

[Print](#) [Close Window](#)

The sky's the limit

How to grow your business

By Matt McClellan

Is your company successful? For Douglas O. Kirberg, the answer to that question depends on your definition of success.

"When I started out of school, I thought if you make \$24,000 a year and you had 20 guys working for you, you've got it made," says the president of Kirberg Co., a roofing company founded by his grandfather in 1920. "So you've got to keep revising those as you go along."

Kirberg's constant revision of the company's goals has helped propel 2008 sales past the \$20 million mark.

Smart Business spoke with Kirberg about how to establish an impressive track record and how to become a better listener.

Q. How do you develop a vision?

You really have to have the desire to be in business or grow your business. Whatever branch of business you're in, you have to have desire to do it and the willingness to really work hard. It's not 40 hours a week. You're going to live and breathe it for many years, seven days a week.

Here's another key thing: You have to set goals. Years ago, I wrote a simple handwritten note. It read, 'Where do you think you want to be in 10 years or five years?' And you keep revising those goals because they change.

You might make your 10-year goal in five years. Then you might decide, 'Well, do I really want to get bigger or not?' There are pros and cons to each.

Q. How have you managed business growth?

As far as the managing of it, you've got to have a good CPA working with you, good insurance brokerage or firm, and your bank is really important — as people are finding out now.

The most challenging time for us was when (former President Jimmy) Carter was here and we had 21 percent interest rates. If you were not on good terms with your bank and weren't considered a good account, you were in trouble, just like now, when people are not getting loans. If you have a good relationship with your bank, you'll be able to get a loan. You've got to get a good track record.

If it weren't for the bank, I wouldn't be where I'm at today because we didn't have that much cash coming in.

Q. How do you establish that track record?

Definitely get to know your banker. You've got to go in and meet them, talk to them. Let them know your whole business. Don't try to hide stuff from them.

A lot of people are afraid of giving out financial statements. When you're first starting out, you had better be prepared to do that. We have to do it today. You have to learn that's the way it is. You have to be straight up with the bank and the insurance people and your advisers.

Q. How do you build strong relationships with your business partners?

You have to listen to others — others who work for you and other advisers you might have, like your lawyer, your banker and your insurance people — generally people you do business with.

Ask them questions. See what you're doing correct or wrong. If it's an industry type, just ask how they feel you are doing compared to your competition. Are you doing as good as they are, better than they are? What are your strong points and weak points?

If you're talking to your banker, it's pretty much the same thing. Are you weak with money? Find out if you are spending too much or not spending enough.

Q. What are some of the things you can do to be a better listener?

There's really no techniques, it's just something where you have to shut up every once in awhile and let them talk. It is a learned technique, but it's pretty simple. You just have to be quiet and let them talk.

When you give somebody a job, let them do the job. I found out when I started growing my company that it was easy to let me do their job. They didn't know whether to tell me to get out of their part of the business or not. They're thinking, 'You own the company.'

If you get involved, the next thing you know you'll be doing it all anyway. I have two sons here, and I have to step back once in awhile. We don't reinvent the wheel, though. You have to remember the mistake has been made; let's not do it repetitively.

Q. How do you make yourself step back and let people do their jobs?

Think how you'd like to be treated. If you were given a job to do, would you like someone looking over your shoulder constantly? Or would you like someone who would let you go ahead and do the job and then discuss it?

Get your job done, turn it in and discuss it then.

How to reach: Kirberg Co., (314) 534 4444 or www.kirberg.com