



TAPPING INNER STRENGTH— PRUDENTIAL'S LEADERSHIP CHANGE SHOWCASES DRIVE TO PROMOTE FROM WITHIN

California-based industrial
launderer thrives by
developing staff excellence at
all levels

By Jack Morgan

Prudential Overall Supply, a third-generation, 88-year-old company with a national footprint, recently completed a model leadership transition. This industrial launderer based in Irvine, CA, promoted family co-owner John Clark, to succeed his father Dan as CEO. At the same time, a new nonfamily President, Chris Welch, advanced to succeed retiring President Tom Watts, another nonfamily executive who had risen through the ranks

from a route driver to the presidency of a company that grew dramatically during his 20-year tenure. Today, Prudential operates 37 industrial and cleanroom locations from coast to coast.

Welch, a 24-year veteran of the company, started out as a management trainee. He worked his way up through a series of progressively responsible jobs in service and plant operations. Welch applauded the process that Dan and others on the executive team undertook to complete the leadership change.

"I think being on the other side of the looking glass now, I really appreciate the time and energy that the Clark family put into thinking about the transition," Welch says. "Obviously, my predecessor, Tom Watts, played a critical role in that approach and that process and certainly

gave the organization a lot of run time to figure out the transition."

'A STEADY HAND AT THE WHEEL'

A small team reviewed candidates for the president's job, but Welch says John Clark made the final decision. "There was a three-person interview, but Dan Clark, who's the chairman of the board, made it clear to me during the interview process and prior to any job offer, that it was really John's selection. I think that's good for me now because I have a very clear vision. Obviously, I have to work with Dan and he's the primary shareholder, but John's my boss. It gives me good clarity of direction."

As a family executive, John described his own "journey" to the top job in the company as a series of progressive moves through the business, going back to high school, when he worked in areas such as soil sorting. Learning the business from the ground up is how Prudential grooms its leaders, so that when they reach the top, they understand the many facets of the business. "A lot of Prudential's top management works through the ranks in the organization," John says. "I think I'm a good example of that. And it's something my father, Dan Clark, firmly and passionately believes in the idea that top-level management will be more successful if they understand what's happening at the lower levels of our organization. So, I've worked in production in high school, as a driver in college and transitioned to the sales and service-management role. Then the natural progression that I would take and most other people in the organization would take is I transitioned into the general manager and then regional director or manager and then continue on that escalation upward."

Welch made his way through this process as well before he was named president. John says the experience that leaders gain by working through a succession of jobs provides the company with tremendous benefits. "That continual progression

through an organization,” John says, “I think that’s really something that makes Prudential strong. When you talk to our executive team here, pretty much everybody’s gone through that journey.”

What’s more, Welch pointed out that promoting people from within isn’t limited to top leadership or even management jobs. It works across the board, including new hires. “I think we have a great story of harvesting internal talent,” Welch says. “And looking inside first. I certainly have been a great beneficiary of that. I’m basically the second from the ground-up in-house president. So, when we do our recruiting and messaging, we don’t just focus on the execs. We have a ton of great stories. I think of an individual in Vista (CA) that had moved to the United States from abroad. He didn’t speak any English and started in the laundry sorting soil. Today he runs a route for us at a high level and makes a very good income.

“We have a lot of GMs that started in production or on a route or other positions. It’s not like we’re just hiring kids right out of college. It’s also an avenue. I think the approach to recruitment is whatever your current state is. You want to do more. Prudential and industrial laundry is a great place for you to be because there’s lots of opportunities. And we want to pick our people first, vs. hiring strangers or people that don’t know the industry.”

Growing leaders in-house helps Prudential in a number of ways, including a better understanding of longtime customers and the production capabilities of the plants. The familiarity of veteran managers is also a valuable morale builder, given the uncertainties created by the COVID-19 crisis. “John’s a pretty humble guy, but one of the things that’s great for him in his current role is that there’s no feeling downstream that he just showed up and got this job,” Welch says. “The rest of the organization’s been able to see him have success at these various levels and perform at a high level. And so, there’s a great degree of comfort, especially at times like now that you have



ABOVE: (l/r) Prudential Overall Supply’s recently appointed leadership team: CEO John Clark and President Chris Welch. Clark is a third-generation family owner/executive, while Welch is nonfamily executive who oversees the company’s 37 locations nationwide. Both men rose through the ranks through a succession of progressively responsible jobs at the company based in Irvine, CA.

a steady hand at the wheel and someone who really knows the business. And more than that, he knows the people and the fiber of our organization. He can see us through this moment of trial to what lies beyond.”

‘BIG BRUSH STROKES AND DETAIL WORK’

While John is quick to tout the benefits of promoting leaders from within, he also sees value in having rising leaders of family businesses working for a time for other companies in order to learn new skills and gain fresh perspectives. “I’m a strong believer that working outside of a family firm is extremely valuable and important,” he says.

During his college years, John had a restaurant job at the Macaroni Grill. His most significant work experience outside of Prudential was a stint as a project manager for ABS Laundry Business Solutions. While there, he gained insights on the laundry business as well as the impact of automation in various settings. “The majority of my outside-of-the-industry experience came from working with ABS for two years,” he says. I had the

opportunity of working in Europe. They sent me to work at numerous industrial laundries throughout the world. So, I was able to see how our sector, the industrial laundry sector, functions across the world. I learned a lot; gained a lot from that experience to be able to take away aspects of the international industrial laundry world. And hopefully bring some of that back to Prudential.”

John worked on projects in China, Dubai, South Africa and several European countries. When asked about the impact of automation in various laundries worldwide, he noted that the companies’ willingness to invest in such technology typically hinged on labor costs. “The cost of labor in Europe is much higher, which, therefore, forces them to automate more,” he says. “I think America is going through that transformation right now. Therefore, automation will continue to rapidly increase. But I was able to witness laundries where the cost of labor is so low that the need for automation was less apparent in those plants. It was fascinating to see the different automation from a South African laundry to a Belgian laundry. Very different worlds.”

John's full-time experience at Prudential began as a sales and service associate. As noted above, he progressed steadily upward to plant and then regional management jobs, gaining knowledge and experience along the way. "I transitioned into the general manager and then regional director or manager and then continued upwards," he says. "It took 10 years for me to go through all the managerial levels and production. Not including being a driver or working in production."

John says his experience at ABS was a bit like a hands-on version of a Master of Business Administration (MBA) program. He later obtained a real MBA from the University of California, Irvine. He says that program also enhanced the skills he needs to lead Prudential into the future. "Five years ago, I wrapped up my MBA," he says. "I did the senior executive MBA program. I found it extremely helpful." He cited benefits including personal growth/development, enhanced confidence and an improved ability to interact with the large organizations that Prudential deals with on a regular basis.

In a similar context, John says he benefited from interacting with a broad group of peers through the MBA program. "I think half the value is networking with your fellow classmates from a myriad of different industries and being able to learn from them and recognize that all organizations have the same challenges," he says. "We just go about solving them in different ways, whether it's human capital, automation, or sourcing internationally. Being able to work and talk to your fellow classmates about this is very valuable. The second valuable piece to that is the in-class learning. You're exposed to all the different facets of an organization. Whether it's accounting or marketing. You learn about all of these and you get a greater depth of understanding."

John also is a graduate of TRSA's Executive Management Institute (EMI). He says a key benefit of that program was the industry contacts he made with students from diverse backgrounds. "EMI was a rewarding investment," he says. "It provides the opportunity to share

experiences with your peers, learn from them, and make valuable connections with the supply side of our industry."

The combination of these experiences helped pave the way for John to set the vision for Prudential as CEO, while Welch focuses on implementing initiatives aimed at furthering the company's growth from a regional player in Southern California to a national company with a market presence in 34 states. "We have a very healthy process," says Welch. "I think John has generally painted the big brush strokes, and then I come in behind and do the detail work and make sure we're executing to his vision."

'STABILITY AND TREATING PEOPLE RIGHT'

When we asked John about the company's future plans, he said no radical changes are in the works. Prudential will continue to emphasize growth in its core markets of industrial garments, facility services (including masks, hand sanitizer and other COVID-19-related items), plus a significant presence in the processing of specialty textiles for use in clean room businesses, such as computer-chip and pharmaceutical manufacturing.

John adds that he's pleased with the resiliency he's seen in industrial markets, which generally have felt less impact from COVID-19 than hospitality or food and beverage (F&B) businesses. "I've been surprised by the stability of this sector," he says. "It seems relatively resilient, compared to other sectors."


Beyond the pandemic, John sees opportunities to continue Prudential's leading role as an environmentally conscious operator with an emphasis on technological innovation. However, prudent management requires the company to move cautiously on costly upgrades such as alternative-fuel vehicles. "We haven't made a strong investment in that yet, even though we are working with various vendors to understand how we could incorporate that technology into our company," John says. "I'm a firm believer that

it's good for the environment. Therefore, Prudential should move down that path. But right now, those technologies are still cost-prohibitive. I'm hoping that the technology evolves at a rapid pace, so that we can bring that technology on board."

Similarly, Prudential hasn't (so far) jumped into advanced automation systems, such as radio frequency identification (RFID) tags for its garments. "Production floor automation, we'll continue to develop and expand," he says. "We'll continue to invest in automation at the right price point that helps support the needs of our customers."

As for RFID technology specifically, John added that Prudential is keeping a close watch on developments. "From a uniform standpoint, it's still a very manual-intensive workflow," he says of Prudential. "Every other year we participate in the Clean Show. We really enjoy seeing the technologies that are brought into the industry through the various manufacturers. We do believe that they are continuing to evolve. So again, it goes back to that right balance of cost over value. If that equation lines up and seems appropriate for Prudential, we're very much willing to invest in that."

As for its leadership team, investment there is likely to continue, given the results that have fueled Prudential's growth for 20-plus years. That success flows in part from the company's ability to tap its inner strength by developing staff at all levels. Investing in and promoting staff creates a virtuous circle of loyalty, coupled with a knowledge of customer needs and production capabilities. "I think the story we tell is that there's a lot of job security with Prudential," John says. "We're a growing organization. We're an essential business. We have a large diversified customer base, and in the end, what a lot of people are looking for when they hire into an organization is stability and being treated right." **TS**

 **JACK MORGAN** is senior editor of *Textile Services*. Contact him at 877.770.9274 or jmorgan@trsa.org.