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THE MAGNIFICENT FOUR

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They're dealers with dignity, who are far too busy to get hung up on others' disbelief that the boss is a woman.

The telephone rings, and a burly-voiced customer bellows, "I want to talk to the guy in charge."

"Yes, sir, how can I help you?"

"No, no, let me talk to the man who runs the place."

"Well, sir, I'm the person who runs the place and my name's Martha. What can I do for you?"

So starts another day in the life of an equipment distributor who also happens to be a woman.

Meet four dealer executives who love the business of selling and servicing heavy construction equipment, even if those around them can't figure out why. They roll with the punches of managing in a traditionally male-dominated industry, and they hold their heads high when they see eyes roll at the mention of their titles.

Janet Felosky, president, Monroe Tractor & Implement Co., Inc., Henrietta, N.Y., near Rochester.

Felosky grew up in the dealership her father founded in 1951. She worked in the business before going to Kent State University, where she graduated with a degree in business administration. She returned home, engaged to be married and ready to re-enter the family business, first as a collector in the credit department, then as credit manager.

When the former president of the company died unexpectedly of a heart attack, Felosky became president the following Monday. That was 10 years ago.

She runs a seven-branch company, three specializing in construction equipment, four in agricultural equipment. Her 150 employees own 38% of the Case dealership.

Felosky's father, Henry Hansen, is the company's CEO; she also has a sister who manages the rental department.

Martha Bush, general manager, Rex Spencer Equipment Co., Belton, Mo., near Kansas City.

Small-town kid and Central Missouri State University alumna, Bush became hooked on customer service at a banking job during college days and joined Rex Spencer in 1986 as an accounts payable clerk. In 1990 she advanced to rental manager, followed by assistant general manager and a promotion to general manager in 1998.

The Case and JCB dealership is owned by Jim Foreman, who also owns The Victor Phillips Co., Kansas City, Mo., also a Case dealership. About 20 employees help operate Rex Spencer Equipment, with Bush at the helm.

Judy Neal, vice president, Ditch Witch of Charlotte, Inc., Charlotte, N.C.

Neal and her husband Steve relocated from Texas to take over a cancelled dealership 25 years ago and, "for all practical purposes, started it from scratch."

"I was actually just going to help him kick start it and then I was going to get out and be a stay-at-home mom," she recalls. "But I'm still here, full time. I never made it home!"

Neal's company employs approximately 80 people across its six locations in North Carolina and South Carolina.

Diann Cook, president, Construction Equipment & Supply, Chesapeake, Va.

Having worked for a material supply company for several years, Cook launched her own small supply business in 1986 when she detected her employer's finances were in trouble. Four years later she reeled in the JCB

account that became available in her territory. With JCB equipment sales also in her toolbox of experience, she hit the ground running and hasn't stopped since.

"I just love this business," she says. "I think I have a fantastic product line—I truly believe in this equipment, and I see a manufacturer that is committed to making the best product on the market."

Cook's small but diligent staff of 14 (she includes herself in that number), serve the entire Tidewater region around Chesapeake and Virginia Beach from their centrally located facility.

WHAT'S THE ATTRACTION?

Entering the equipment business is one thing. Sticking around long enough to acquire a passion and assume leadership for it is something else entirely.

"Today we're in a nice building, but before I think my friends would have said, 'You wear nice clothes to a place like this?' " Felosky says. Besides the thought of oil stains on ivory-colored slacks, men and women alike still marvel at any woman's sincere interest and active involvement in running the daily operations of a CE dealership. "I don't think it's an interest to women," Felosky continues. "Today there's still a—I wouldn't call it a wall—but there's an image. It's not considered an attractive business for a woman."

The lure for these four would appear to be in the changes and challenges that their businesses hand them each new day.

"The industry, especially now, is always changing—there's no time to get bored," says Bush. "If you wait long enough, just like they say about the weather in Missouri, it will change. And I think there are always new challenges that you face each day. The equipment business is getting more and more sophisticated all the time. I feel I'm relatively a newcomer to the business even after 13 years. In that short amount of time it's amazing the number of changes I've seen."

In case you ever wondered what it's like for a woman to run an equipment business, well, it's about the same as it is for a man. Business is business, these executives would agree, no matter what your first name is or how much testosterone you have or haven't got. Like every dealer principal, each has her own management style and perspective on everything from personnel issues to problem solving. None are naïve, none are novices, and none would dispute certain advantages they bring as women to their work.

"I think being a woman, you have more of a feeling for where people are coming from. You do have a better understanding of the emotional side of things, especially having been a mother." Felosky says.

But these dealers bring more than intuition to distribution.

Strengths and Achievements.

"I'm very energetic, and I'm creative," says Neal. "That might not seem appropriate in a construction equipment business, but as far as marketing and merchandising and layout of the dealerships that we've opened—that's probably my 'big talent.'" Elbow-deep in day-to-day operations, overseeing all internal controls and processes, monitoring legal and government regulations and managing human resources issues, Neal also shouldered the responsibility of buying the real estate for the company's new facilities, as well as single-handedly designing the structures, inside and out.

But does she consider any of these to be her greatest achievement? No. Instead, she points to her people. "My biggest achievement would have to be developing the team of people that we've built here and the opportunities that we've made available for them. That's been the most rewarding part of it for both me and my husband."

For her part, Bush is most proud of having improved communication throughout her dealership. But her financial savvy is her real secret weapon—the ever budget-conscious Bush, relying on her accounts payable background, watches her company's money like hawk. "To this day I find myself checking how much cash we have and what bills we have coming up due. I remember how much pressure that can put on the person who pays the bills."

Cook says sheer determination is her most important strength. But no braggart is she. "Anyone who's determined and is willing to work hard can certainly do what I do." On the other hand, maybe brains is her strong suit, as she couples willpower with a heavy concern for providing superior service and the sure-fire strategy of "surrounding myself with a great staff."

Attention to detail as well as a big-picture outlook is the paradoxical framework from which all four draw their insights and decision-making prowess. Organized, service-oriented leaders, who care about their staffs as well as their customers, these dealers also share a common struggle. Each finds herself working harder to master product knowledge and technical intricacies than she suspects her male counterparts do.

"I may not *have to*, but I feel that I do need to work at this and be more precise on technical things," Cook admits. "And it keeps getting harder every year because all the manufacturers are coming out with so much. It's really hard to stay on top of that, because it's equally important to know the competition as it is know my own products."

She voices the concern the others share. But defeat is not an option.

"It's not easy reading to sit down and look at product information and determine dig depths and lift capacity and those sorts of stats, but it's very necessary in order to get the respect of the customers—and the employees, for that matter," says Bush. "You just have to be willing to ask questions of the people around you that you've put in key positions whom you trust. You can't be afraid to go to your service manager and say, 'I know this may sound like a stupid question, but can you explain this to me and show me how this works?' "

A Style of Her Own.

Good management comes in different packages, and being the boss in a multemale-populated work setting calls for strength of character and leadership qualities that draw the respect of others. The dealers we interviewed tend to view themselves as hands-on types, working shoulder to shoulder with their comrades—no 'I'm-the-boss-and-don't you-forget-it fixations' among these line-tow-ers.

"I lead by example," says Neal. I'm hands on and make good use of my time. I don't bring personal problems to the business. I try to set the best example I can and hope that the staff follows it. If they don't, then we take steps to correct it. That is the approach that works best for me.'

Neal resists the stereotype of being her company's community shoulder to cry on just because she's a woman. But it's a tricky discipline to maintain.

"It's very easy for a woman to be looked at as the caretaker," she says. "I am sympathetic, and I do care about everybody as a person, but I have to be the boss first. It's a challenge for me to find and walk that fine line."

Cook's low-key leadership style fits well into the small, family-like environment of her Virginia firm. "I would describe myself as very open door, and I think my staff would describe me pretty much the same way—they can walk into my office any time and talk to me about anything. I very seldom close my door," she says.

"I consider myself one of the people who works here," she adds. I participate in whatever is needed. We all feel equal here, and we all respect each other. Everyone is cross-trained to do almost anything in the company and just about everyone here can sort of fill in for anyone else. I have a fantastic group of people who understand that we all work together, we all pitch in."

Bush, who'll roll up the sleeves to help any staff person with just about any task, within greasy boundaries, of course, is a manager who also lives by open communication. "I think I picked up an approach from a very good manager, Bob Foreman at Rex Spencer Equipment, who was always very supportive of my decision making," she says. "I try to use that same philosophy with my employees now. I always try to be supportive of new ideas or suggestions and talk about them. We try to have communications meetings fairly frequently.

"I hope the staff would say that I'm a great listener. I think it's easy for them to come and talk to me and feel like I'm actually listening to them and hear what they're saying."

Hands-on is good, but it's not for everyone, and it depends on the context. While each recognizes the importance of letting go and trusting her employees to do their jobs, Felosky uses that mentality to frame her entire management style.

"I will be hands off if somebody is doing the job," she asserts. "I tell somebody what the end result should be—just because I did it a certain way doesn't mean you have to do it that way.

"I guess I developed that philosophy from my father. He believed in hiring people and letting them do what you hired them for. If you don't believe in them, why did you hire them?"

"I think I'm flexible but persistent," she continues. "I want this to be a good place for people to come to work. There's no class structure here—all my managers are working managers."

What Are You Shooting For?

What's an executive without goals? And this group is not wanting for noble ones. Growing their businesses tops the list across the board. Whether it's building a new service center adjacent to her headquarters building, as Cook foresees doing; raising the performance bar on existing branches, which is

Felosky's priority; or retaining and expanding a high caliber of staff, particularly technicians, which Bush aims to do, goals are an ever-present reality for the successful distributor.

"We've always been very goals-oriented," Neal reflects, but the first goal she and husband Steve identified and achieved in their business is one she hopes never to repeat. "We started this company two weeks after Richard Nixon resigned, and the bottom fell out of the economy. That was probably the worst recession in construction history. So our first goal was just to be able to make payroll; survival was The Goal at that point.

"Of course later we set goals related to being financially independent. My goal in the next five years is to step back, to let a new generation take over and for me to be on the outside looking in. I'm hoping to take a different leadership role and eventually semiretire."

Business Frustrations.

Wrestling with everything from business conditions to business systems comes with distributor turf. The "alligators" these dealers face in the ring are not unlike the ones everyone else who sells equipment faces, sooner or later.

"One of the greatest challenges for me is the technician issue right now," Bush says. "I'm sure the market's the same everywhere, and in Kansas City it's very competitive. We have both union and non-union scenarios, which are somewhat interesting, because even though these unions have contracts with these mechanic groups, they're paying above what the union contract requires just to keep people. That's very unusual. It's caused quite an investment and a lot of research on our part in terms of where our competitors are at wage-wise and benefit-wise, because benefit packages are a big draw these days."

Neal concurs. "It's a problem we don't have the answers for. We are interviewing and running ads all the time. It's become a bigger part of the business in the last 2-3 years than it ever used to be. We've improved our benefits—we've gotten very competitive and increased vacation time, but that's created a whole new set of problems. It's hard enough to get good people, and then when you've got people on vacation and sick leave it becomes a problem."

The other alligator Neal wrestles with these days slithers around the office, drinking up money like coffee. It's a greedy reptile better known as information technology.

"The biggest challenge for me right now is a generational thing, I suppose," she says. "I'm having a real tough time justifying the expense that we are putting into our computer systems. I don't want to be the computer expert, but I would like to know enough to understand what we're getting for our investment. I don't feel like I'm getting any new information with the new system than I did with the old system. And it's constant. It seems like we always need a new program or someone needs his or her own printer or this one's got to have a laptop. Sometimes I feel like we're losing our focus on the rest of the business because we're wrapped up in the information system."

A Day in the Life of...

The typical day simply doesn't exist, these distributors all say. But certain common characteristics run through the nine or 10 hours each spends at the office: phones ringing, interruptions, miles of reports and paperwork to read, the occasional customer complaint, meetings and dozens of phone calls to make decorate their daily lives in dizzying hues.

"I generally put in one or two hours at home the night before so I have my agenda ready when I arrive the next morning," Felosky reports. "If I can get all the important stuff done in 45 minutes before the phone starts ringing then I've had a good day!"

Fighting to keep paperwork at bay, or at least on a short leash, Bush makes a point of walking the dealership floor throughout her day to stay involved with customers and to be accessible to her staff. She tries to maintain a 70-30 ratio of people work vs. paperwork.

"I don't want to be sitting behind a desk just waiting for someone to bring me a problem or a question. I really want to be out there. I walk out to the parts counter and visit with the customers who are having to wait."

GETTING BATTLE SCARRED WHEN YOU DIDN'T EVEN KNOW THERE WAS A WAR

OK, so we've established that running a dealership is pretty much the same for women as for men, right? Yessss, but with a few extra pains in the backside just to make things interesting. Some of the attitudes women dealers encounter from peers, suppliers and occasionally employees and customers are humorous; some are not-so-humorous, but they've learned to laugh anyway.

"I've watched eyes roll when I've been introduced as president of the company," Felosky says. "It doesn't bother me anymore. At first you want to just give them a piece of your mind, but what's the point? You are where you are because you've earned it. I was not going to be president, but my father felt I was more qualified than any of the other candidates.

"Sometimes you can feel the tension when you walk into a meeting and you're the only woman. That big macho attitude is still out there—it's a demeanor, you know. I just kind of chuckle to myself about it. I can't help but look around to see if they're treating other people the same way."

At manufacturer-sponsored dealer meetings, Bush has encountered the most acute offenses, which she good-naturedly absorbs and diffuses to spare others embarrassment.

"The biggest thing is to go at it very honestly, not with a chip on your shoulder," she says. "I think you gain respect much quicker that way. But it can be difficult: I attended a dealer meeting in Houston recently; there must have been about 175 men there, and I was the only woman. I was mistaken as a spouse of an attendee, I was mistaken as one of the 'girls' that works for the manufacturer—there was an assumption that I worked for the manufacturer, not for a dealership. When I say, 'I'm here representing my dealership,' people ask me, 'Are you the only who came?' When I reply 'Yes, I'm the general manager,' they say, 'You're the general manager?!'

"Some men really don't know what to do. It's like any other awkward social situation. I see it as my job to make them as much at ease as possible."

Cook feels she's been spared from most forms of derogatory "crap," supposing to herself that "if it ever happened, I just didn't pay attention. I've always tried to be very professional. I have this business in mind in whatever I'm doing, and I haven't had any problems. I just plunge forward."

Ignorance is bliss, they say, but it's hard to ignore mail addressed to *Mr. Diann Cook*. "No matter what your name is some mail is always addressed to Mr., because everyone just assumes. I always get a chuckle out of that—in fact, it's kind of a joke around here: Mr. Diann! It just lands in File 13," better known as the trash can.

Chuckling wasn't exactly the response invoked from Judy Neal, who has known decades of being ignored in meetings, written correspondence and achievement awards. She boycotted dealer meetings for years as a consequence.

"You just have to be strong person," she can finally say. "I did get angry, but I got over it.

"One scenario that happened just last year was when we were a top dealer and were awarded by one of the manufacturers. They gave my husband business cards with Top 10 Dealer printed on them. Later, when we each gave a customer our cards, he asked, 'How come he's a top dealer and you're not?'

"There have been a lot of recognition or achievement awards that I didn't get," Neal continues. "I finally decided to ask about it once, and they said, 'Well, it's just for the people who *really* work in the business.' "

Customers, incidentally, rank lowest on the most-likely-to-offend list. Employees aren't much of a problem, either. Both groups have come to respect these leaders—after all, they have the benefit of seeing them in action everyday. Both also tend to soften their rough edges in the presence of a lady.

Nevertheless, the industry simply is what it is, replete with coarse language, mechanical jargon and a fading few who would rather that the women stay home. But for four women dealers who choose dignity, integrity and even jocularly in their approach to equipment distribution, it's an industry they wouldn't quit for anything.

"I think I'm pretty well accepted now," Felosky says. "I've been around a while. If I have something to say, I say it; otherwise, I keep quiet. You don't learn by being a motor mouth. I've achieved credibility and respect by being a good listener."

And are we having fun yet?

"There's plenty to do around here, but it should be fun," she answers. "It's where you spend most of your life—if it's not fun, something's wrong."

WORDS TO THE WISE

Advice for women managers climbing the dealership ladder.

- "Don't have blinders on. Go in and learn everything you can about the business. Don't limit yourself to the function where you may have started—there's so much in the company that you can participate in."
Judy Neal

- "My advice to a woman manager is no different than it would be to a man: Give a good day's work for a good day's pay. It's very important that you not pass up opportunities for training; experience as many different departments in the dealership as you can.
- "Be a risk-taker. Endure awkward situations, and do it in a manner that is professional. Maintain a level of pride in yourself and in your company." **Martha Bush**
- "Go to as many equipment or job-related meetings as you can, not necessarily to be heard, unless you really have something to say.
- "And add value to everything you offer. I don't care what business you're in; if you don't add value there's no reason for you to be elevated." **Janet Felosky**
- "It's a very exciting business to be involved in. It's a great career.
- "Take a lot of time and energy to devote to it. The key to success is determination and a willingness to work hard."