

Plan, prepare, prosper: Leadership transition success at North Country Business Products



By Chelsey Paulson,
HR Manager

Ten years ago, North Country Business Products began to develop a leadership transition plan. Today, our three executives have retired, our new President and CEO Kris Rydberg is leading the organization and we have made strategic changes within the organizational structure. North Country developed a transition plan, and we have been implementing that plan for several years.

Sounds easy, right? When you have Dean Crotty, past president, Curt Crotty, V.P. of Sales and Service and Darlene Geller, V.P. of Finance and Administration, with a combined tenure of 109 years, transition is not easy. In 2010, Dean had the idea to add associates, who he felt were leaders, to the Board of Directors. He wanted to expand their horizons and give them opportunities, insight and experience on a Board in addition to challenging them to think strategically. Some of those associates are now senior leaders at NCBP and have transitioned into the roles that Darlene Geller and Curt Crotty once had.

North Country wanted to promote the next CEO/President from within the organization. That was the goal. However, the board had set a strategic plan to double in size within 10 years, which was going to require skills and expertise that were beyond the internal candidates, and self-admittedly, beyond Dean's own expertise and stage in life.

How do you replace a (at the time) 39-year associate who had been president for almost 20 years? It was a very slow and thoughtful process. Six different executive search firms were interviewed. They were great recruiters, with impressive references. However, when it came down to hiring one of them, it was determined that no one understands the culture and strategy better than internal associates (i.e., the internal recruiting team) and so the search began without outside assistance.

The President/CEO position was posted utilizing executive-focused online job sites and also by reaching out to passive job seekers through LinkedIn. Surprisingly, we received a large number of qualified resumes. In order to narrow the candidate pool, we followed this process:

1. Phone interview with NCBP recruiter to discuss job history and listen for excellent communication skills. The length of the phone interviews were in the one hour range.
2. Phone interview with the current president that focused on applicable experience. These interviews generally lasted about an hour or less.
3. In-person panel interview with the executive team (Dean, Curt and Darlene). These interviews lasted up to three hours.
4. Lunch with the president — a more casual, get to know each other, meeting.
5. In-person panel interview with executive team and outside Board of Directors. These interviews lasted two hours.

6. Corporate psychologist assessment and interview. This was a leadership assessment designed to identify the qualifications and characteristics of the candidates. The steps included — mental ability, personality inventory and a personal interview. Total length of time for the candidate to spend on taking the assessment and in an interview with the corporate psychologist was up to four hours.
7. Reference and background checks.

After 11-12 hours of conversation with the top candidates, 5-6 hours of conversation with references and dozens of pages of interview notes and discussions, we felt we knew who would fit our culture and be able to take NCBP in the strategic direction we envisioned.

The executive team, HR and the Board of Directors determined Kris Rydberg would be our next president and CEO. Today, Kris often jokes about the grueling process he was put through, but he does understand the tremendous responsibility we all felt, especially Dean, to select the best candidate for the position.

The onboarding process was equally as important as the recruiting and hiring process. When Kris started in May of 2014, the focus for the rest of the year was primarily getting to know the associates and our customers along with industry/product education. A three-month schedule was developed for Kris. Friday's were left open and used to debrief with Dean and H.R. and to allow Kris to catch his breath! Kris met individually with each director in the company and several of the managers as well. He went to most of our locations with Dean on his "road



show” to meet the associates. Kris also met with the outside board members one-on-one. As time progressed, he would determine what areas needed more of his attention than others.

Kris attended RetailNOW just three months after he started, and this was where he was introduced to many of our vendors and partners in the industry. Being new to the POS industry, RetailNOW was instrumental in Kris’ industry education as he was able to walk the show floor and get a better feel for the variety of products, services and solutions.

At the end of 2014, Kris held a strategic planning session with over 20 associates to update the plan we developed in 2012, as many of the tasks in the three-year plan had been accomplished. This was a great forum for Kris to get to know the leaders on a deeper level and to work as a team to set the direction of the company.

2015 was the year of transitioning Dean’s financial and administrative responsibilities to Kris. Dean and Kris had a chart listing the major responsibilities (for example signing employment agreements, purchasing company vehicles, 401(k) review, benefit review, financial statement review, etc.) and

the timeframe when each would be transferred to Kris or delegated to someone else. The goal was to extend the transition period to allow adequate training and to allow Kris to focus on the strategic direction of the company.

After all the interviews, assessments and training, you may think nothing could possibly go wrong. One thing we underestimated was the real impact change would have on the associates — at all levels. We thought we had done everything right — the associates knew of the transition plan (since 2010), and they were updated throughout the hiring process. We announced the new CEO and gave an overview of who he was, including his qualifications and areas of expertise. Of course, we all knew change was inevitable, but I’m not sure we all knew what that actually meant. Kris was stepping into the role of someone who, at the time of retirement, had been here 41 years — 20 as president. It took time and patience on everyone’s part to accept and embrace change at NCBP. Today, we have a new leadership team and it’s an exciting time for North Country and for our future in the POS industry!

The associates at North Country are extremely grateful for the 109 years of combined extraordinary service, determination, hard work and vision that Dean, Curt and Darlene contributed — words can’t express our gratitude. We would not be the company we are today without these three individuals. They were our visionaries for many years. They set the plan and we, in Dean’s words, “hailed the mail!” While many things have changed in the last two years and will continue to change, our core values will always remain the same.

If a leadership transition is in your future, start planning early! Then implement the plan, communicate often to your associates and expect some bumps along the way. Leadership transitions are not easy, the impact of the change needs to be considered from all viewpoints. If you create a team of strategic, hardworking and capable people (who also like to have a little fun!), your company will find opportunities to grow and prosper! **C**



Dean Crotty (center, holding award) honored by the associates at NCBP.



NCBP’s Beloved Triumvirate: Dean Crotty, Darlene Geller and Curt Crotty in 2016.