

# LEADERSHIP UNLEASHED

## Most successful business people have found a place where they can balance their competitive nature with their values

By Dave Veale

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Gordie Lavoie, president of Sunny Corner Enterprises, is serious about his role in sustaining a progressive culture that is connected to strongly defined corporate values. In every interaction that I have had with Gordie, he consistently demonstrates the values that have supported the enduring success of the Miramichi-based construction, fabrication and industrial sales firm that was established in 1965.



(pictured: Gordie Lavoie Photo: from [Wallace McCain Institute](#) video)

For example, when Lavoie accepted the role of chairman of the New Brunswick Business Council, he role-modelled his company's stated cultural value that "people learn by doing." He describes being chair as a great opportunity to interact with business leaders who share a commitment to supporting New Brunswick's economic growth and community development.

Lavoie left a career in the banking industry to join Sunny Corner Enterprises over 21 years ago, and he has been the president for the last five years. He has directly benefited from his company's strong focus on succession planning that, he believes, has kept it growing, thriving, evolving and - most importantly - remaining relevant.

The obvious place to start our conversation was on how succession planning has factored into the company's long-term success.

Lavoie: Our organization has roots going back to the original owner. I believe the senior members of the company always had succession planning in their mind and worked hard to try to build something that would be sustainable into the future. The organization has transitioned through different internal ownership and has always been an employee-owned company.

*Q: What have been some of the other contributing factors to the success Sunny Corner has had over the last 47 years?*

A: We've always been able to find good people to motivate and to move the company forward. Every time we change leadership, we experience a slightly different model - a different approach - but we always seem to find a successful formula to keep it moving forward. That's really critical in any organization if you are going to have sustainability. You have to always be looking at what the future is going to be like and plan for it.

*Q: How does your internal partnership support the business goals?*

A: I have the title of president, but my partners are equally as influential in this business and absolutely as important. We are not an organization that gets overly tied up in who has the title and who is in charge. We all have distinct roles that we fill, and we try to do our very best and help each other out. We're very collaborative.

*Q: What are the biggest lessons you have learned in your tenure at Sunny Corner Enterprises?*

A: I've learned a great deal from the leaders that were in the organization ahead of me. Traits that I saw in predecessors were their ability to take a really bad situation, work through it and let everyone feel like the sun was still going to come up tomorrow. You've got to give people hope that there is going to be a tomorrow. As a leader, you can't be saying the sky is falling every second.

*Q: It sounds like these leaders were great at reminding people to put things in perspective.*

A: Yes, it was a huge stabilizing factor. Whenever there was a really serious situation and you felt the world was spinning too quickly, having a leader who had that great perspective helped to slow that rotation and allowed people to see their way through things. They were also always very good at keeping their egos in check and staying grounded.

*Q: You mentioned hope earlier, how does the concept of "hope" play into leadership?*

A: We are creatures of eternal hope. It is the ultimate thing. There is nothing wrong with saying, "You know what? Things aren't great today, but next week they are going to be better." That's what people want and need to hear. It gives them the will to keep going.

*Q: What are some of the softer leadership skills that you found are kind of critical to your success?*

A: I probably tend to reflect more on what I'm not good at more than what I am good at. I definitely think empathy is important. You have to be able to put yourself in other people's shoes, especially if you are trying to reach a settlement or properly negotiate.

I also believe you have to have a certain competitive desire, but it can't be allowed to run rampant. I think most successful business people have found a place where they can balance their competitive nature with their values. If you can establish what your values are, they will guide you in how you make your decisions as you go forward.

*Q: In your role as president, what are the biggest challenges you find you are dealing with?*

A: That varies with things like economic and workforce circumstances. There are so many different areas you can look at. Whether you are a \$100-thousand-a-year business or a \$100-million-a-year business, we all tend to have the same challenges. The only thing that changes is the number of zeros behind the challenge because it usually revolves around customers, people and cash. That is where most of our issues come from.

*Q: What did you find most challenging about being the chairman of the New Brunswick Business Council?*

A: When you get in a room with 24 business leaders, you get 24 very unique and interesting personalities that are pretty used to getting their way. It's gone well and it's been interesting. It's not often that you have to try to bring that many dominant personalities together and reach some type of consensus.

I should also mention that every one of those folks, without exception, is a great person who is more than willing to try to help you out in any way they possibly can. It's really reassuring.

*Q: Who has been an inspiration for you?*

A: I think rather than an individual, there are a number of people at different points in time in your life that inspire you. I'm a huge believer in that.

I would be remiss if I didn't say it's absolutely wonderful to have, as I do, a spouse that is very supportive. You talk to most folks that have achieved some of their life goals, and usually they've had a spouse that was very supportive in allowing and encouraging success.

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