

in conversation with...

Henry Demore

President & CEO
High Liner Foods Inc.
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Henry Demore was just 35 when he took over the reins of National Sea Products in 1989. At the time, the company was mired in debt, a situation that worsened in the early '90s as the federal government cut fishing quotas, effectively gutting the company's harvesting business. Supported by shareholders, Demore shifted the company's focus to the frozen food market. His decision paid off: in 1994, National Sea Products turned a profit for the first time in seven years. Now known as High Liner, it has become one of North America's largest marketers of prepared frozen seafood products.



My father and grandfather were fishing captains and vessel owners. They were leaders every day of their lives - working with their crews, selling fish to National Sea Products. They weren't home much, but when they were, I followed them around the wharves, and got to see what they did, so I was immersed in leadership from an early age.

Great leaders level out the emotions in an organization. In down times, be positive and inspirational - celebrating small successes and building up confidence. When things are going well, dampen the enthusiasm a bit and encourage people to look for risks.

I think my age helped me to weather the challenges we faced as a company as quotas were cut. When you're younger, you're not as aware of the risks. You have a certain self-confidence, a belief that 'I can do this'. And that was a good attitude to have. Now that I'm 55, if someone approached me with a similar opportunity, I'd say, 'Are you crazy?'

I've talked to business leaders in Boston, Calgary and Toronto and they all say that some of their best employees come from here (Atlantic Canada). We have people who care and are committed, and I think that's our greatest strength.

I do fairly well maintaining a work-life balance, partially due to technology, but it also helps to live in a small town. You don't have to commute or line up for anything. If you add up the hours in a day that you spend in some kind of queue, whether it's in a car or an elevator, in a city like New York or Toronto, it's a fair amount of time.

The low point for me was the northern cod moratorium. I remember saying to myself, 'I don't care if we ever catch fish again in Atlantic Canada; we're going to be successful'. Instead of obsessing over the latest quota cuts, I decided to focus on customers and opportunities in the market. A change in leadership mindset like that will flow through the whole organization, so it was a pivotal moment.

Recently, I was nominated to be secretary of the National Fisheries Institute in the U.S., which puts you on track to be the chairman. But there was a bylaw that said you had to be an American citizen, which I'm not. There was some grumbling about having to change the bylaw until the NFI president revealed that the nominee was me. The resolution passed unanimously. That kind of industry recognition makes you feel proud.

A Lebanese family that runs a pizzeria in Lunenburg said it's nice to live in a place where you can work, raise a family, save money and not worry about a civil war, or saying the wrong thing. There's a freedom here you won't find in many other countries, and that makes this a great place to live. We sometimes take that for granted.

There's this notion that we shouldn't celebrate the success of our cities in Atlantic Canada. But we should. It's very important for the region. I know if you're a politician, that's a challenge, particularly in Newfoundland, where St. John's is booming and the rural areas are struggling. But it's not going to help the rural areas if St. John's isn't doing well.

My wife, Rena, and I climbed Kilimanjaro with two other couples to raise money for Laing House. We had three objectives: come back healthy, raise \$60,000, and make it to the top of the mountain. Not only did we raise nearly twice that amount, all six of us made it to the summit, and I would say in great health. That shows you what happens when you have a good team with clear objectives and lots of preparation. **I ABM**

Interviewed by Mark Surrette, president, Knightsbridge Robertson Surrette - 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