

A straight-talking leader, dedicated to lifelong learning

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If you are looking for straight talk then you have to meet Donnie Fillmore. He calls it as he sees it. And, as I have learned, he is not one to mince words. My guess is that this quality is one of the many reasons he recently received a Top 20 Under 40 Award for trucking in Canada.

Donnie is a strong advocate for the trucking industry and currently serves as chairman of the Atlantic Provinces Trucking Association (APTA).

Donnie, a self-professed continuous learner, is the president and co-owner of Atlantic Pacific Transport Ltd. Donnie and his brother Mark took over the business from their father, Donnie Sr., who founded the company in 1989 in Clairville, Kent County.



Donnie Fillmore keeps his goals for business and personal life on the door facing his desk. Photo: Greg Agnew/Times & Transcript

With 42 trucks and 80 employees, Donnie's vision for the company is to be the best flatbed carrier in Atlantic Canada through servicing clients in flatbed and wide-load hauling of building supplies, components and construction equipment. If you want to see the variety of large items the company transports be sure to take a look at its Facebook page – you will see drivers hauling everything from dump trucks to jet airplanes.

Q: What was it like growing up with a father who founded the family business you now run?

A: My dad was a truck driver his whole life so trucking for me was second nature. We had trucks in the yard since I was born. I grew up around trucks. Trucking just seemed like the natural progression for me. Ironically though, I don't drive a truck. I don't even have a Class One licence, which most people are surprised to hear.

Q: How did you get into the trucking business?

A: I graduated from high school, I needed a job. I got looking around and Dad needed to hire somebody. So I gave it a try and now I'm going into my 22nd year in the business.

Q: Tell me about the process of taking over from your father, the founder of the business.

A: You go through the pains of succession. Working with family is not easy. It's not for everybody. You laugh together, you cry together, you argue and you fight. And – at the end of the day – you're still family.

Q: Tell me about the business model.

A: It's a low-margin, tough business. You've really got to watch your costs and you have to be efficient. You want to find a niche where you can stay out of the limelight and, if possible, away from competition.

Q: How do you run a business that focuses on your people?

A: The things you appreciate most in life are people. Everything we do is about people. You have to remember that at the end of the day, you're working in a people business.

Q: How has the trucking business changed since you first started?

A: Today we're looking for manpower. We're looking for people – for drivers. We're trying to grow our business and we're held back because of people. It is different than 20 years ago when we had loads of resumes. Lots of people were looking to drive trucks back then.

Q: So, much different challenges today?

A: Shame on us, the industry, for not being forward-thinking enough to know we were going to run into a shortage. We should have developed and trained more aggressively. We hit the lull that we're in today because 15 years later we're just starting to address this challenge.

We didn't start soon enough and we weren't aggressive enough. When you compare us to other trades, NBCC has been continually training carpenters, pipe fitters, electricians and plumbers for the last 40 years.

Q: How are you addressing the labour shortage?

A: We have to really focus on becoming more visible as an industry. People don't realize how important, how big and how rewarding the trucking industry can be.

It's a good career. You can make a good living. We have to get out there and compete for young people and second career people. We have to create better partnerships with our customers and our suppliers to make it better for drivers.

Q: What do you feel the general perception of the industry is?

A: My feeling is most people driving down the road see a big truck and they just want to get away from it. They don't want to be behind it because they can't see where they're going. The flip side of that is, the truck driver is driving down the road in his or her office.

There are 100,000 professional truck drivers in Canada – it's a huge part of our economy. But we need 33,000 more and 2,000 of those new drivers are needed in Atlantic Canada.

Q: With unemployment so high in our province, is it surprising that you have unfilled positions?

A: There is a big difference between a truck driver and a professional truck driver. The responsibility on (professional) truck drivers is great. Driving the truck is a skill and doing the paperwork is like a science.

Q: What are the qualities that you look for in a good driver?

A: You need to be well organized and time management is crucial. You have to be flexible and take pride in your work.

Q: What does the future of your company look like?

A: We want to grow the business – continue to progress and improve. We want to be more efficient and leaner.

Q: What is your growth plan?

A: Usually you grow through acquisition and that takes a lot of capital. Then there's organic growth and it

takes more time to meet your growth targets. Atlantic Pacific Transport has always grown organically.

Q: What's the best advice you've ever received?

A: The best advice was from my Dad when we first started. He said, 'We have to learn from other people's mistakes because we can't afford to make them all ourselves.' Some great advice I got recently was from my Mom. She said, 'Life is so much more fulfilling when you serve.' That's great advice. Some of the best feelings you get are when you help people.

Q: How do you stay sharp as a leader?

A: I'm a lifelong learner. I'm always taking courses and training. I'm always looking to improve. I recently graduated from the Wallace McCain Institute's Entrepreneurial Leaders Program. I have to say the program was life changing.

Q: How would you describe yourself as a leader?

A: I hope I inspire people. I hope that I'm respectful and listen. I don't always agree with everyone, but I hope that I'm always fair.

Q: How would you finish the following sentence, 'A leader's job is to ...'?

A: A leader's job is to serve. Leading is getting someone to do something because they want to do it.

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