

Case Study

This monthly feature shows how business experts have helped entrepreneurs address specific issues that face small businesses.

Owner turns to Rockefeller to help grow company

By Janet Rorholm

When Scott Bennett wanted to grow his business, he turned to the late John D. Rockefeller Sr. for inspiration.

Rockefeller founded Standard Oil Co. in 1870 and rapidly became a billionaire and philanthropist. It is Rockefeller's foundational business strategies behind his success that are the premise of Verne Harnish's book "Mastering the Rockefeller Habits." From the book grew the Gazelle's, a national organization dedicated to using the Rockefeller Habits to help small- to medium-sized businesses grow.

"I was attracted to the inherent simplicity of the process," Bennett said.

Bennett wanted to increase the standing of his broker dealer business, Nations Financial

Group in Cedar Rapids, and grow sales from \$10 million to \$30 million over the next three to five years.

Nations Financial works with independent investment brokers in placing orders and providing regulatory oversight.

To achieve his goals, Bennett turned to his business coach, Doug Wick, owner of Positioning Systems in Cedar Rapids, who is well-versed in the Rockefeller habits. The two had been working together to put processes and procedures in place for the business.

Like many other business owners, Bennett fell victim to short-term focus, Wick said.

"He had a tendency to get focused on one thing and then focus on another and another," Wick said.

The problem with that type of leadership is that it confuses employees, who deem the new focus as the fad of the month, he said.

So Wick and Bennett worked at developing a one-page strategic plan for the business that would define the company's core values and

purpose. It also would determine priorities for Bennett and his 15 employees.

Part of developing that strategic plan is figuring out your "big hairy audacious goal" and develop ways to measure whether you are meeting that goal.

"I think people make things more complicated than they need to be in a business," Wick said. "They need to simplify things."

Bennett said the process did simplify things for him, although he said it wasn't easy.

"I've never been a believer in long, lengthy business plans. They are hard to create, no one reads them, and they are impossible to meet," Bennett said.

Next they set targets they would have to meet to achieve that goal, breaking them into yearly, quarterly, monthly, weekly and, ultimately, daily targets.

"You have to break that mission-critical boulder into big rocks and then into gravel-sized pieces so that you can get them done and pretty soon you find out that you've accom-



Nations Financial Group Inc. owner Scott Bennett, front left, adopted Rockefeller habits to help grow his business. To keep employees on track, they hold brief huddles every morning, week and month. Mark Tade photo/EdgeBusiness

plished your goal," Bennett said.

By doing that, you can easily prioritize your daily workload.

"There is always the one thing — the drop-dead critical thing — to get done today," Bennett said.

To reinforce that focus, businesses adopt a meeting rhythm of daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly gatherings, Wick said. This is typically where employees balk, and Nations Financial employees were no exception.

"Everybody's eyes just rolled. 'I don't have time for that nonsense' was the general reaction," Bennett said.

But the meetings are designed to be short and sweet. They reinforce the strategic goal and improve communication, Wick said.

"The daily huddles should be no longer than 15 minutes, and they're off. They can be done in as little as five to seven minutes," he said.

In the huddle, employees state what they are working on, where they are stuck and how they are doing compared with their key performance indicators. Finally, they end with something positive, which can be something related to work or their personal lives.

Wick said any business can put the Rockefeller habits into place.

"I don't think it's difficult. I think what's difficult is getting people to buy into it and one reason is that people don't like change and as a

business grows there is a lot of change," Wick said.

But the meeting rhythms can help with that, he said.

"This becomes a routine people can rely on," Wick said.

That was the case for Nations Financial, which had just undergone a major software conversion that was riddled with problems. Bennett said the daily huddles helped employees get through the conversion.

Bennett said not only has the Rockefeller Habits helped him prioritize his to-do list, but it also has reinvigorated his love for the business.

"Without knowing your principal purpose and your principal beliefs, it's impossible to prioritize," Bennett said.

He's found that two-thirds of what's on his desk at any given time could be thrown away because it's not mission critical.

One of the consequences of better strategic alignment in a business is improved productivity, Wick said.

"A business tends to be 40 percent more productive when the business is aligned to its core values and strategic goals," he said.

Bennett can't help but wonder where his company might be today if it had used this approach 10 years ago when he founded the company.

"I would be light-years ahead," he said.

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