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# CLEAR as a BELL

After more than 60 years, a focus on staff and treating everyone as a member of the family has meant that Bell Equipment Limited has flourished as a global manufacturer in heavy machinery.

Images courtesy of Bell Equipment Limited

One of the leading manufacturers in the world of heavy equipment designed to transport materials in industries such as mining, construction, forestry and agriculture, Bell Equipment Limited has come far from its humble beginnings. Managing Director of Bell Equipment Europe, Marc Schürmann, is well aware of these beginnings and says the company honours them to this day.

Founded by Irvine Bell and his wife Eunice in South Africa in the 1950s, the company now has its equipment on every continent in the world except Antarctica. “It started as a family company,” Marc says. “Irvine Bell was joined by his brother Rob and brother-in-law Malcolm Campbell and they operated a small agricultural engineering and repair workshop on a farm in the sugar-cane belt of KwaZulu-Natal. In time, his three sons, Peter, Gary, and Paul, also joined him in the business and each has their own diversified areas of focus and skills.”

Marc believes the involvement of Irvine and his sons in the company set the tone for years to come. “It really laid down the foundation for future development, and all three sons are still actively involved in the company to this day, which has seen Bell continue to nurture its strong family roots.”

One of the strengths of Bell Equipment is how it has been able to retain this family feel while expanding internationally. “I think the people who the company has employed and nurtured over the years, many of whom have achieved 30 or more years of service, have been brought up with the set of family values and have passed these on to new employees. We are a very informal kind of company; from the start, everyone is on first-name terms.

“Open, honest communication has always been encouraged, which has allowed young people with fresh ideas to come in and try new things. Not always successful from the start, obviously, but we encourage people to explore new areas of innovation and allow

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them the latitude to fail so that they learn through pushing their boundaries. I don’t think the success of the growth of the company has been any one person’s claim in particular; I think it’s very much a group effort with the family environment as the cornerstone.”

Marc himself came to Bell Equipment more than 20 years ago. Originally an engineer, he was working for a larger corporate company but didn’t enjoy the culture. “I studied a Bachelor of Mechanical Engineering in South Africa. I had a bursary through one of the big corporate steel producers but when I went to work there after my studies I didn’t enjoy the culture and I resigned.

“Within the week of resigning, Bell Equipment called me and said, ‘We have an opportunity, are you interested?’ I duly flew down and went for the interview. I think I was the fourth engineer to join them and that was 22 years ago. To this day, any engineer who really wants to do real engineering—hands-on engineering—aspires to >



work at a company like Bell. Back then, I was no different; for me it was like a dream come true.”

Marc believes that working his way up through the company, starting as an engineer, has made him a better leader than he would have otherwise been because it has taught him about all aspects of the business. “I think the benefit of taking the long route is that I have been exposed to, and have had the opportunity to work in, most areas of the company.

“The designing and technical stuff is well entrenched, but then you become production operations manager and supply-chain manager and you start learning afresh. Each rung up the ladder exposes you to new skills that you need to develop. It encourages you to extend yourself and ask questions to better develop your skills in those areas.

“I think what really helps is that you’re involved in everything. You

might not know everything but you very much understand how it all works together and when and whom you need to ask for support and advice. You have input at each step of the way because it isn’t a one-man game; it is definitely a team effort.”

Marc says that Bell Equipment encourages all management to have a hands-on approach, and to really understand every area of the business. This is why they try to promote internally rather than hire externally, so that the management team comes from within. Even as MD, it is not uncommon for Marc to climb under a truck to look at mechanical problems, or to sit with the HR team to understand a policy.

Other than being driven by people-centered management, one of the focuses of Bell Equipment is trying to differentiate itself from its competition by producing superior products with the best

technology. “We have always been technology driven and customer informed. We try to rely on the best possible technological solution to solve as much of what we can for the customer, and that’s an ongoing challenge.

“Looking back over time, what sets us apart from many of our competitors is that we actually know our customer. I know that sounds like a coined phrase but we actually know the customer personally in almost 90 per cent of cases. We get to know his wishes, his aspirations, and appreciate his frustrations. Invariably, what we do is we listen. We listen to how we can best improve his situation.

“Obviously, customer needs, applications, competition, markets, drivers, and new technologies are constantly changing so that’s a continuous process. But I think that really gives us a competitive edge. We really get to know the customer and what his requirements are and then stay



in touch with what the latest and the greatest technologies are and try and deliver the best solution for the customer’s needs.”

To meet customer requirements, Bell Equipment also needs to ensure good relationships with other companies it collaborates with. Although not all companies may share the same strong family culture and set of values as Bell, what has helped the company in its relationships with suppliers and other companies is the way it approaches those relationships. As Marc explains, everyone they work with—not just direct employees—is treated as part of the Bell family. “If you don’t recognise the efforts of the suppliers, your own people, or the customer, you won’t achieve your goals successfully or in a sustainable fashion.

“For us, it’s important for all our stakeholders to understand and appreciate that they are part of our team, they are part of our supply chain, they are a part of developing a world-class product and we recognise and value their contribution. Together, we have to combine a wide range of systems and components so that they function together in harmony and deliver an exceptional product that addresses the customer’s needs. We often get together at conferences and recognise good performance; the family culture is

“If I don’t understand something, I’ll actually go and visit that area and look at and crawl under the trucks, go into the workshop and really try to understand what the issue is.”

- Marc Schürmann



something we try to apply beyond just the people we pay the salaries to. I think the recognition of everybody in the supply chain can, and does, make a difference.”

One factor that Marc believes will help guide Bell Equipment through a potentially turbulent future market is investing in staff and leadership. For Marc, if the company has a strong, dynamic team it will be able to more easily adapt to the changes that may be needed in the industry. “It’s quite difficult in the current environment because we have seen a multitude of changes and fluctuations in the past five years,” Marc explains.

“What we are trying to do within our company is to become a more proactive company, one where our resources are agile. Usually, change evokes a fair amount of fear and



concern but we want to develop our people so that dealing with change becomes second nature and they become inherently flexible. By applying basic leadership principles and providing a trusting environment, people are more likely able to deal with the requirements of change on a more frequent basis.”

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