



FSE: Father Passes Torch To Son

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When Chris Renoud was in college, he entered an engineering competition in which he was asked to design a bridge.

While working on that bridge, Chris' father, Winston, founder of Bellingham-based Fiberglass Structural Engineering (FSE), observed his son and was quite impressed.

"I thought, 'Man this guy is smart,'" Winston said. "It was just gut feel. He was quick to pick something up and quickly move forward with it."

In college, Chris went on to emulate his father by pursuing a mechanical engineering degree. Then, at 23, Chris joined his father's company.

"I think my experience in high school and college opened my eyes to this whole industry and I was well suited for it because I had been exposed to it my whole life," Chris said.

Chris was so well suited that recently his father passed the torch making him the new CEO at FSE.

"[Winston] wants to retire and we wanted to find a way for FSE to remain a family business; this obviously is the best way to do it," Chris said.

Winston started FSE in 1976 in his living room.

He saw that huge Fortune 500 companies were buying complex, one-of-a-kind fiberglass equipment, such as piping, tanks, towers and ducting for the construction of massive liquid transfer systems, but they did so with limited knowledge of the complexities of fiberglass engineering and design.

However complicated, Winston said the systems were far less complicated than the aerospace work he was doing previously at Boeing. So he started FSE as a consulting and inspection company that acts as a liaison and advocate for the end user of the system.

"Almost immediately we started working with Weyerhaeuser and other really big corporations here in

the United States," Winston said. "The bigger, more sophisticated companies appreciate the value we bring to the table."

Chris said the company was created to meet a need and that need still exists.

"We are still the largest and most specialized company for fiberglass engineering inspection," Chris said. "So we are kind of in a niche."

Chris said working with his dad has been beneficial because his father is someone he can really trust.

"You can trust anyone, but there is definitely a family trust that you can't get anywhere else," Chris said. "Blood is thicker than water."

Winston said there is a natural tension between a father and son. He said he has spoken with other father-son teams that have gone through a transition of power and said they saw similar tensions. For example, Winston said perhaps work tension could flare up and cause father and son to snap at each other and then apologize later.

"It's just a natural thing to happen, but I think as the transition takes place, there is a calming down that takes place, which is unique to this father-son issue," Winston said.

Overall, Winston said their transition arrangement has worked out well.

"Seldom does that happen," he said. "If we were to hire a general manager, there can be a myriad of problems."

Winston said he will hang around for the next year or two to guide his new CEO.

"I have a lot of experience in the things that Chris will be going through, but I just need to shut up and let him go," Winston said.