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# SMART BUSINESS

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**THE ART OF  
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THE RIGHT  
DECISIONS AT  
THE RIGHT TIME**

## FABRICATING PLANS

**HOW ROSS BUSHMAN  
UTILIZED STRATEGY  
TO STEER CAST-FAB  
TECHNOLOGIES FORWARD**



# FABRICATING PLANS

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STRATEGIZING WASN'T A NEW CONCEPT FOR CAST-FAB TECHNOLOGIES CEO ROSS BUSHMAN, BUT THE ONSET OF THE ECONOMIC RECESSION IN 2008 GAVE STRATEGY A WHOLE NEW MEANING. WITH NEARLY HALF OF CAST-FAB'S BUSINESS DROPPING OFF DUE TO THE ECONOMY, BUSHMAN AND HIS TEAM HAD TO STICK TO THEIR STRATEGY AND LOOK FOR WAYS TO DIVERSIFY THE BUSINESS IN ORDER TO SURVIVE TOUGH TIMES.

It was late 2008 when Ross Bushman and his team had just finished a new strategy for the next five years of business at Cast-Fab Technologies, Inc. Bushman, who is president and CEO, along with his team were excited about the new strategy that was put in place and what it could mean for the company.

However, just a few months later, 2009 began and the castings and fabrication industry was hit hard by the recession. Cast-Fab Technologies, a 280-employee, \$50 million gray and ductile iron foundry that supplies castings, patterns, steel-welded fabrications and precision sheet metal components, lost nearly half its business virtually overnight.

"We went through some hellacious turmoil in our industry, to say the least, back in that 2009 time frame," Bushman says. "It was a period of about five or six months where a lot of that drop occurred. It wasn't that we just lost 30 or 40 percent of the business in one day. We didn't lose any customers. What we lost was our customers weren't buying anything and that was different."

With its customers taking a break from business, Bushman and Cast-Fab had to look elsewhere to keep business going.

"We knew we had to stay strong, make some painful choices early on, and we didn't procrastinate on them," he says. "We knew there would be opportunities to pounce on."

To take advantage of those potential opportunities, Bushman stuck to the company's plan, reassured employees that things would be all right with hard work and new customers would be found through diversifying the business.

Here is how he carried Cast-Fab Technologies through the downturn.





Reaffirming America's Manufacturing Excellence

“On the implementation side is really where plans are won or lost and strategies are won or lost.”

Ross Bushman,  
president and CEO,  
Cast-Fab Technologies, Inc.



### Involve employees in your strategy

The recession caused panic in a number of businesses as individual industries began to see the effects of the economy. Bushman, however, wasn't going to let panic set in at Cast-Fab — he communicated what the organization was going to do.

“Our people were going home every night and the news was not good,” Bushman says. “Everybody had a friend, a neighbor or a family member affected somehow by the economy.

“People need clarity and every day we were out there trying to talk about those things and we kept talking to them about reaffirming America's manufacturing excellence. That was what we were after.”

To achieve manufacturing excellence Cast-Fab aimed to diversify the customer base, establish new customer relationships and continue to grow with current accounts. To put that plan in motion Bushman involved many people in the strategic planning process.

“You have to involve a lot of folks in the organization,” he says. “People are usually pretty surprised at how much different kind of numbers and things we are sharing even down to key shop-floor personnel. Team members need clarity. They need the ‘what’ and the ‘how.’”

Deciding who to include in the strategic planning process can be a difficult decision. A good strategy group involves people from different levels and experience.

“We certainly have the key managers involved, but we're also looking out for those up-and-coming associates who are going to be the key folks five or 10 years from now and getting them to be part of the process,” Bushman says. “At the end of the day, these folks own the plan — the strategy map and the numbers on the scorecard and what specific metrics we are doing — they are intimately involved in developing those things with us.”

You want to pull in folks who are on a track to do some bigger and better things for your company down the road.

“That just helps with the breadth of opinion,” he says. “In the C-suite, we all can get blinders on at times and forget that information isn't assimilated through the organization as much as it comes to you. That's why your players need clarity — the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ — and you have to communicate those things.

“The toughest part that any organization has is getting an outside force's perspective of what's coming at you and trying to look at where things are going to be five or 10 years from now and what you need to be doing today to get there. That's where some

of those outside folks can help challenge you.”

People are usually surprised at how many folks Cast-Fab involves in its strategic planning process.

“We have around 280 folks today and we'll take 25 or 30 people off-site to really be part of this process and really help map the future of the organization,” Bushman says. “They then own the plan and they believe in the words and the numbers that are on the page. It's not just me or my brother sitting up there talking about those things and that's really worked well.”

### Get buy-in

Having all of those people in the room to help form a plan is extremely beneficial when it comes to gaining buy-in for a new direction.

“I talk to our folks and tell them, ‘This is your chance to write the script for the next four or five years for the organization,’” Bushman says. “It's not just me standing up there going over the same old charts and numbers. We've really created some good alignment within the organization as far as goals. We're getting people pulling in the same direction.”

To get your company on the same page and moving together, it takes patience and persistence. Bushman has identified the

## The Bushman File

five dysfunctions of team training to get his employees in line.

"You have to be willing to get better and not just go through the motions," he says. "Sometimes to get better you've got to have some conflict and some change. So we've used the five dysfunctions of a team training, which talks about dealing with issues in a professional way. Sometimes it's not fun, but we've spent a lot of time getting the right people that fit together."

When you're trying to get buy-in for a new strategy or direction for the company, it is rare that you will please everyone, but it is critical that you get a majority on board with you.

"You have to keep working your strategy so it becomes ingrained in what you do," Bushman says. "My dad told me years ago that if you got even 70 percent of your workforce on board, buying in to what you were doing, that's probably world class. You're probably not going to have everybody, you just have to keep getting some converts each day, each week, each year to what you're trying to do and you'll slowly move the needle.

"An 80 percent solution executed on time is better than a 100 percent solution executed late. It may not be perfect, but start the plan and start it working and work on the implementation phase. It's about getting a little bit better each day as opposed to giant leaps."

To move forward with a plan each day and each week, you have to put emphasis on the implementation of your strategy.

"Too often people go through a huge strategic planning process, they come out with a great plan, but they spent months and months doing it, and at that point, people are exhausted," he says. "When the work needs to begin on the implementation side, it fizzles out a little bit.

"We really shortened the time on the strategic planning side and we really focused on the implementation. On the implementation side is really where plans are won or lost and strategies are won or lost."

### Move forward

Following Cast-Fab's strategic planning process in 2008, the economy tanked and implementing a plan and sticking to it became more important than ever.

"One of the principles and beliefs that I use is that decisions in crisis demand calm leadership," Bushman says. "We really knew that and really communicated as best we could with the organization."

Bushman used that calm, yet determined demeanor to steer the company in a positive direction. With current customers putting business on hold, Cast-Fab looked to gain new business. It brought on new clients and diversified its offerings.

**NAME:** Ross Bushman  
**TITLE:** President and CEO  
**COMPANY:** Cast-Fab Technologies, Inc.



**Born:** Cincinnati

**Education:** Attended Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and received a production and operations management degree. He also received an MBA from the University of Cincinnati.

### What was your first job and what did you learn from that experience?

My very first job was at Carlisle Construction. It was a heavy equipment construction company that rented cranes, dump trucks, etc. I was the guy who swept the gas pumps, worked in the truck wash and steam-cleaned the engines so the maintenance group could work on them. It was a pretty good experience for a 14-year-old learning different stuff. I learned how different people dealt with conflict.

### What is some of the best advice you have received?

My dad taught me years ago that pigs get fat and hogs get slaughtered. We use that a lot here when we're talking about relationships with OEMs that we're trying to establish for the long term. So when we're in negotiations or doing pricing we're talking about getting a fair return for what we're doing to be able to sustain and grow the business, but at the same time, we're not looking for just one sale or a home run. We want to be able to do this for the long haul with them.

### Whom do you admire most in business?

My dad taught me most of what I know. He's been my hero in life. I was also part of a mentoring group here in town several years back with a fairly famous local business guy, Bob Kohlhepp. He is the chairman of the board over at Cintas and has been a great mentor to me and taught me a lot as well.

### What are you most proud of at Cast-Fab?

I would have to say it was some of the work we did for the military. We did things on both sides of our business, ranging from ductile iron bomb bodies to some of the fabrications for the MRAP vehicles. A lot of our stuff isn't necessarily seen when it is in use somewhere. It's part of a machine or inside the guts of a machine, but when you can point to something that our folks are doing to help out our troops overseas, that's pretty special to us.



“It’s about getting a little bit better each day as opposed to giant leaps.”

Ross Bushman,  
president and CEO,  
Cast-Fab Technologies Inc.

“We knew there would be some opportunities in the marketplace and there were,” he says. “We continued to use our strategy, and we continued to look at where we wanted to go and that’s how we made our decisions. We made some painful cuts at the time, there’s no doubt about it, but we were proactive with those. We didn’t wait too long.

“We really saw where things were heading pretty quickly and that allowed us to stay strong in many ways.”

The opportunities Bushman communicated to his employees came up in time. Cast-Fab made an acquisition and gained business from competitor demise.

“We had our most successful year that year of new customer generation,” he says. “We really needed to, because our current customers weren’t buying anything. I knew if we could get some more spokes into the fold once the current markets came back we’d be in pretty good shape.”

Throughout this period, Bushman made it a point to stay as positive as possible and celebrate any small wins the company made.

“You have to spend a lot of time talking about the positives, not just the negatives,” he says. “People think you have your plan and you come in and talk about the stuff that’s not going very well.

“We try to celebrate success, because how boring would that be to just come in and talk about the problems all the time. We try to spend three times the amount of time on the positives as we do on the opportunities for improvement.”

Some of those positives have come from the new product offerings that Cast-Fab has created over the years in order to diversify.

“Part of the strategy that has been working really well for us is we have developed a couple of product lines of our own to help us diversify,” Bushman says. “We have a line of bank equipment products that’s sold under

the business and brand Security Systems Equipment. We do safes, vaults, safety deposit boxes, pneumatic tubing systems and anything that a credit union or financial institution may need that’s metal-based.

“We have another smaller division that does products for water and waste water treatment. That business is sold under the name Coldwell-Wilcox Technologies. These are subsidiaries of Cast-Fab that are a smaller piece of what we do, but they do help us diversify.”

The key to diversifying to help grow your business is to not leave the core competency of your business behind.

“You can’t stray from your core competencies,” he says. “Ten years ago, we didn’t know anything about bank equipment, but we knew how to make fabricated product. An opportunity came up to make an acquisition there, and we did that.

“Eight years ago, we didn’t know much about the products in water and waste water treatment other than they used a lot of castings and fabrications, machining and assembly. We had to learn how to sell some of those products and establish ourselves in those markets, but at the end of the day, we know what we do here in this building pretty well, and we’ve never strayed far from that.”

By sticking to a strategy of following core values and diversifying the business, Bushman has led Cast-Fab into new realms of business. He plans to continue that growth.

“As a family business, we don’t want to be doing this just for one or two more years; we want to be doing this for 30 years and beyond and get it over at some point maybe to a third generation,” he says. “So we’re trying to do those things and make those decisions now for the long haul.” <<

#### HOW TO REACH:

Cast-Fab Technologies, Inc.  
(513) 758-1000 or  
[www.cast-fab.com](http://www.cast-fab.com)



# CAST-FAB

TECHNOLOGIES

## TAKEAWAYS

- » Utilize employees from different levels in your strategic planning.
- » Continue to work your plan as you gain buy-in.
- » Diversify by using core competencies.