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NextGen Family Business Succession: Comfort One Shoes – Garrett Breton

Abstract

This is the first in a series of articles about family firms in the shoe retail industry that have participated in NSRA's NextGen Leadership Program and have been working for years on succession transition planning – including ownership, leadership and management.

Disciplines

Business

Comments

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NextGen Family Business Succession:

Comfort One Shoes – Garrett Breton

CAROL WITTMAYER, ED.D.

This is the first in a series of articles about family firms in the shoe retail industry that have participated in NSRA's NextGen Leadership Program and have been working for years on succession transition planning – including ownership, leadership and management.

In 1992, shoe retailer legend Maurice Breton opened his first store in Old Town Alexandria, VA. The business now includes 13 locations in the mid-Atlantic region. Maurice's vision included selling the highest-quality shoes and employing the best sales associates trained through its own Comfort One University. Active in the community, Comfort One is proud of their philanthropic support.

Maurice's son Garrett joined him in 1993, with the title of "Stock Boy". Prior to being named president in November of 2019, Garrett had many positions over the years that helped him to understand all facets of the business such as sales associate, assistant manager, manager, buyer, director of merchandising, junior vice president of sales and vice president of merchandise.

The two have enjoyed their journey together. The succession process was over a ten-year timeframe. Maurice is

still active in the business and remains chairman of the board.

In an interview on the process of transition planning, Garrett reflected that succession is much more of a process, not an event.

Garrett's advice on what is needed to make a successful transition include three phases, (1) assessing interest and gaining experience, (2) assessing passion for the business, and (3) clarifying transition expectations from both NowGens (the current generation) and NextGens (the upcoming generation).

Interest and Gaining Expertise in the Business

The first phase in the transition process includes getting an under-



Dr. Carol Wittmeyer

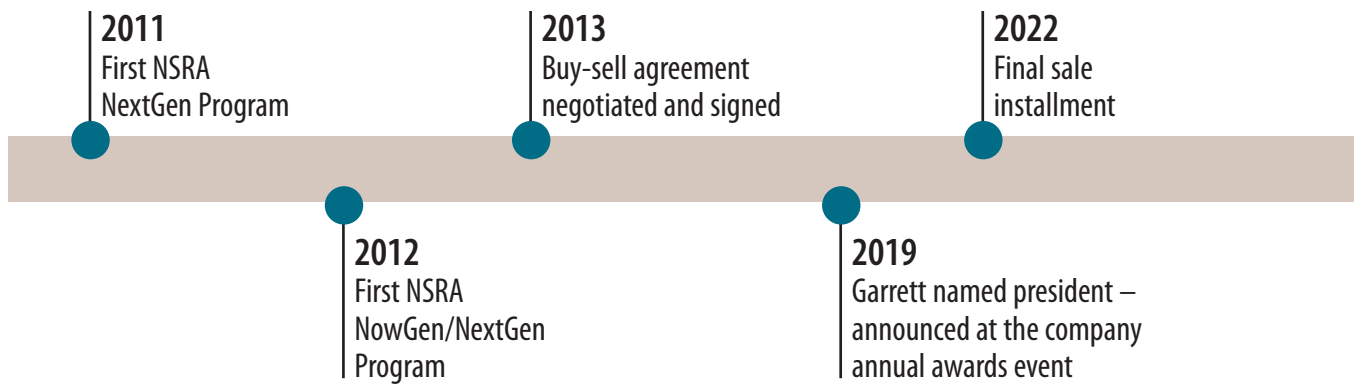
standing for the business by demonstrating competence in a variety of roles. Relevant questions include:

> Do you have a feeling for the business? Are you good at it? What roles do you need to assume to make sure you are well-versed in the business?



Garrett Breton (second from right), with NSRA board members and NextGen participants. Jim Sajdak, David Sajdak, Ed Habre, Josh Habre, Alan Miklofsky (center front) and Maurice Breton.

Comfort One Succession Timeline:



Every time that Garrett took a new position, it took him time to get proficient. Once he felt that he has done a good job, he has taken on more things to excel at. He commented, “You have to prove that to yourself, to whoever your parent is in the business and the people who will work with you after your parent’s gone”. That has taken many years to accomplish.

> *What have you learned from failure (and have you failed)?*

Garrett struggled in his first management position. He did not fully understand the job. He thought his job was supposed to give work to everyone else. Employees quit. It was an eye-opening and humbling experience.

Passion for the Business Transition from Both NowGen and NextGen Leaders

Relevant questions are necessary from both the NowGen and NextGen perspectives.

Is there a want from the NowGen to leave the business and in a timeframe that is desirable from the NextGen’s perspective? That question took Garrett and Maurice several conversations over years to discuss. It involved talking about things that are very unpleasant. Of course, the idea that the NowGen will not always be alive to be at the business is an underlying difficult thought for all involved. Additionally, the potential hubris of the NextGen who has ideas that can be perceived as arrogant to the NowGen can get in the way of productive discussions that are typically all based on both generations truly wanting the best for the family and the business.

Both generations are passionate about the firm and both want the best. The NextGen typically comes from wanting to breathe in new energy/ideas and the NowGen is proud of their experiences that they know worked – that can be an expected friction in the process.

Clarifying Transition Expectations from Both NowGens and NextGens

No two businesses are the same. Garrett has seen companies use gifting strategies to transition the business. Some strategies include the NextGen purchasing it from the NowGen. And some use a combination. Clarification of expectations in this regard are critical to successful transitions. This careful analysis also needs to consider the expectations of employ-



Garrett Breton, his wife Alaina, and daughters Grace and Josephine outside of Comfort One Shoes on King Street.

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NextGen
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ees who may aspire for leadership positions and wonder about NextGen capabilities and their own futures.

What helped Garrett and Maurice start working through these steps? One triggering event was their participation in the NSRA NextGen program that started in 2011. They were among the first participants.



Maurice and Garrett Breton in 2009.

Being with NextGen peers who had much in common with Garrett helped him to focus – away from the office – on important issues such as: Do I want to run the family business? How would that process work? How have others done it?

The peer group had many participants who were at different stages in the succession process, which made it more interesting to see how things were going for a variety of different situations. While the peer group members knew each other from shows, they had not talked much about the family business issues they all could relate to, and always walked away from sessions knowing that while one's situation might be unique, everyone else is having the same feelings, doubts and conversations. It's actually the norm.

Garrett Breton's Reflections on Conditions for Success:

Doing a deep dive on yourself.

What do you want? Why? This takes time and it's important to share with NowGen to see where overlap could occur and how to create and execute a plan.

Personal Board of Advisors

Garrett built a network of peers including:

- **Mentors** – 20 years older and having achieved successes Garrett wanted to achieve. They came from his dad's board – local business owners he admired who were honest and trustworthy. They could give feedback of all types – criticism and praise as they could see, and wanted to celebrate achievements with Garrett, who commented that while it's so nice to get a compliment from a vendor, it means so much to get one from a mentor who has nothing to sell you.
- **Competitive Peers** – those who are competitive and challenge Garrett. When they do well, it inspires Garrett to look at himself honestly to think about how he can be better and to never coast.
- **Non-competitive Peers** – those who have experience in different industries and are successful. He can call them for specific expertise, for example, his banking friend to help him think through planning for banking meetings.
- **Board of Directors** – Comfort One Shoes has a board that was created by Maurice. They provide guardrails as they hold them to be accountable. They have yearly meetings and talk about overall direction and strategy.
- **Board of Advisors** – Comfort One Shoes also has a more tactical and less strategic board. They meet two times a year. They go through all the store locations to question: Can we do better training? Do we have the right brands? Are we doing the right marketing, etc.?
- **Experts in specific subject matters** – These are the advisors who help implement plans such as the accounting team and lawyers. They sought those recommendations out from others who had successful transitions.
- **NSRA NextGen classes** – Reading books and trying to fill the gaps from either experience or skill sets deficits was helpful. In addition to preparing for difficult conversations as mentioned, they studied negotiations and emotional intelligence. Garrett indicated that he feels blessed to have his dad's work ethic (if we hustle hard enough, we will make it) and a strong curiosity about business and people. He likes to challenge himself, so the program has been a good resource.



Garrett Breton

Epilogue

This pandemic year was a tough year for all, so Garrett had to evaluate the things he used before such as, work hard and it comes together. That didn't happen this past year. So, he did what many did in the pandemic and took time to be a good friend, father, healthy and successful in business. He smiled at the end of the interview and said, "I'm a better dad, friend and spouse this year".

Sound familiar?

Maurice, Deborah and Garrett Breton celebrating the day they closed on the 200 King Street building in Old Town Alexandria in 2016.



Others have figured it out. There are many resources available as well, so it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel.

The peer group, now together for a decade, has resulted in the formation of dear friendships. They keep in touch on issues. They share honest conversations about hopes, dreams, fears and challenges, Garrett said. The program offered a safe environment away from daily duties for peer groups and also facilitated NowGen/NextGen planning sessions away from the daily tasks.

After the first year of the program, the NowGens were invited to participate in multi-generational planning. The NowGens learned that the NextGens had made progress on planning issues which got their attention and made them realize that they, NowGens, had work to do as well.

The program also made it apparent that both generations have to get the conversation going.

After the first NowGen/NextGen meeting in 2012, Garrett and Maurice worked to talk about expectations and finally negotiate a buy-sell agreement in 2013.

The succession was a ten-year timeline. It included creating a timeline with goals, considerations for legal protections, etc. Meetings happened over lunches and other venues. There were difficult conversations and hurt feelings along the way. Garrett reflected that the

first assignment in NextGen was to read *Difficult Conversations* by Harvard's Doug Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen.

Conclusion

Every family business transition story is unique. What is not unique is that in a planned transition, it takes a deep understanding from both generations that they are committed to the process, the timeline and the future success of the business. The process takes many years to have important and sometimes difficult conversations between the Now/Next Gens and also with a variety of stakeholders including employees. It is also helpful for the NextGen successors to experience a variety of roles in the business that ultimately set them up for business success including credibility with their employees and customers. Finally, it is important to have a cadre of advisors that share valuable relevant expertise and outside experience. ■

Editor's note: In April 2021, Garrett Breton accepted the position as chairman of NSRA's NextGen committee.

Dr. Carol Wittmeyer is interim dean of the School of Business at St. John Fisher College. She teaches at the Family Business Center at Loyola University of Chicago and is also a founding faculty member of NSRA's NextGen initiative.



NextGen participation creates lifelong friendships. From left, John Luck, Joel Habre, Josh Habre, Megan Sajdak-Holtan, Andrew Sajdak, David Sajdak, Ben Sajdak, and Garrett Breton.