




STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP



Richard Garbee

One pool and spa industry veteran shares the strategies he used to help build and lead a manufacturer out of bankruptcy

After nearly four decades in the pool and spa industry, Richard Garbee entered retirement — or “Garbee 2.0,” as he calls it.

His career was one to be proud of. Garbee was part of Hayward Pool Products’ original marketing team, which brought about innovations like the industry’s first color-coordinated equipment system.

However, one of his biggest accomplishments was helping grow GLI Pool Products from bankruptcy to a thriving \$80 million manufacturer as its vice president of sales and

marketing. “That was a 16-year run, from 2006 to 2022. It was amazing,” says Garbee. “But we really started with nothing. There was no strategy, there was no business framework.”

To Garbee, a business is only as strong as its strategy, and the way you lead that business is key. Here he shares his recipe for building a business.



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Identify (and commit to) a unique value proposition

To begin the new business's strategic planning process, Garbee and GLI owner Gary Crandall dove into business resources, including Jim Collins' book "Good to Great."

They found the most crucial ingredient for a solid business strategy is your business's unique value proposition. This is something your business can excel at, that separates you from the competition and adds value to your customer. In Collins' book, this was referred to as your "hedgehog."

"At the end of the day, if you don't have a value proposition, if you're just the biggest or the best, it really doesn't resonate with customers," says Garbee.

He shared three questions from Jim Collins' book you need to answer to find your value proposition.

1. What can you be the best at in your industry?
2. Can this be an economic driver of the business?
3. Will your team be passionate and dedicated to seeing this through?

For GLI, this process led to the company's 72-hour lead time promise, in an age when delivery of custom in-ground liners and safety covers took between three to eight weeks during the busy season.

"We decided we wanted to change that, and we took the phrase 'we deliver in hours, not days,'" says Garbee. He knew establishing predictable and fast delivery times would appeal to customers who were sick of needing to call customer service to find out when they would receive an order — especially in a seasonal business. GLI's promise to customers not only became a strong competitive advantage, but also helped unify the team around a singular goal.

"The entire organization got behind it," Garbee says. "Those that didn't, they decided they would go play somewhere else."

Run your business by a guiding mission

Identifying and establishing a value proposition you can deliver on isn't an easy task. His advice is to begin by looking beyond strategy and identify your business's core values.

"Start with a set of core values and a mission statement that resonates with your employees and the people you want to hire," Garbee says. "What is it that you are driving towards that's just more than dollars and cents?"

Establishing those principles is critical whether you're a pool dealer, distributor, or manufacturer.

"They all have to answer that question — 'why?'" Garbee says. "Why do you exist?"

Those non-negotiables will not only inform how you run your business, but can also help with recruitment and retention.

For GLI, this mission was keeping families safe and bringing them together. Over time, the company learned of multiple stories of cars being accidentally driven over GLI safety covers. Hearing how their products protected customers from driving into their swimming pools helped remind employees how important each job was to the safety of customers.

"If you can identify and do that with authenticity, then you can typically win the day."

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Lead your people

Even with a strong value proposition and mission, a business will need a strong leader its people can trust in order to thrive. While many different approaches to leadership can lead to success, Garbee says there are three leaders should prioritize.

1. Lead by serving.

Leading with an emphasis on serving your group will build trust — which in turn will set your team up for future success.

"Servant leadership means listening, observing, and asking a lot of questions," says Garbee. "It means hiring people who can replace you, having the confidence that you can obsolete your job."

2. Communicate the vision.

Garbee says communication of the vision is not just the responsibility of sales and marketing. Rather, it should stem from leadership. If that vision is powerful, it will resonate within the organization. When leadership is active and relentless in articulating the business's vision and strategy, everyone throughout the employee hierarchy will be able to understand it, promote it, and rally around it.

3. Follow up and follow through.

"If you say you're going to do something, you better do it," says Garbee, who says each interaction is "an opportunity to burn equity or earn equity."

Whether you're interacting with your employees or customers, how you respond will affect their trust in you and your organization.

"Relationships are what it's all about," says Garbee. "They have to trust that you believe in them and you're in it with them — through recessions, pandemics, and whatever life may bring."

