


Chapter 2

Employee Ownership and Governance as Labor Innovation: A 30–Year Case Study of Organization Democracy at Carris Reels

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ABSTRACT

Moving from the perspective that employee ownership and governance open developmental pathways and possibilities toward thriving in bridging the polarities in the workplace considered inherent within wealth creation and voice, this chapter draws from the author’s longitudinal Carris Reels case study. In examining the transition from a successful, respected and endeared family-owned business one with 100% shared employee ownership and governance, concepts and constructs are applied from the fields of employee ownership, corporate governance, organization development and change, adult development, human resources, business management and innovation.

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INTRODUCTION

Moving from the perspective that employee ownership and governance open developmental pathways and expanded possibilities for workers and companies toward thriving—in bridging the polarities in the workplace considered inherent within wealth creation and voice, this conceptual chapter draws from the author’s longitudinal Carris Reels¹ case study. In examining the transition from a successful, respected and endeared family-owned business to a values-based one with 100% shared employee ownership and governance, concepts and constructs are applied from the fields of employee ownership, corporate governance, organization development and change, adult development, human resources, business management and innovation.

The chapter is designed to draw together theory and practice: theoretical perspectives, empirical research and practical applications within a range of developmental processes and outcomes at Carris Reels, in its continuing efforts to be an aware, values-based, intentional and actively changing employee owned and governed company. This chapter is organized as follows: Carris Reels Overview; Review of the Literature for Employee Ownership and Governance; Methodology; Key Observations Regarding Change Efforts; *Long Term Plan* Insights for the Carris Transition; Shared Employee Ownership and Governance; Developmental Shifts; Developmental Processes in the Transition to Employee Ownership and Governance; Understanding of Human Development and Awareness; Areas of Emphases for Development; Notes from a Conversation with Kathy Brytowski, Carris Human Resources Director; Notes from a Conversation with James Brooks, Carris IT Director; Conversation with Jason McKeighan, Carris Director of Production; and Concluding Thoughts.

CARRIS REELS OVERVIEW

Carris Reels is a mid-size employee owned and governed company—sales are at \$155 million. Headquartered in Proctor, Vermont (Rutland County), USA, the company manufactures hardwood, plywood, plastic, metal and hybrid plastic and metal reels for the wire and cable industry and other applications. To serve its customers, the company also produces wire ties, bolts, and barrels. Reel recycling is a growing emphasis within the company. Carris Reels is a significant player in the wire and spool industry.

With international reach, Carris Reels has nineteen locations in Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Indiana, North Carolina, Oregon, Virginia, Texas, Canada, and Mexico. There are 750 employees: 580 in the US and 170 in Canada and Mexico.

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