



Tom Nelson's AWCI 100th Anniversary Dinner Speech Summary

National Gypsum Chairman, President and CEO Tom Nelson spoke during the AWCI 100th Anniversary Dinner. Here are excerpts from his speech, which have been edited for brevity.

This is National Gypsum's 23rd year as sponsor of this event, and I am honored to be here and excited about the future of our industry. We're here to celebrate the past 100 years, but more importantly, to look toward the future.

I'd like to tell you quickly about National Gypsum's heritage, which started with three men – Melvin Baker, Clarence Williams and Joseph Haggerty – who represented sales, manufacturing, and research and development. They were the Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos and Steve Jobs for our company. As the original disruptors, they bootstrapped our company with innovations that would change the industry. And, they literally started with \$100,000 – working in Mr. Haggerty's kitchen.

I wonder what they would think if they were here tonight? I'm sure they'd be amazed at everything that has happened. And they would marvel at what you've done to drive our industry and this organization forward over the past 100 years. That brings us to this point in time – leaders facing the future.

Over the years, a key part of my role has been to "look around the corner" at other companies, other leaders and other industries. In doing that, I've had the opportunity to collaborate with several of the most accomplished thought leaders in business today. While none of us can predict the future, I've learned we must prepare to lead during times of disruptive change. And, the fast pace of change is astonishing.

My goal is for you to leave with a few fundamental ideas that will hold true, regardless of what comes our way in the next 100 years.

First, you never know where the next billion-dollar idea will come from – maybe from an unlikely place or from an unlikely individual. **Seek out those ideas** and individuals and nurture them. **Be open-minded.**

Investors, potential employees and customers are not going to gravitate toward our companies if we are sitting still. We need to **push our organizations** to look around the corner and identify how we can take advantage of emerging trends.

When it comes to innovation and leading through change, we must foster diversity. As an industry, we must attract a more diverse pool of talent as the next generation assumes leadership roles.



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Diversity of disciplines – Imagine field superintendents, office estimators, architects, manufacturers and contractors – all working together to address problems and develop strategies for the future.

Diversity of backgrounds – People bring different and valuable perspectives to a situation based on their backgrounds – so take advantage of that.

Charles Darwin reminded us a long time ago that it is not the strongest or the fastest who survive, but those who adapt the most quickly. Successful companies **adapt quickly** to change. Their leaders are open to change and have the ability to lead their organizations through that change. Trust in leadership is critical at this point.

Based on my personal experience with many of you in this room, I know as an industry we have very effective leadership, and I believe it all ties back to being genuine and authentic. This is the way we build trust.

Put People First – Don't get out of sequence when determining what's most important in your organization. If you focus on people first, everything else will follow.

Recognize, Recognize, Recognize – It's a simple concept but can be easily overlooked. Identifying and recognizing the difference-makers in your organization can be your secret weapon.

These nuggets of wisdom from game-changing industry leaders really boil down to a few simple concepts as we face the future and lead through change:

- Seek out innovative ideas in unlikely places.
- Encourage diversity of ideas and individuals in your organizations.
- Be an authentic leader and you will earn people's trust.
- And finally, put people first – and everything else will follow.

I would like to conclude with one concept that seems to embody all these insights about leading through change – and that's "relationships." Our industry was built on relationships and as leaders we need to recognize no matter what comes next – robots, artificial intelligence or driverless trucks – people will still do business with people. As we lead through change over the next 100 years, I truly believe the strongest competitive advantages will be built on people, relationships and long-term partnerships.

Thomas C. Nelson has served as the Chairman, President and CEO of National Gypsum Company since 1999. From 1995 to 1999, he served as Vice Chairman and CFO of this Charlotte, NC-based building product manufacturer. Nelson is a member of the Board of Dean's Advisors at Harvard Business School and a past chair of the Policy Advisory Board at the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University. He is also a director of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond and Yum! Brands, Inc.

