

Joseph Gargiulo

Family Focus with a National Presence

When the folks of Goshen, New York, had a question about hardware, they knew they could trust the young boy working at the local store to serve them with enthusiasm and savoir faire. Joseph Gargiulo had, after all, started working for his father at age seven, helping customers find what they were looking for and keeping the shelves of Goshen Hardware stocked and tidy. Over the years, he observed his father eagerly and absorbed valuable knowledge about everything from plumbing, to electrical work, to paint mixing, to customer service. Joe’s father had gotten into the hardware industry to help support his Father-in-law’s burgeoning family business, Stuart Dean—a building restoration and maintenance company founded by Joe’s grandfather, Edward J. Degan. Now the executive vice president of Stuart Dean and the division president of the mid-Atlantic region, Joe still considers his time at the hardware store as his greatest education, using the service skills he learned as a boy to attain success today.

“Actually, I originally didn’t want to work for Stuart Dean,” Joe admits. When he graduated from Boston College in 1977 with a BS in Accounting and Marketing, he moved to Chicago and worked for several large enterprises that ultimately left him feeling unfulfilled and immaterial. His brother, John, headed up Stuart Dean’s Chicago office at the time and approached him in 1980, posing what Joe refers to as “an offer I couldn’t refuse.” The young professional would have to work significantly longer hours at significantly reduced pay as a salesman, but there would be opportunity to have an immediate impact in his work. Realizing that Stuart Dean was a part of his very blood and heritage, Joe recognized the ambition stirring in his soul and accepted the offer. He excelled as a salesman and was promoted to sales manager in 1984. He

directed his small sales crew until 1986, when he was offered the opportunity to open a new office in either Dallas, Texas, or Washington, DC. “DC was a sleepy town, and real estate hadn’t been discovered yet,” Joe remembers. Submitting his proposal for the DC Metro Area location proved to be the best decision he ever made. With its respectable and stable rates, DC has since advanced as one of the most desirable real estate markets in the world, and Joe’s office is now the largest and most successful division of the company.



In many ways, Joe’s personal history resembles a microcosm of the family company’s overall evolution to date. Just as it can sometimes take a single idea to change the course of a lifetime, it can take a single idea to transform an industry. Yet, as Joe’s grandfather demonstrated, this may not be the first idea that comes along. In fact, it took six failed business attempts within a span of ten years before Edward Degan finally founded Stuart Dean

in New York City in 1932. The fledgling company served as the sole distributor and applicator of Dupont Synthetic, the first clear synthetic lacquer coating designed to prevent architectural metals—specifically brass—from oxidizing. Later realizing the value in the product, the Dupont Corporation approached Edward in 1934 asking to buy the exclusivity rights. Ed, however, readily signed over the rights without accepting compensation, an act of integrity that would later reward him in spades when the lacquer became a war good during World War II. Though it was taken off the market during that time and distributed solely to the military for use on brass casement shells, a drum of lacquer would appear on Stuart Dean’s doorstep each month, ultimately enabling the company to stay in operation.

When Ed passed away in 1954, Joe's four uncles—Gene, Gerry, Jack, and George—assumed leadership of the company and tested the waters of expansion by opening new offices in LA in 1963 and Chicago in 1969. Another dimension of service offerings was added as well, and as is the case with so many businesses, diversification spelled big returns for Stuart Dean. Until the 1960s, they had focused solely on metal refinishing, building a reputation of excellence through mastery of a narrow specialty. They noted, however, that the buildings they worked on had marble floors and walls. Thus, evolving into architectural stone maintenance and restoration was a natural progression for Stuart Dean. They became the largest provider of architectural stone maintenance throughout the next thirty years, concentrating in granite, marble, terrazzo, and exterior limestone. Then, in the 1990s, architectural wood was added to the repertoire, as well as architectural glass and the curtain systems used to protect building exteriors. With a service portfolio that provides comprehensive attention to the various finishes of a building's interior and exterior, clients can now rely on Stuart Dean to cover all aspects of a project without having to coordinate multiple contractors.

As time passes, Stuart Dean has also aimed to operate less like a family business and more like a corporation. Though all forty-plus of its stockholders remain family members and all but two of its CEOs have been within the family, it has expanded to approximately 650 employees worldwide and retains three (out of nine) non-family board members from outside industries. Joe recognizes the value of outside leadership and remains committed to incorporating it. The company culture prohibits a sense of entitlement, and decisions are always made in the best interest of the company as a whole. Consequently, Stuart Dean strikes a unique and highly appealing balance. They have successfully taken the personality of a mom-and-pop style small business and translated it to a national scale. With offices in the top twenty real estate markets in North America, they are equipped to offer on-site and personalized service to large clients nationwide. While Joe hopes to establish more uniform procedures to render their services consistent across offices, their national presence remains a great credit to Stuart Dean's staying power.

Joe's division, then, is perhaps the quintessence of this staying power. The Mid-Atlantic office is currently about eighty-five employees strong and does approximately \$10 million in revenue annually. Joe remains active in the day-to-day operations of the office and also oversees the operations of the Florida office, which has about thirty employees. "This is what I do best," he says, referring to his current daily duties. In addition to fulfilling the various roles of financial overseer, personnel manager, and policy collaborator, Joe is still out in the field on a regular basis, making sales and monitoring on-site progress to ensure that the company's vision and quality assurance are maintained. When asked why he hasn't become CEO yet, he cites his aptitude and preference for the small business mentality and the close relationships it allows him to develop with employees and clients. Recognizing the importance of his brother John as a mentor and role model, he uses his own relationships with staff as opportunities to pass on wisdom and guidance in a similar fashion, exhibiting sincere interest in the lives and careers of his employees.

In developing these mentoring relationships and dispensing advice to young entrepreneurs just entering the workforce, Joe focuses more on character development tips rather than employment instruction. "Don't be too concerned about getting the perfect job, because the chances of you staying in that profession are miniscule," he counsels. His words are sure to assuage the fears of anyone entering the job market during these sub-optimal economic conditions. The focal point at such a juncture should instead be the cultivation of one's moral character and relational skills. "You must deal with people properly and ethically no matter what industry you enter," says Joe. Learn how to deal with difficult individuals by disarming them with kindness, and practice treating others how you would wish to be treated. This advice fits hand-in-hand with what Joe reports as his greatest professional challenge, which is personnel management. He indicates that it's hard to find individuals who are driven to do the right thing regardless of short-term interest. Young entrepreneurs who exhibit this strength of character are thus highly sought-after and will enjoy more success than they would otherwise.

Strength of character is even so important as to overshadow more traditional measure of intelligence in some cases. “My number one management philosophy is hiring good, smart, hardworking people,” Joe explains. “I manage by feel more than numbers.” Because the industry is so hands-on and relies heavily upon relational skills in addition to a strong knowledge base, he truly believes that effort can be the key ingredient to success. Even if one didn’t get the top grades in school, there is a future for that person if the right effort is leveraged.

In reflecting back upon the road that led him here and in considering what the future holds for Stuart Dean, Joe’s focus remains not on the success he has enjoyed but rather on the people and presences in his life that have influenced his career—and ultimately his life path—most profoundly. These are not grandiose figures of fame and history, but rather the common figures that occupy his everyday life. “I’m a faith-based person, so the Good Lord has taken good care of me,” he says. He also speaks with a genteel and sincere warmth of his wife, older brother, and parents, recognizing that each has provided valuable skills and support. In a business that has flourished and expanded so far from its roots, it’s good to know that, for both Joe and Stuart Dean as a whole, the element of family continues to thrive as strongly as the company it created.

– By **Gordon J. Bernhardt, CPA, PFS, CFP®, AIF®**

*About Gordon J. Bernhardt
President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon’s Blog](#).*