

Taking charge as a successor

Pamela Kan and Laura Markstein are presidents of family businesses in male-dominated industries. Both of their companies are based in the East Bay region of California's San Francisco Bay area.

Kan is the second-generation leader of Bishop-Wisecarver Corporation, a Pittsburg, Calif., industrial automation company specializing in linear and rotary technologies. She joined the company in 1991, was named president in 1999, gained a controlling interest in the

company in 2009 and became the sole owner in 2020.

Markstein, a fourth-generation member, leads Markstein Sales Company. The Antioch, Calif., company is one of the largest independent family-owned groups of wholesale beer distributorships in the United States. She joined the company in 1991 and became president in 2001.

We asked Kan and Markstein, *How have you put your own stamp on the family business, and what is your advice on being an effective successor?*



PAMELA KAN, BISHOP-WISECARVER CORPORATION

"Sometimes there is a paradigm that the next generation has to have the skill sets of the prior generation. I think that's false for many different reasons. The business model keeps changing. And I think it's better if you actually have a different lane.

"My dad spent his time out on the production floor. He liked engineering and building machines. I'm a sales and marketing person. We weren't trying to compete against each other; we were

complementing each other's strengths, and we brought different things to the business.

"Being a manufacturer, you're always looking for new ways to gain efficiencies, new ways to create differentiation in your product lines, to market, to sell. And so I think it's really important to stay on top of technology. How is it changing? Is it going to disrupt your business? Is it going to put you out of business? You can't put your head in the sand; you have to start thinking about how you keep the business relevant.

"My dad said he was really blessed because he got paid to do his hobby. And

because he saw it that way, he didn't have a lot of structure in the company. When I came to the company, nobody even had a business card. Most people didn't even have a job description or a title.

"On the office side, over time, I did almost every job. That gives me credibility. I really had a broad breadth of knowledge around the company by the time I became the president. So I started making changes right away.

"We were one of the first in B-to-B to have a website. I pushed very early for email. I was pretty much a change agent from Day 1."



LAURA MARKSTEIN, MARKSTEIN SALES COMPANY

"I think every generation creates its own culture in the way that they operate.

"I was so honored to be asked to work in the family business

that I really took a lot of pride and ownership and felt a lot of passion towards making sure that I was going to be successful, and that my employees knew that were appreciated. So I tried to create a culture of inclusiveness and family atmosphere. I invest in my people.

"I incorporated a very robust wellness program. We have massage therapy

onsite, chiropractic care, walking groups, boot camp, yoga. We're dog-friendly. It's a modern approach of taking care of my employees and knowing what they go through on a day-in and day-out basis. It's a very physical job, so really taking care of them.

"My father allowed for me to make mistakes. He allowed for me to learn every position within the company. I think that's incredibly important for any family member that is going to be joining a family business — they need to learn. They need to understand what the drivers go through on a daily basis. The salesperson, how hard they have to fight for that sale.

And what the operations guys go through and what that nighttime warehouse guy is going through. I especially think that if you've got trucks within your company, you need to be in that truck to see the safety precautions that these drivers take.

"My general manager is a woman, and she is amazing. That's incredibly rare in this business, to have a woman-owned distributorship and a woman general manager.

"I used to have to write my orders in a binder. That's completely changed. We've invested a great deal in technology and in making sure that my sales force and merchandisers can be very efficient within the marketplace."