of exploration and skill development.

When Trae and his brothers were grade school boys, they had gathered up a few old tools, a stack of leftover roofing shingles and a Folgers® can filled with recycled nails to roof an old firewood shed. It had taken them most of the day, and while the results were, shall we say, “somewhat primitive,” they were immensely proud of themselves. That early effort gave way to a sort of informal apprenticeship characterized by supervised projects, the gradual use of power tools, lots of fatherly lessons (some more readily accepted and gracefully delivered than others), and growing pains for all as the excitement of participation gave way to the desire for autonomy and mastery.

Passing the reins

Succession in a family business requires a similar process of teaching, learning and gaining experience, but ultimately its success depends on the willingness of one generation to yield authority and for the other to assume it. In the best of circumstances, the transfer is gradual, intentional and peaceful. In those two days, I was reminded that an environment of partnership born of trust, perspective guided by two parts patience and one part humor, and a clear focus on bringing the plan to fruition is required for success.

For those of the senior generation, it is critical to recognize the talents and capabilities of the next while knowing when to offer advice and when to step back. As we worked beyond the limitations of the equipment at our disposal, I better understood his desire to have access to the right tools and technologies to assure the highest quality of work within the constraints of

a tight timetable. I was also energized by his commitment to creating an outcome that was both functional, but also well-designed and attractive.

The emerging generation finds benefit from recognizing that value is to be gained from the experiences of their predecessors. As we worked within the limitations of the tools and materials at hand, the power of adaptability and

flexibility borne of experience were brought to bear on the problems in front of us. Wisdom reminded us to pause to let frustration subside and to acknowledge good work as the new design emerged.

As we finished sweeping and gathering tools, I thought about those POWs, former enemies from long ago who had been the beginning of that barn.

I wondered where life had taken them after the war. As we walked away from that old barn so tied to our past, I was thankful we had added to its story by taking advantage of the opportunity for a father to let go of the reins and a son to take them up.



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