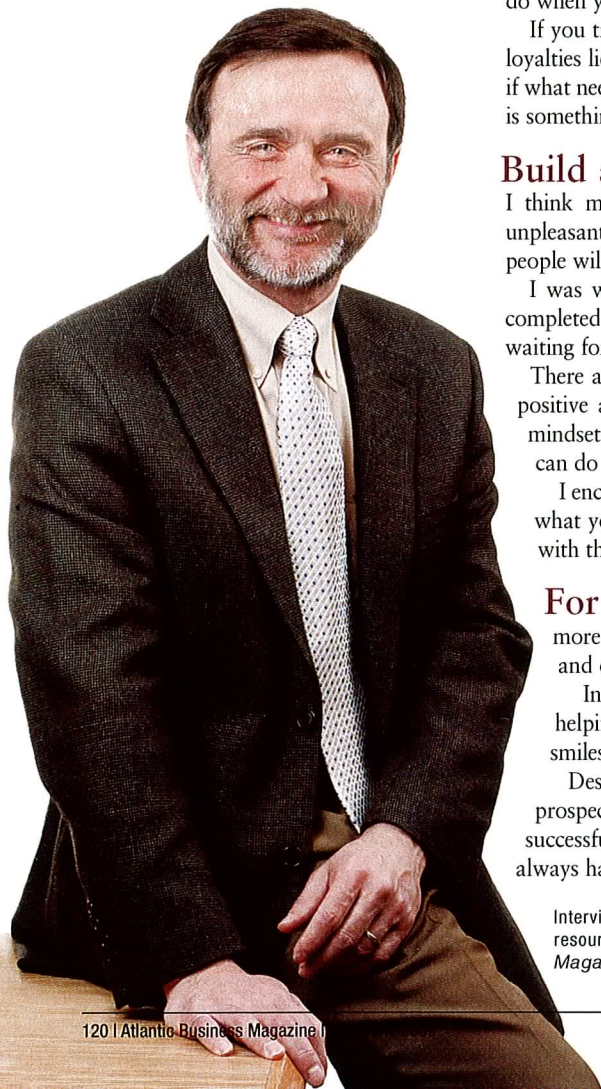


IN CONVERSATION WITH...

Jean-Paul Deveau

President
Acadian Seaplants Limited

What does it take to lead a company recognized as one of Canada's 50 Best Managed Companies for seven consecutive years? Jean-Paul Deveau took over the reins of Acadian Seaplants from his father in 2002, building the company into a multi-million-dollar performer exporting to 70 markets worldwide. Not one to rest on his laurels, he is constantly focused on what's next.



My father started this company out of my childhood bedroom in 1981. He had one customer, one product and positive cash flow, which is significant for a startup.

Just after I earned my bachelor degree in engineering, Imperial Oil offered me an industrial sales job in St. John's, Newfoundland. No one in engineering wanted to do sales. I told my father I was ready to quit and he said, 'It's a great opportunity. You should seriously consider it.' I took the job and he was right. The communication and negotiation skills I learned put me on the path to where I am today.

If you want to build a successful organization, you have to do it through your people. The challenge is how to set the goals, the framework and the vision, and then get out of the way so they can do it.

Spend time on what is important, not what is urgent. Urgent things aggressively try to take valuable time away from you. Determine what's important, focus on those things and push the urgent ones aside.

Our company has evolved considerably. Ten years ago, it was more autocratic – a command-driven, top-down organization. We made a conscious decision to bring in top talent and allowed them to do what they do best in their areas of expertise. It took time to make that evolution, but they performed better than I expected.

Initially, my father and I did everything and decided everything. One day he said, 'You're working from eight in the morning until midnight. You could continue to do that, but we're not going to build the business this way. We need to bring more people on and delegate responsibility.' That's tough to do when you're used to calling all the shots.

If you truly want to change your organization for the better, first you have to look at where your loyalties lie. I want to see the company succeed and will do what it takes to make that happen, even if what needs to change is me. I have pretty thick skin and I want to hear what has to be done. If there is something I have to change, tell me and I will do it.

Build an environment where employees feel comfortable telling you unpleasant things. I think my employees are genuinely surprised that I'm thankful when they tell me something unpleasant, and that I commend them for it in their performance appraisals. Do that consistently and people will realize you are serious.


I was working at one of our plants years ago and I asked an employee to do something. He completed the task, but didn't proceed to the obvious next step. I asked him why and he said, 'I was waiting for you to tell me to do it.' That was when I knew we had to change.

There are many ways leaders can motivate employees. I do it by example. There's nothing like a positive attitude, a belief you can do something, and being enthusiastic to foster that particular mindset throughout your organization. Think about it: if you don't have a leader who believes he can do it, how far is that company going to go?

I encourage the next generation of leaders to take on whatever challenges they find. It's amazing what you can do, how much you grow and what you can learn when you take chances and run with them.

For a long time, the company consumed my life. If I could do it all over, I would get more involved in organizations and activities outside of the business earlier, based on the rewards and opportunities for growth I've experienced.

In recent years I've been teaching people with disabilities how to ski. Nothing compares to helping someone who has very limited mobility learn how to ski down a hill. You've never seen smiles like that.

Despite the current economic downturn, I'm very optimistic about Atlantic Canada's economic prospects. We have tremendous opportunities here, particularly for developing internationally successful businesses. We have had short-term challenges before, and we will again, but we've always had this attitude that we can take on the world and win. 

Interviewed by Jeff Forbes, vice president, Robertson Surette – Atlantic Canada's leading recruitment and human resource consulting firm. Leader's Insight conversations are published in each issue of *Atlantic Business Magazine*. Feedback: dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com