Citizens of the Industry

A salute to 33-year Ernst Enterprises veteran Don Fleming

A wise person once said, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

Don Fleming did not choose ready mixed concrete through some carefully constructed career plan. He answered a "help wanted" ad, and 35 years later, he is still standing. He has run the gamut of positions, worked through acquisitions, survived the Great Recession, and ultimately taken responsibility for plant maintenance.

The thread connecting all of it is remarkably simple. Care enough to learn how things work. Help when something breaks. Never ask coworkers to do something you would not do yourself. And pass what you have learned to the next generation.

Farm-kid mentality

Don grew up true-blue rural, active in 4-H and raised around horses. His grandfather still plowed with draft horses and taught Don how to handle them. The animals were not simply equipment. They were cared for, loved and kept for long lives.

That upbringing carried directly into Don's working philosophy. He strives to take care of what has been entrusted to him by learning how it works and doing the work that needs doing.

There is more to his work ethic than duty or obligation. Don learned early that equipment, animals and people all respond better when somebody genuinely takes care of them.

Stumbling into concrete

Moraine Materials was starting Frontier Concrete in Spring Valley, Ohio, and needed people for a residential front-discharge operation. Don saw the ad in the newspaper and filled out an application. The hiring process was wonderfully ready-mix: They put him behind the wheel of an old six-wheel-drive International PayStar. Having grown up around farm equipment, he drove it roughly half a mile, and they hired him on the spot.

Don had no grand plan to make concrete his life. He simply gave it a shot, and curiosity took over. He always wanted to know how things work, and he sought out opportunities to learn something outside his immediate job description. He kept asking questions and kept learning.

For reasons beyond his control, Moraine turned out to be the wrong door that led to the right one. When Don parted ways with the company in 1993, he interviewed with Ernst Concrete. During the meeting, the interviewer asked if he could call Don's supervisor at Moraine to confirm the circumstances of the departure. After that conversation, Ernst immediately hired him. His response to the transition was pure Don: no bitterness, just gratitude for a blessing in disguise.


Don Fleming

Don credits his 33-year tenure at Ernst to a culture of caring, exemplified by company Owner John Ernst and then-Vice President Mark Van de Grift. They were personable and approachable, kept an open-door policy, and talked with him—not at him. He felt appreciated. Indeed, people respond better when somebody genuinely takes care of them; and to that work environment, Don remains fiercely dedicated.

His pursuit of learning led him from driver to mechanic, then into concrete pumping, plant operations, and finally plant maintenance. What hooked him was the belief that there was always something new to figure out. Every day was different. And that kept recharging his commitment.

The day-to-day pressure: You never completely turn it off

Ready mixed concrete is unforgiving. Don's method is practical: deal with it blow by blow.

Ask him how he fully disconnects from the pressure, though, and Don does not offer some polished management-book answer. He admits that he does not turn it off. He carries two phones, and they are on 24/7.

Our industry disrupts family life. Sleep is hard to come by. No matter what the "escape," the business is never completely gone. Don does not romanticize burnout, but he acknowledges loyalty and its personal cost.

He maintains that the people of Ernst looked after him personally, not simply as an employee, and his loyalty became reciprocal. People stay where they believe they matter. That points to an important industry lesson on retention: compensation matters, but belonging matters more.

Why do people stay in our industry?

Don's answer is simple: "Ninety-nine percent is caring." People who see ready mixed jobs as nothing more than a paycheck often do not last. The people who build careers care about the people, the company and the customers.

Advancement does not equal success. There is absolutely nothing wrong with driving a mixer for 40 years. Some of the finest people in the business do exactly that. Ready mixed concrete does not require everyone to climb a corporate ladder. It requires people to give a damn about the rung they are standing on.

Definition of leadership

When asked what he hopes people will say about him 20 years from now, Don does not mention titles or accomplishments. He hopes they say, "He was good, fair and dependable."

He repeatedly credits the company rather than himself, and he never expects anyone to do something he would not do himself. That summarizes a leadership philosophy better than any paragraph of management jargon ever could.

To care is to exist

Companies need technology, equipment, capital and good processes. But none of them care whether the first load ships tomorrow morning. People do.

And after everything Ernst Concrete has given him, Don's greatest hope is simply that he has been worthy. Thirty-five years of effort, loyalty, curiosity and caring suggest that question has already been answered. Truly, people like Don make our industry a great place to be!