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How Radio Flyer's Third-Generation Leader Reinvented His Family's Iconic Brand



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Radio Flyer Chief Wagon Officer Robert Pasin. (DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION: JEFF MANGIAT FOR FORBES; JAMEL TOPPIN FOR FORBES)

When Robert Pasin stepped into the top job at Radio Flyer in 1997, he had big choices to make. The Chicago maker of little red wagons, founded by his grandfather, was losing business to competitors. Another toymaker, Little Tikes, had introduced a popular wagon made of plastic, while Radio Flyer had stuck with old-fashioned wood and steel. Pasin was all of 28 years old, and he had to find a way to reinvent his family's iconic brand.

His to-do list was long, including a product line overhaul and moving manufacturing to China. But first he had to learn how to be a great boss. “The turning point for me was deciding that my number one priority was to build myself up as a leader,” he says, “and to get very intentional about making that a skill that I needed to develop and hone.”

Though he’d finished his M.B.A. at Northwestern’s Kellogg School the year he took over as chief wagon officer—the title he prefers to CEO—he didn’t feel prepared for the job. So in 2002 he enrolled in a series of leadership courses taught by Gerald D. Bell, an adjunct professor at the University of North Carolina’s Kenan-Flagler Business School, flying down to Chapel Hill to attend two-day sessions every other month.

Among the tools he learned about was a process called 360 feedback, where a worker gets anonymous evaluations from supervisors, colleagues and subordinates. For Pasin, it was an eye-opener. “I learned there was a gap between how others perceived me and how I perceived myself,” he says. “I thought I was a really good listener, but people told me I was an average listener and I’d use humor to cut off conversations.” After he completed the Bell course, Pasin hired Marshall Goldsmith, a well-known leadership coach, for an extra year of training.

Becoming a better boss helped Pasin implement overdue changes, although his efforts at introducing new products were not an immediate success. His designers fumbled with plastic at first, introducing a push-pull wagon that flopped. Then they hit on the Pathfinder wagon, which has seats that flip up and down. It remains a bestseller. They introduced scooters, tricycles and a four-wheeled contraption called a Ziggle,



Radio Flyer's new Tesla Model S for kids. RADIO FLYER

which kids operate by wiggling. Radio Flyer also sells a series of EZ Fold wagons, fold-up models made from fabric and steel. Traditional wagons have gone from 100% of sales to 25%.

In 2017 Pasin's team debuted another successful product, a miniature replica of the Tesla Model S. Designed for 3-to-8-year-olds, its rechargeable lithium-ion battery powers a top speed of 6 mph. Tesla founder Elon Musk even tweeted about it, pronouncing it "quite fun." Radio Flyer's revenue has climbed to an expected \$120 million this year, four times 1997 sales.

On the manufacturing end, Pasin shut down Radio Flyer's Chicago factory, which did not have the capability to produce plastic products. Two thirds of its products are now made in China and another third in a factory in Wisconsin.

While Pasin has made changes, he still embraces the company's history. His grandfather Antonio Pasin, an Italian immigrant who learned cabinet-making on a Venetian estate, started manufacturing a wooden toy wagon in Chicago in 1917, first calling it Liberty Coaster for the Statue of Liberty. He changed the name in the late 1920s to Radio Flyer, to capture the fascination with early radio broadcasts and airplane flights.

Has Pasin ever considered updating the company name? Not a chance. "When you say 'Radio Flyer,' the first thing people do is smile," he says, "and the second thing they do is tell a story, and it's usually a story about warm memories from childhood. That's a powerful thing and something we cherish."