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Greg High, third-generation owner of High companies, starts consulting firm

By Jason Scott

Greg High spent years working with his family to craft a simpler management structure at High companies, one of Central Pennsylvania's largest and most diversified family-owned businesses.

Now the third-generation co-owner of the Lancaster County company is looking to advise other family businesses as they make similar leadership adjustments.

On April 2, the 50-year-old High will turn his attention full-time to GH Family Business Consulting Group LLC. The solo venture will be separate from the other High family businesses, though Greg High will be using office space in the family company's corporate headquarters in the Greenfield Corporate Center in East Lampeter Township.

High felt the time was right to strike out on his own.

"I got to a point where we positioned the company well from a governance standpoint and a number of other companies have been asking me questions about our company," he said. "As I met with other family businesses, I saw a real need for guidance on governance structure."

High, who has been around the family business his entire life, said the High management structure was working well under his father, S. Dale High.

However, the younger High didn't believe the heavy reliance on one person — his father — made sense for the future of the company, the largest private company in Lancaster County.

In 2006, with the support of his father and family, Greg High led an effort to start streamlining the business structure at High companies.

"As our generation looked at it, he was holding all of the pieces," said Greg High, who until early this year led the High Family Council, which represents the family's majority ownership of the High companies. "We wanted to transition the company beyond our father during his lifetime. We wanted to make sure that the transition would be smooth and successful, instead of sudden and surprising to the organization."

He admits it took some time to convince his father that proactive changes would better position the company for long-term success.

When the streamlining started in 2011, the company had different people serving on its two boards of directors. Those boards oversee the company's two main divisions, High Real Estate Group and High Industries, which control other High companies.

The family decided to have common directors serving both boards. A new investment committee with other members was set up to advise the two boards on details of various deals and other company investments.

High also had separate CEOs leading High Real Estate Group and High Industries. In 2012, Nevin



Greg High is the founder and president of GH Family Business Consulting Group LLC. - (Photo / Jeremy Hess/The Premise Studio)

Cooley, who was leading the real estate division, assumed the role of CEO of High companies and oversaw both divisions of the overall company. Cooley retired at the end of 2014 and Michael Shirk assumed the role of CEO in 2015.

In addition to those changes, Greg and his siblings, Steve and Suzanne, worked with their father to identify a successor as chair of the company's two boards. In early 2016, S. Dale High moved into a chair emeritus role and a new chair, Paula Crowley, was named.

Greg High believes many family businesses face similar challenges and, with his new firm, he wants to help them.

"I wouldn't say there is a lack of family business consultants, but few have ever worked in a family business," High said. "I'm not saying they are not effective, but I felt that was a competitive advantage for me. I'm doing it every day."

He has been working with a few clients on a part-time basis. He didn't name them, but said they range in size from about \$25 million in annual sales to \$5 billion.

And their needs are all different, he said. One company wanted an outside director on its board who works in a family business. Another wanted to start a family council and needed a consultant to help develop agendas and keep the family focused.

Other clients, he said, might need help starting a family leadership center. The High children completed their own leadership center last year as

a way to honor their father for his 50-plus years of company service.

S. Dale High, who became company chairman in 1977, took a single entity with \$1 million in annual sales and about 60 employees and led it to become a large conglomerate with more than 2,000 employees and \$643 million in revenue by the end of 2015.

The S. Dale High Leadership Center hosts company meetings and events, as well as the offices of The High Family Office and The S. Dale High Family Foundation. The auditorium also is available for public use by reservation.

Greg High said he is focused on attracting clients in Pennsylvania and surrounding states. Rates can be hourly or flat for specific projects, he said.

If the business grows to a point where he needs to bring on more staff, High said he may consider affiliating with one of High's divisions as a new subsidiary.

He isn't the first in his generation of family members to expand the High brand. In 1998, his brother Steve started High Environmental Health & Safety Consulting after serving as company safety director for many years.

Greg High said he will remain involved in High companies from a board and ownership level. But his day-to-day focus will be on his new business.

"Most of my time will shift to what I can do to help other families," he said.