



Three Generations of Success

The common refrain is that the first generation builds the business, the second generation makes it a success, and the third generation squanders it. The third generation of the Harris family, however, is bucking the stereotype and working hard to build the business with the same drive the older generations had.

Over the past 50 years, the Harris family has worked tirelessly to make Janitronics what it is today. A competitive marketplace, pandemics, recessions, a shrinking workforce, and internal transitions are just some of the challenges they have overcome.

Developing a strategy for the future and being prepared for the unexpected are just a few of the hurdles facing family-owned business leaders. As Janitronics continues working towards the future, they have also become leaders in how family businesses can continue flourishing during the third generation and beyond.

1st Generation

In 1972, Jim Harris, Sr., founded Janitronics with a simple and clear mission: to provide professional and personalized cleaning services.

“When the company [was] in start-up mode my father was first getting Janitronics on the map, establishing a footprint and laying the foundation for success,” said Jim Harris, Jr., President of Janitronics and the second generation of the family business. “What set my father apart from his competition were three key factors: his work ethic, dedication, and his keen ability to anticipate.”

In the first 10–15 years, Janitronics built a reputation of reliable service and grew organically. This included taking on jobs and clients that competitors wouldn’t, experimenting with products and processes to improve service, and investing in industries to establish and reinforce core competencies.

Sr. set the tone and culture of family involvement from an early stage. He taught his children the ins and outs of the company, and they learned the business from the bottom up. His children scrubbed toilets, mopped floors, and emptied trash cans among other tasks. These early actions were Sr. planting the seeds for future success.

2nd Generation

The transition of a family-owned business from the first to the second generation is successful in less than 33% of cases. In successful family-owned businesses, the children in the second generation has witnessed the effort and dedication which was needed to make the business successful, and are given opportunities to take on an active role. With trust built-in, communications are often open on business issues and lessons learned. The most common roadblocks to a successful transition include a sense of entitlement, lack of passion, and not enough attention to knowledge transfer.

“It was a tremendous benefit to be able to watch my father in all aspects of the business,” said Jim Harris, Jr. “From how we work with and treat our customers, to forging relationships and collaborating with others, even competitors, to support our industry and grow opportunities, these were lessons that cannot be taught in a classroom.”

Jim Harris, Jr., noted the obstacles which he had to overcome for Janitronics to make this first, important step, and he credits his father’s leadership along with his willingness to teach and listen. “When you are the person in charge for a long time, like my father was, it is easy to get set your ways,” Harris, Jr., said. “What made him a great leader was his ability to listen, to ask the right questions, and to make a decision he may not have made if he was on his own. He passed down so many lessons and I hope I will be able to do the same thing.”

3rd Generation

One of the most difficult transitions with a family business is from the second to the third generation. When it comes time for the second generation to hand off to the third, the success rate is about 10%. Common reasons include that the third generation is accustomed to wealth and success, they weren’t around for the lean years, they are less fiscally conservative, and there are more family members in the third generation with more points of view, leadership styles, and expectations for the company.

As Janitronics enters its sixth decade, there are even more Harris family members employed in the business. While the third generation has heard stories of struggles, barely getting by, and seemingly long-shot financial risks, they are stories of other days. They have come of age during the business’ success.

Jim Harris, Jr.'s two sons, Dan and Brian, joined Janitronics at different times, each taking different paths that led them to where they are now. His youngest child and only daughter, Abby Harris, learned from her grandfather, father, and brothers about the business and at a young age worked many years as an intern in the business. Her path is different from the other two; she sees the success of Janitronics from the other side, working at an advertising agency that works closely with Janitronics for all their marketing efforts. She is the first in the three generations of the Harris family to earn an MBA degree, graduating from St. John Fisher University in May 2022 and adding yet another accomplishment to the family’s long list.

Not all challenges come from within the business. The third generation was just hitting its stride when the COVID-19 Pandemic began in 2020, forcing them to face a slew of unprecedented challenges. Where other companies' leadership fell behind, Janitronics' leadership pivoted to use the pandemic as an opportunity for growth. Even though they hope this is a once-in-a-lifetime event, this generation is proud of the strides they were able to make in the face of adversity, both in the company and in their community.

"The key to success for my generation is to become fully immersed not only in the business, but also in the professional cleaning industry," said Dan Harris, who is in Business Development at Janitronics. "My generation understands that past success does not guarantee future prosperity."

"The path that has been created may appear to be more supported, but not set in stone," said Brian Harris, a Regional Operations Manager at Janitronics. "You must constantly work to strive to be the best version of yourself, grow your personal and professional skills, live outside your comfort zone, and continue constantly growing. Family business or not – your limitations become your weaknesses."

The Family's Partners

There have been several people outside the family who have impacted the Harris family business. Some have worked alongside all three generations, providing advice from their decades of experience in business.

"I was introduced to James Harris, Sr., and James Harris, Jr., in the fall of 2017 to help supercharge the Janitronics quality program with one of their largest customers. To witness the dynamics between a father and a son in business was very impressive to say the least. It was readily apparent that the 'push and pull' between the two was one of the key ingredients enabling the incredible growth of the business," said business partner and great friend of the Harris family Larry Treen, COO and Managing Partner of Relay Integrated Logistics & Solutions.

"Soon after I met a young professional, Brian Harris, poised to take over the quality programs and eager to create an environment suitable for exponential growth. Dan Harris [was] eager to run the special services unit and prove himself able to take the lead and keep up with the other three Harris family members. Both Brian and Dan have gone from 'working in the business' to 'working on the business' in a very short timeframe."

While each generation has supported the others to help them succeed, having the external support from long-time business partners and an experienced executive team has made Janitronics even stronger. As the third generation learned their roles alongside these industry experts, they are now becoming more involved at the executive level and are preparing to lead the company in the future.

What does the success from that third generation look like?

“Sr. set the bar pretty high as far as leading Janitronics,” said Jim Coleman, Janitronics’ Rochester sales representative. “I have not seen anything that would indicate that transitioning to the next generation of the Harris family will do anything but keep raising the bar higher and higher.”

Jason Coleman, the Buffalo sales representative, emphasized the company’s focus on personal relationships with leadership and trust. “I felt like a number for many years, even during times of success. I now feel like a valued part of the continued growth of a strong regional company!”

Sustainability

The Harris family and Janitronics have seen their fair share of ups and downs, great days and nearly insurmountable challenges. The most recent came in the fall of 2022, when founder, father, and grandfather, Jim Harris, Sr., passed away. A business which started out as a dream with a few hundred dollars and a lot of sweat equity has grown into a regional powerhouse with many families relying on it for prosperity.

“The one thing that is always a constant in business, is change,” said Harris, Jr. “Your customers’ needs will change, the economy goes up and down, the workforce fluctuates, and then you get a global pandemic in the mix. Smart businesses understand their industry and their competitive landscape, are able to pivot quickly, and are truly attuned with their customers’ needs.”

Harris, Jr., says these are qualities he learned from his father and believes he has incorporated them into the culture of Janitronics. He and the current generation are in the position to pivot and pass on this knowledge and their own success, and to ensure that the next generation of the family business will, in time, have the opportunity to do the same.