

Tom Walter Shares Story of ‘Culture Shift’

Angus University keynoter shares the ultimatum that changed his business.

by Kindra Gordon, field editor

“E ither you change or we’re leaving.” That was the ultimatum Tom Walter faced one morning in 2006 from two employees in his Chicago-based catering business. One of those employees asking him to change his “iron fist” management style was his own 24-year-old son.

Walter recognized this was a defining moment, and said he realized pretty simply, “I couldn’t lose them.”

Walter adds, “I realized the way we were doing things wasn’t going to work for the next generation. It reminded me of my father’s authoritarian ways, which didn’t work.”

The result was a journey of change for his business, his employees, his family and his personal life. Walter detailed that experience in his address during the Angus University General Session Nov. 6 at the 2016 Angus Convention in Indianapolis, Ind. Angus University was sponsored by Merck Animal Health.

Walter said shortly after the encounter where he was asked to change, he read the



PHOTOS BY LEANN SCHLEICHER, ANGUS MEDIA
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book *Good to Great* (by Jim Collins), which helped spark a process of identifying core values for the company and its employees. He also began to recognize the need for trust, mutual respect and buy in from staff.

“We got rid of the words ‘department’ and ‘manager’ and focused on teams and training,” explained Walter.

He also received a new title. Instead of chief executive officer, he became the chief culture officer.

A succession plan was put in place along with a focus on

employee engagement. Integral to this effort, Walter said, were identifying the values, vision and mission of the company. He noted, “If you don’t have that [values, vision, mission], employees can’t become emotionally engaged with the company.”

Said Walter, “I used to believe profit drives everything, but today I know culture comes first and profit comes second.” He reported that as a result of increasing employee engagement in his business, profits have also skyrocketed. And, he’s attracting new employees to his business because they have heard positive things about the culture that the business offers employees.

He concluded, “I’m here to make the point: There’s a better way to do business; there’s a better way to engage family members.”

In addition to the book *Good to Great*, Walter recommended the book by Bo Burlingham *Finish Big: How Great Entrepreneurs Exit Their Companies on Top*. Both are available via www.amazon.com.

Walter’s presentation was part of the general session kicking off Angus University, the Nov. 6 educational series sponsored by Merck Animal Health at the 2016 Angus Convention. To listen to his presentation, go to <http://bit.ly/AU16-Walter> in the Convention newsroom. For more news from the Angus Convention — including summaries, speaker presentations, photos, videos and much more — visit the convention newsroom at www.angus.media/news/Angus-Convention.



Editor’s Note: Kindra Gordon is a freelancer and cattlewoman from Whitewood, S.D.



▶ After changing the work atmosphere of his business, Tom Walter’s role changed from chief executive officer to chief culture officer.