

Like a Boss: When Quick Growth Overwhelms



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Dave Fairburn, CEO of North Point Outdoors, was only 18 years old when he got his start in the industry doing part-time irrigation work. But it wasn't long before he realized he was building a profitable business – and it was growing rapidly. Revenue for the Windham, N.H.-based business grew from \$700,000 to a projected \$4 million in a very short amount of time. While the growth was amazing, Fairburn quickly learned it was also overwhelming. The now-29-year-old says the biggest lesson he's learned so far in business is that growth does not solve problems. It silently creates them unless it is properly managed.

Fairburn says that during the company's "most wild growth spurt" he was seeing the business grow more than 50 percent annually. With that rapid growth he began to recognize that problems were creeping in – in all areas of the business. In the office, they were struggling to keep up with invoicing. In the field, the operations team was struggling to plan, route and efficiently complete their work when days were jam-packed. From a cash flow standpoint, equipment was getting added almost too quickly in order to keep up with the work. Fairburn says the days were feeling hectic and the company morale was decreasing. That's when he knew he had to take hold of the reins and do something before the growth overtook them.

"We found ourselves spending more time putting out fires and fixing mistakes," Fairburn says. "Who would have thought that growing could be a problem? But we learned that if you're unprepared to handle growth it can actually roll over you. If you're not careful, a growing business can actually fail."

Fortunately that wasn't the case for Fairburn. He says that he "stuck through it and pressed on." That meant buckling down and making some tough decisions. He took a hard look at the employees he had and brought in some new hires

that he felt would be a positive addition. Operationally he began using CRM software that helped fix some of the office concerns with invoicing, sales, and estimating. Fairburn says that as some of the office problems were resolved, the field operations improved as well. More time was spent on efficient routes and Fairburn put an emphasis on “empowering people with responsibility and giving them the tools they need to succeed.” He says that he credits a lot of the turnaround to taking good care of his people.

Fairburn says he now sees growth as both a “blessing and a curse,” and recognizes that it’s something that has to be managed.

“For a young business we have felt that growth was a lot like drinking from a firehose – and we’ve had to pay the price for lessons learned the hard way,” Fairburn says. “But we didn’t lose hope. We pressed on – taking the good with the bad. In the end, part of the fun is enjoying the ride and learning as you go.”

Read more on Dave Fairburn in [Young Guns](#)

Our [Like a Boss](#) series highlights some common business challenges landscape professionals face and how they conquer them.