

CRISIS MANAGEMENT COMES BACK TO CORPORATE CULTURE



Claffey Pools president shares the lessons he has learned under pressure to not just survive but thrive

Honesty. Integrity. Passion.

Charlie Claffey, president of Claffey Pools in Dallas, Texas, is quick to sum up the corporate culture that exemplifies his \$40 million custom pool building company. And Claffey is even faster to point out the perils of such a philosophy.

“The words get wiped away in a minute if you don’t make decisions that align with the words,” warns the chairman-elect of the Pool & Hot Tub Alliance (PHTA) Board of Directors. “Culture is not words on a wall. It is how you live your business day to day.” As one of the top builders in the country, Claffey Pools has forged its values under pressure. It’s been 35 years since Claffey’s father Paul founded the company, but watching it blossom, joining its ranks, and

driving its growth have taught him how to manage a crisis with confidence. Here he shares the “kindergarten philosophies” that can help others do the same.



**Two generations of the
Claffey family lead the company.**



**Claffey Pools supports
PHTA’s Step Into Swim initiative.**

Do the hard work.

Coming from a long line of construction workers, Claffey grew up on jobsites. By the age of 7, Claffey was learning the stone masonry trade that had sustained his family for generations.

"I got a real sense early of what it was like to be a laborer for a brick layer, which at the time was nothing short of complete sucking," he recalls now with a smile. "That gave me a very healthy respect for the people who actually do the work. Part of who I am today as a leader is due to those experiences as a very young child. And one of those traits that's very important in building culture is creating a team that displays the utmost respect for every level of the organization."

Don't let 'no' stop you.

It was a natural progression into pool-building when Paul Claffey moved his family to Texas from Wisconsin after the global recession of the 1980s dried up business up north. It wasn't easy.

"He got 50 no's over the course of the year. A year! Didn't make a dime. Then he got one yes," recalls Claffey, who was by then in college. "His tenacity at the very beginning ended up turning into a company that has built over 11,000 pools over the course of our history."

That early persistence continues to impact the company. Claffey Pools does less mass marketing than most of its competitors and relies almost entirely on referrals, starting with customers who remember the company by its first name, Pools by Paul Claffey.

The parts make up the whole.

Claffey set out to build his career as a corporate finance expert. But when the time came for the next generation to take over Claffey Pools, he and his siblings all signed up for roles. They shared his parents' bedroom office. Claffey still treated it like his previous corporate gigs.

"The way I learned the business is strange but invaluable: at a micro-accounting level," he explains. "I would review every bill that came in and understand all the pieces and parts by the billings on the job."

Within 10 years Claffey quadrupled the number of pools they built a year. And it's continued to come in handy, including at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic,

when the company had to cut costs quickly amidst uncertainty. Knowing the components meant knowing where to find savings in the spring of 2020.

"You dive in as opposed to being a spectator," Claffey says, adding he's always viewed it as "if we're going to go down, we're going to go down fighting, scratching, clawing."

Move mountains for your employees.

Claffey has felt the fear of going down. Already aware that "there's no greater pressure than carrying on a legacy," the siblings at the helm of Claffey Pools faced the Great Recession in 2008 with the viewpoint that their legacy was more than the family, more than the business.

"My sister, my brother, and I went six to eight months without taking a paycheck. I had to sell our house, cash in life insurance policies—every asset that we had—with one goal in mind, and that is we retain every single employee that we have," he recalls.

They did. Today 40% of Claffey Pools' 100 employees were there during the business's worst year on record.

Treat everyone as you want to be treated.

The single greatest accomplishment in Claffey Pools' history, its president says, is the work done following the 2021 Texas freeze, which impacted more pool customers than any previous natural disaster in the state.

"We fixed over 1,100 pools with a team of 43 people working seven days a week for a little over 3 months. Some of us worked 20-hour days...controlling the supply-side management, controlling the communication, getting the work scheduled, getting the work quoted, getting the work done."

That wouldn't have been possible without their experiences in previous crises, which brought them together as a team and taught them "you do whatever you've got to do to make clients happy."

Do the next right thing.

Understanding and teaching why you do what you do is just as important as the act itself, explains Claffey. "Our 'why' here at Claffey Pools is to passionately

serve our employees and our customers. The goal every day is simply to do the next right thing that allows us to serve those we serve better." Claffey is always looking "to do the next right thing." That drives his mission for PHTA as he takes the helm.

"I believe we have an obligation to give back to our industry. I believe we have an obligation to do all we can to lift up and promote strong, ethical businesses. PHTA develops codes and standards that drive the industry. Without the incredible work of our industry volunteers and our PHTA staff, we don't have codes, we don't have standards. Without PHTA leading our industry, our industry would be subject to codes and standards that are written by people that don't understand our industry."

For those manufacturers, suppliers, service companies, maintenance companies, pool builders, sub-contractors, and other pool pros who haven't joined, Claffey has one final reason why the PHTA is worth it: It's the way to lead.

"If you want to lead," he says, "you need to be the one that is constantly pushing the envelope. If you want to lead, you need to be the one that sets the standard."



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