

Seeing a generational shift

There are some fundamental truths in the nursery and greenhouse industry. Two stand out to me as we are in the middle of spring.

First, Oregon nursery businesses may offer a complex mixture of green goods, while serving different markets and running at different sizes, but they all share the common denominator of being family run. Family is a cornerstone of our little slice of heaven in the Pacific Northwest. I am exceedingly proud to be a part of this world.

The second truth is the generational shift in our leadership, particularly over the course of the last decade.

Some background. During Oregon's key period of rapid growth in the 1980s, our industry blossomed due to the hard work, intestinal fortitude and pure drive of several nursery titans.

Our Oregon Association of Nurseries was blessed with leaders like Dick Joyce, Jack Long, Rod Park, Jack Bigej, Norbert Kinen, Tom Fessler and Doug Zielinski. These leaders then handed the reins to the group that led us into the 2000s, including Kathy LeCompte, John Coulter and Mark Krautmann. They all did their part to build our legacy.

Without the shoulders of those who preceded the current generation, the industry would be a fraction of what it is today. Now we're seeing that new generation shine.

Same work ethic, new era

Nursery Management magazine recently published a survey that outlined the challenges in attracting new workers into our industry workforce, and lack of engagement by the next generation serving on industry boards.

This is not what we are seeing in Oregon. During my 19 years of service at the OAN, a new generation has taken the reigns of leadership, with some following the footsteps of their fathers and mothers. Forged in the fires of rapid growth, deep recessions and industry consolidation during the toughest economic times, our new leaders have learned from the experience of those who have capably led OAN over

the last four decades.

This generation is in the process of taking operational control of their family operations and we should be grateful they are doing just that. Across the country, family farms are shrinking and growers are aging out. This will happen here in Oregon too, but what I am seeing now is a surge of fresh leadership. Have hope. We've seen this new generation is equal to grapple with the plethora of seismic changes in the market and political world.

What others are saying

Forbes magazine did a story on how businesses can prepare for the future. It pointed to the need to attract board members 50 or younger due to the need for more tech-savvy minds to face innovations that could disrupt markets.

With the rapid democratization of knowledge and information readily available at everyone's fingertips, the future not only demands we innovate fast, but stay alert for disruptive innovation from others. Not everyone will meet this challenge. The emerging truth is that the lifespan for companies is becoming shorter.

LinkedIn conducted a review and found that 90% of directors are in agreement that diversity of age is important to achieving diversity of thought. However, the average age of independent directors of S&P 500 companies is going up, and is now just over 63. That's two years older than a decade ago. Only 6% of S&P 500 board directors are 50 or younger.

In light of this, do boards really have the age diversity they not only need, but claim to value? My conclusion: many boards know they need to bring in the next generation, but the existing generation is not ready to let go yet.

What makes our board different

The Oregon nursery industry has long been a plant production innovator, incorporating new ideas and technologies, and seeing the market curvatures of the road ahead. Does the industry get knocked down a time or two? Yes. But as I've told my two daughters, in the words of legendary football coach Vince Lombardi, "It's not whether you get knocked down, it's



Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

whether you get up."

I have served under 19 boards of directors in my time at the OAN. I have had the privilege to be the executive director for 14 of those years. We serve with a single goal in mind: to support and advocate for our members.

In 2016, led by a next-generation leader, Mark Bigej, the OAN board of directors created a task force to update the composition of the board to match the makeup of our industry to ensure that all production types are appropriately represented. This innovation has made the board more responsive to the issues and needs of our grower community.

Born from the industry to serve the industry

I asked our board members if they got their fire and start from Future Farmers of America, which is a fantastic generator of talent for the agricultural community. I found out very few participated in FFA. Instead, they learned from working the family farm.

The S&P 500 board members' average age is 63. OAN Executive Committee board members have an average age of 44, and for the full board of directors, it's 47.5.

Smart, innovative, future focused — we can all take tremendous solace that the generational shift of leadership at the OAN has put the industry in strong, capable hands. ☺