

One entrepreneur's 4 keys to exceptional leadership

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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

When Kris Birch took over his family business in 2009, becoming the leader his team needed didn't happen overnight.

Birch is president of , a St. Paul, Minn.-based landscaping, snow removal, irrigation and tree services business. Birch's father, James, founded the company in 1978 and steered its growth for three decades.

The leadership torch was passed only four short years after Birch joined the company as an intern.

"I wanted to be in charge. I wanted it to go the way I wanted and I wanted it to be about me," says Birch, who is 36. "We had some impressive growth over the first few years but it didn't stick. It was all centered on me and I was beginning to show my weakness and limitations."

After reading books on leadership, listening to podcasts, and attending leadership-focused summits, Birch realized that everything wasn't about being the "boss" and taking all of the credit. To succeed, he needed to hire and foster an exceptional team.

"I don't want to do it alone," Birch admits. "I have even started realizing I don't want to be the star of the team. I want to be the one that gives the team and its stars the confidence to win -- to stretch, push, risk, believe in people beyond what they think they can do."

After all, great leadership leads to exceptional customer service, which creates a great business reputation, which in turn leads to a successful business. Today, Birch, Inc., employs 25 year-round staff, around 70 total in

the summer months and as many 150 people during a snow event during the winter.

Birch has developed a four-point manifesto for why and how his team does what it does. " These values are the filter in how we fulfill our passion, our 'why' we grow and develop our team to win," he says.

1. Be honest about everything.

What relationship can exist without truth and trust? For Birch and his team, honesty means more than telling the truth. It's about being open, communicating with staff and customers without having to be asked questions.

For example, as part of Birch's tree services, the team will often suggest PlantHealthCare treatments instead of altogether removing a tree. " This option is usually dramatically less expensive for the customer, but our interest isn't about getting one big sale, but building a trusted relationship with our customers," Birch says.

2. Strive for professionalism in all that you do.

Just like honesty, professionalism means more than doing the job you were hired to do. For Birch, it's about looking the part, being reliable and always over-delivering.

One of the biggest keys to Birch's dependability is his fleet of Chevy trucks. The company owns and operates a variety of Silverado pickups and a Tahoe, all designed and engineered to help get the job done.

From a high-strength steel bed to an available snowplow prep package, they offer the right match of dependability and capability that Birch needs. " Our trucks work hard, especially during a snow event," Birch says. " They need to start when it's 15 degrees, haul a 10, 000-pound skid loader across town and plow 10 inches of snow for over 12 hours. We don't have back up plow trucks because in our experience a well maintained Chevy is reliable."

Birch and his vice president personally drive a 2015 Tahoe and 2016 Silverado Z71. " It's a personal choice but it also communicates a message to our customers," Birch says. " They are not 'flashy' trucks but they are professional, impressive but not 'showy.' It says we work hard but appreciate value and quality."

3. Everyone should be accountable, no matter what.

Every person on Birch's team – from leadership down – needs to be accountable for his or her actions, regardless of being right or wrong.

For example, what happens if a customer's garage door is accidentally damaged during snow removal or, say, a lawnmower throws a rock through a window? " We all make mistakes," Birch says. " Instead of waiting for the customer to contact us we will notify them of the damage and have a repair plan in motion."

4. Keep your competitive juices flowing.

Birch defines competitiveness as " striving to win without being afraid to fail."

" We might not always win," Birch says, " but we are getting better."

Sometimes it's not the shiny new technology or a cutting-edge marketing strategy that makes your company shine. It's about getting back to fundamental values, as the team at Birch, Inc., has done. As its website says:

" Creating this culture within our company leads to building stronger relationships with our customers and vendors. ... We desire our customers to be just as proud of us doing the work as we are about the work we do."