

Magna's Walker looks to the future as Canada's CEO of the Year



Governor General David Johnston, Joan Walker, Don Walker, John Wallace and Hugh L. MacKinnon. Photo by MCpl Vincent Carboneau, Rideau Hall ©Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada represented by the Office of the Secretary to the Governor General, 2015

By Brock Weir

Nearly 30 years ago, Don Walker, an eight-year employee of General Motors, prepared to leave the company to strike out on his own.

He wanted to start his own company, and eventually approached Frank Stronach to see if Magna would be interested in joining in on the venture.

Evidently Mr. Stronach was intrigued with Mr. Walker's meetings. The two had three subsequent meetings, the younger fellow was offered a job, and 27 years later, now serves as CEO of the Aurora-based company.

?I thought I would join Magna to try it out and to learn that side of the business, and I stayed there ever since,? Mr. Walker tells The Auroran. ?The thing that appealed to me, and what appeals to other people at Magna is Frank really was a visionary when it came to how to structure a company and how to motivate people. He has profit sharing for everybody in the company and it is a fairly entrepreneurial, autonomous company so people can get to create their own careers to a certain extent. Having the ability to work with Frank directly and see how he thought was quite a learning experience for me. Frank is probably the most entrepreneurial person I have ever met in my life.?

Now leading the company in Mr. Stronach's stead, there are a number of key tenets of his philosophy that continue to inform the work of his successor, including that profit sharing and advocacy for employees.

?I think the way Frank would use his experience and his gut to tell him what was a good deal to get into, what wasn't a good deal to get into, and really thinking out of the box are some of the things I have learned from Frank and have helped me in my career,? says Mr. Walker.

It has served him well. Mr. Walker, a King resident, was named Canada's Outstanding CEO of the Year last fall, and was formally bestowed with the award at a ceremony held at the Royal Ontario Museum earlier this month. The Outstanding CEO of the Year Program was developed in the early 1990s, recognizing business leaders for their corporate performance, vision, leadership, innovation and social responsibility.

?It is certainly quite an honour to win the award,? says Mr. Walker. ?Since it is in its 25th year, there are a lot of very successful,

very good CEOs that have been chosen in the past.?

Mr. Walker, however, is not going to rest on his laurels. He says looking to the future has been an integral component in Magna's success, and central to three priorities which have governed Magna for the better part of a decade. The first, he explains, is investing in the world of manufacturing with an eye to ?world class manufacturing.?

?I believe Magna can be as good ? or better ? than any other company in the world when it comes to manufacturing,? he says. ?An area we focus on a lot is innovation and we would define that as new products an end consumer would see in the car. We are really focused on research and development, working with universities, working with start-up companies on technology. The third is worldwide people development systems. We have 130,000 people and it is just a system to keep track how we can train them and retain them to stay in the company.?

Finding these ?good people? has been the biggest challenge facing Magna over the last several years, he notes. In a globally competitive market, there is no shortage of opportunities for talented individuals.

?Whenever there is a problem, it usually means we haven't had the right people to solve the problem,? says Mr. Walker. ?From a CEO's perspective, it is a given that you have to have the right technology, the right product strategy and the right structure but the biggest challenge is finding the best people. Once you have got them [you have to] motivate them and keep them in the company.?

To this end, Mr. Walker says he is particularly proud of a strategic approach he has implemented towards problem solving, being providing clear direction on accomplishing goals. This can range from product strategy, customer strategy, geographic strategy, and new technologies.

With this in mind the top priority for the year ahead is identifying products Magna can develop and bring to market which would solve existing problems their customers ? car companies ? are facing every day, such as maintaining efficiency and minimizing CO2 emissions, and improving fuel economy.

?We are doing a lot of work with cameras and looking at autonomous driving ? reducing accidents and making it more convenient for people to drive vehicles,? he adds. ?I guess the biggest opportunities would be to look at new products that benefit the industry for a longer term, looking at other areas Magna can use our expertise in, which can be outside the automotive industry. It could be in renewable energy or it could be in other fields. We are always looking to see how we can use our expertise to grow our company.?