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Robyn Eddy

Eddy Group

When it comes to having strong connections with the community, the Eddy Group must be among the foremost companies in Canada. The New Brunswick-based construction wholesale group has been an intrinsic part of its community for four generations. Robyn Eddy, its President, maintains the company's links to its stakeholders. A big believer in the importance of Eddy's well-defined corporate culture, Robyn has successfully balanced the demands of the family shareholders with the growth of a dynamic business to create one of Canada's finest family firms.





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Robyn Eddy,
President, Eddy Group

Robyn Eddy did not have much time for the family business when she left university. "Back then, I vowed not to join it," she says. "The family business just did not seem very exciting or a very good fit for me." Instead, she worked in the hotel world and rarely gave the family firm a second thought.

But, in her mid-thirties, she began to change her mind. Asked by the family to lend a hand, Robyn agreed and began to realize the legacy the Eddy Group had in the community, and what opportunities the family business could offer someone with a desire for a rewarding career. After making the decision to join, Robyn and the company got on well enough that she eventually became its President. And today, Robyn's efforts have helped to create one of Canada's finest family businesses.

The Eddy Group is a wholesale distribution company in the construction sector. Employing around 145 people in the Canadian Maritimes provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, it is a classic midsized family business with strong

links to the communities it works in. Robyn now represents the fourth generation of family ownership and control. Her great-grandfather George Eddy of Bathurst, New Brunswick, got started as a wheelwright in the late 19th century and, in 1909, he incorporated the George Eddy Company, which eventually became the Eddy Group. At that time, the business was a typical frontier firm, offering various skills, products and services to a fast-growing country. The company had a sawmill and a millwork shop, as well as a carriage shop and a flour mill.

Many family members

George brought his son Chesley George Eddy into the business, and he ran the company from World War I through to the 1960s. He developed the lumber and forestry side of the company, and became known as the "the Boss" due to his determination to get things done. Chesley was, in many ways, the archetypal second-generation leader of a family business, taking a company started by his father onto a much faster



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growth path through ambitious expansion efforts. He was helped enormously by his children: he and his wife Grace had 11 in all, 9 of them boys. "Part of the reason for the success of the business back then was that there were so many family members to help out," says Robyn.

From the 1950s onward, Chesley – aided by six of his sons – focused more on the sales and distribution of building materials, hardware and plumbing, mechanical, electrical and municipal supplies, while new branches were opened in Nova Scotia. Gradually, the management passed to those of Chesley's sons who worked in the business, and they took it to a new level of development. The fourth generation joined the Eddy Group in the 1980s, and Robyn became President in 2007. "Soon after coming into the business, to my surprise, I got hooked," she says. "I began to realize the business was so dynamic. Of course, there were challenges, not least to balance the demands of the business with the family side."

To help achieve this balance and to ensure that the Eddy Group continued to prosper, the company borrowed some of the governance and related practices of publicly traded firms. "We have quarterly board meetings, fairly detailed quarterly reporting, dividend and debt policies, a Formal Board and an Executive Committee, which helps to partially separate the relationship of the family and the business from day-to-day operations. The Executive Committee consists of several non-family members." The Formal Board, says Robyn, is designed to maintain the stability of the culture, and stewardship remains a top priority.

Stakeholder harmony

Robyn believes that, in a business the size of the Eddy Group, it is very important to ensure that family harmony is maintained. "The company is not big enough to split up 10 ways," she says (there are approximately 10 main family shareholders of the 100% family-owned business). Harmony is also maintained by a



The Eddy Group employs around 145 people in the Canadian Maritimes provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.



Robyn, pictured here with the past family business leaders, represents the fourth generation of family ownership and control.



The opening of the Kentville Nova Scotia location involved, from left to right: Jody MacDonald, Vice President of Sales; Keith Assaff, Vice-President of Operations and CFO; Robyn; the Mayor of Kentville Nova Scotia, Dave Corkum; and Mark Connors, Branch Manager.

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Robyn Eddy

strong bond between the company and its other stakeholders – its employees and customers, and the communities it operates in. "I have worked in other businesses, but probably the most important factor in the success of a family business is trust between key family members, customers, management and our team," says Robyn. "I have found, when anyone is talking to me, whether I am recruiting, speaking to a supplier or talking to a peer company across Canada, they pay more attention to me because they know I have more skin in the game. It has made a significant difference in the relationships we have been able to build."

But Eddy's commitment to its stakeholders would be worth little if the business did not continue to thrive. So how does a fourth-generation family business in construction sales and distribution continue to be entrepreneurial and innovative? Robyn thinks this is helped by the Eddy Group's culture of flexibility – mostly by its commitment to the quality and experience of its people. "We innovate in our processes by making sure our business and our people are flexible in meeting the demands of our suppliers and customers. It is a lot about relationships, and we need to be constantly responsive to these relationships."

Of course, the strong culture of a fourth-generation family business is also part of that innovative process. Robyn says the protection of this culture has been very important in maintaining strong relationships and has helped to fend off competition from larger competitors. "We have seen businesses get acquired – and their culture is destroyed or significantly compromised very quickly," she adds. "The benefit of that for us is that we get their customers. But it also makes us think how valuable and important our culture is."

Those beliefs, coupled with the Eddy Group's culture, will help to engage future generations of the family. Already, Robyn's daughter works in the business, and some other members of the fifth generation are also employees. Robyn says the Eddy Group is very careful about bringing in family members. "When a family member joins, there can be no sense of entitlement. No one is treated differently from any other employee."

A commonsense approach to business, based on all the best qualities of stewardship, means that Robyn's words carry real weight when they are related to the family's role in the business. These factors, combined with a culture that has been created over four generations of the Eddy family, will hopefully see the Eddy Group prosper for generations into the future. That is the greatest legacy any family business can have.

Robyn Eddy

President

Company name:

Eddy Group

Generation:

Fourth

Founded:

**1909 in New Brunswick,
Canada**

Industry:

Construction

Employees (2016):

145