

FOR TRUE LEADERS, ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE

LEGACY LEADERS | BY KEVIN SPAFFORD

“GO AHEAD.”

Yes, anything is possible for Chad Olsen

“Go ahead.” It’s a simple motto, and a very clear message for Chad, Pam and the crew at Olsen Custom Farms. “Go ahead” stems from their radio talk. It’s the way they commonly respond to inquiries on the CB radio. For these American farmers, it also means, “Yes, anything is possible.”

Olsen Custom Farms is one of our nation’s largest custom-harvest operations, running 50 combines and as many work crews.

It’s a family operation, owned by Chad and his wife, Pam. They employ his brothers — Travis, the company accountant, and Corey, a diesel mechanic. Olsen Custom Farms is home-based in Hendricks,



the wheat crop in Texas and winds up in southern Canada, just before the family heads home for the Thanksgiving holiday.

START FROM SCRATCH

Keep in mind, Chad didn’t start out with several combines, multiple work teams, a home farm and a trucking business. He started from scratch, and there were times when it may have been easier to give up than to go ahead.

He began farming in

it burned down,” Chad says. “I lost everything — cows, calves, equipment and feed stocks. Everything I’d worked so hard to build went up in smoke.”

Suddenly Chad was deep in debt, with no means to pay his loans; all collateral was lost.

But rather than an excuse to quit, the fire became a defining moment. It had cost him everything except his pride and the determination not to let this disaster define him.

“Bankruptcy wasn’t an option,” he says. “That scar [of unpaid obligations] would hang over my head for the rest of my life.”

To satisfy his debts and save enough to start over, he drove a truck, took on a school bus route and did any odd jobs that might provide a paycheck.

NEW BIZ BLOOMS

On the way back up, he started renting whatever pieces of ground were available. Chad purchased a combine and started doing some custom work for the neighboring farms — and the rest, as they say, is history.

So where does a person learn the fortitude and gather the strength to carry on through the impossible?

“Everything I’d worked so hard to build went up in smoke.” — CHAD OLSEN

Minn., where these agri-preneurs also have a rental division, offer other custom-farming work, own and operate 15 truck and trailer rigs, and personally farm 5,000 acres of grain.

The operation custom-harvests wheat, milo, canola, corn and soybeans. Their season starts in early spring with

1987, milking 15 cows in a barn he rented from his parents. As soon as he could afford it, he bought his own place and built a new milking barn.

Chad expanded his herd to 60 cows, and for a time, the future looked very promising. That is, until the fire.

“Sixty-three days after I moved into my new barn,



Chad Olsen, shown here with wife Pam and their family, has a can-do attitude that helped him restart his farm after a devastating fire left him with nothing but unpaid bills.

This industrious farmer went from dairy farmer to custom operator, quite by accident. "I could drive a pretty good piece of equipment and get paid for doing it," he says. "I started doing custom work, and the business just took off from there."

SKILL TAKES TIME

Leadership is not a learned trait. The character of a leader and the ability to manage risk develops over time. Leaders are first learners. They develop the basics, learning about business development, money management and team building.

They develop relationships and grow the founda-

tion necessary to build something bigger than themselves.

Then, they invest the time and hone their craft until it becomes second nature. Professional development includes active participation in learning experiences, mentor or protégé relationships, and delivery of specific results.

In the corporate world, leaders are well-seasoned before they assume a titled leadership role. They go through management development programs to earn the experience, education and skills necessary to lead.

For the family farm, professional development is no less important. In

fact, there's a lot more riding on the leader's ability, and simple mistakes can have devastating effects for the entire family.

NEW COLUMN

This monthly column will focus on leadership and leadership development as an integral part of a comprehensive succession plan. Topics will include leadership profiles, professional development, mentoring, assessments and team building for the farm business.

For Chad, the lessons continue. As a business owner, he is fully involved in the day to day. As a father, husband, son and brother, he's family-

oriented and focused on the responsibilities that feed the soul.

Leadership is not something you do; it's who you are. **FF**

Spafford and his firm Legacy by Design (legacy-by-design.com) serve the succession planning needs of farmers, ranchers and agribusiness owners. Contact Spafford at 877-523-7411 or KEVIN@LEGACY-BY-DESIGN.COM.

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