

Weekly EMP Newsletter

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CLAUDE AND BETTY LOU LAVAL
ENTREPRENEUR
MENTOR
PROGRAM

Ask Me Anything Session with Agnes Saghitilian and Stuart Woolf by Timofey Volkov

This week's luncheon hosts were mentees **Kara Hernandez** and **Kevin Robles**. We enjoyed delicious club sandwiches and salad from the *Waffle Shop*, a locally owned restaurant known for great breakfasts, brunch, and lunch. Kara shared the owner's story of persistence, support, and success during COVID. They survived and are in the process of opening up a second location.

Agnes Saghatelian, CEO and Owner of *Valley Lahvosh Baking Co.*, and **Stuart Woolf**, President, and CEO of *Woolf Farming and Processing*, were our featured guests. Although these two family businesses differ significantly, Agnes and Stuart share many leadership and entrepreneurial attributes. Additionally, they both value their family and believe Fresno is a great city and a wonderful region to raise kids.



Valley Lahvosh Baking Co., 100 years old this year, is headquartered in Downtown Fresno. The baking company produces a wide variety of traditional Armenian crackerbread for retail, food service, and OEM customers throughout the United States. Agnes was born and raised in Fresno and began working for the bakery when she graduated from Fresno State in 1993. She worked side by side with her mother, Janet Saghetilian, who then led the company. When Janet passed away in 2010, Agnes took over the leadership role. Agnes is the third-generation family member leading the organization. Agnes loves being the 3rd generation to lead this company and is proud of the organization's traditions and culture. She loves being a mother of one daughter and enjoys spending time with her.

Woolf Farming and Processing Company was founded in 1974 by Stuart's father, Jack Woolf. The primary business of Woolf Farming and Processing includes the production, processing, and handling of almonds, pistachios, processing tomatoes and operates two processing plants—one for tomato paste and one for almond paste. They are one of the largest tomato processors in the world. Stuart received his bachelor's degree from the University of California, Berkeley, and his MBA from Boston College. Upon graduating from Boston College, he joined his family company and became the second generation to lead Woolf Farming and Processing in 2002. Stuart indicated that he loves being a grower in California despite the ever-present significant variables. Stuart is married and has five children.



After the self-introductions, the session became interactive, with the EMP Mentees directing personal and professional questions to our two guests. It became clear that these two leaders had many overlapping characteristics despite their organizational and industry differences.

- Both family businesses are characterized by resilience and agility. Their resilience has allowed them to overcome challenges and to build great companies. Agility has shown their ability to act quickly and strategically. Both leaders are entrepreneurial in their approach to running and growing their organizations.
- **Agnes** and **Stuart** believe their responsibility is to build an enduring family business. Agnes' primary goal when she took over the realm was to ensure that the company reached 100 years old! Now, it's planning for the future. Stuart's goal is to ensure that the organization can be passed on to the next generation in better shape than received.
- Both guests spoke about learning from mistakes provides an excellent opportunity for growth. The biggest mistakes that turned into learning opportunities include:

Agnes: Take the time to learn and understand the situation before making significant strategic decisions. She allowed a general manager to make an important strategic change in the organization without her involvement. Once the strategy began to be implemented, she realized that the situation was very different from her understanding and caused significant problems. Since then, she has not had a General Manager and has personally taken on that role. According to Agnes, "Don't put the cart before the horse."

Stuart: One of the biggest mistakes he has made in business is trying to grow too fast. Although growth is important, growing too fast over a short period can cause many serious issues. Cash flow is one major issue resulting in borrowing too much from banks. "It's critical to moderate growth...don't press accelerator too fast."



- **Stuart** and **Agnes** believe one of the essential elements of their leadership is creating an open line of communication with their team members. Stuart advised that "to succeed, you have to communicate to all employees the vision of the organization, and you must have enthusiasm doing good and challenging times." **Agnes** believes that vision is one of the most important information for her to communicate across the company. She starts with her leadership team and expects it will cascade down throughout the company. She also frequently speaks with the entire team of employees to keep them all posted on progress being made on the vision.
- Because EMP's mission includes developing the mentor/mentee relationship, Stuart and Agnes were asked about their mentors.

Agnes indicated that her most important mentor was her Mom and learned significant lessons over the years working side by side with her. She also feels it important to continue developing mentors and participates in a local CEO Forums and Vistage.

Stuart indicated that his mentor was his dad and his dad's friends. Throughout his career, he deliberately surrounds himself with people he admires and participated in Young President's Organization (and their small group forums) He also has an outside advisory board. Claude Laval was on the first advisory board established for the company. "Outside directors make a family business act better".



- **Agnes** and **Stuart** have a "growth mindset" We asked them how they have grown personally as leaders of their organization.

Agnes advised that she has learned the importance of dealing with situations head-on and having more self-awareness. Sometimes life can get overwhelming. Whether we have too much to do or we are feeling completely drained, it can be hard to face the tough things that are thrown our way.

Stuart indicated initially, he was very stressed. The job was all-consuming. There was always more to be done. As he got older, he became less stressed because he was able to fall back on a set of references to guide his decisions. "I missed a lot of my five children's early activities, and I am trying to make up for it now."

- Both **Agnes** and **Stuart** advised that the primary responsibility for building and leading an effective leadership team rests with the CEO.

Stuart quoted Jim Collin's book Good to Great. "It's important to have the right people on the bus and the wrong people off the bus." As a company grows, Stuart indicated that "getting the wrong people off the bus" is hard but necessary. "Key members who don't follow vision need to be let go from the company. It's important to have alignment". **Agnes** agreed. Additionally, they both stated that it is essential that you have individuals on your team or board that will challenge your thinking and not just agree with you. Challenging the current state of an organization is essential because it can allow a company's leaders to evaluate how the organization operates and consider new ideas.



"Employees have to believe in you as a leader"--Stuart Woolf

"Allow employees to be heard"--Agnes Saghatelian

- One area where Stuart and Agnes had significantly different experiences was during COVID-19.

Agnes indicated that Valley Lahvosh was hurt dramatically during Covid-19. They had to shut down for 3-4 months to adapt to the requirements. Specifically, they faced severe supply chain issues. Over 60% of the business is focused on food service. According to Agnes, the company had to adapt rapidly and make quick decisions for survival. Her team stuck together and made it through the challenging period...and she thinks they are better and stronger now.

Stuart indicated that operations remained steady during the pandemic crisis, unlike so many other businesses. The one area impacted during this time was trying to adhere to the CDC guidelines to ensure worker safety and health. This was felt explicitly in the tomato processing plant, where there are 120 days dedicated to running the plant 24 hours/day. The possibility of an outbreak of Covid at the plant was of critical concern. Due to the planning, the plant got through the processing season without needing a shutdown due to infection. The real issue these past few years is the continued issues around water--it has gone from bad to worse. "California's state policy has abandoned the San Joaquin Valley" Today, the biggest issue is what to do with the land that the organization decides to fallowed land in the long term. Stuart is taking precautionary steps on this land, including solar farms and water-tolerant plants like agave. "We are going to figure this out!"

- When asked about their greatest attributes, Agnes and Stuart provided the following thoughtful responses:

Stuart believes that one of his best attributes is that he has learned to be a strategic thinker....looking at trends and challenges and asking, "where do we want to be in 10 years, and how do we want to get there?" He is surprised by how few companies and leaders do strategic planning. He is always looking for opportunities, even when facing significant challenges. He prefers to be proactive vs. reactive.

Agnes believes she possesses good listening skills, genuine interest, and concern for others. This improves her understanding of how the business operates day-to-day and leads her to better business decisions. "I have to be a moderator, a problem solver, and a shoulder to cry on when it is required".

We couldn't believe that it was almost 3:00, the end of our session. We could have easily talked for another hour or more! It was a very fast session with lots of takeaways! We greatly appreciate our time with Agnes and Stuart and the candid conversation that outlined their personal and professional journey.

The following are favorite quotes and key takeaways from the session:

- "Never put the cart before the horse!"--Agnes (*Mentee John Petrogonas*)
- "If you always have two guys who agree, you only need one. For advice, you need someone who will give you honest feedback"--Stuart (*Mentee Colton Cunningham*)
- Stuart and Agnes's ability to act like they have known each other for years and build an inviting synergy even though they had just met! (*Mentee Dirk Tharpe*)
- My major takeaway was that preparation is key. Agnes and Stuart have a clear direction of where they want their businesses to go in the future. I think this is very important to keep a business growing and innovating. Having a clear direction will allow you to get more done in less time. It also allows you to change course faster when problems arise. This is especially helpful to have a healthy balance for a family. (*Mentee Kevin Robles*)
- I enjoyed how Stuart talked about the importance of a positive attitude. He said to get excited when faced with a challenge. I think everything is about your perspective, and if you look at challenges as an opportunity to learn, grow, and accomplish something, it can change your entire mindset. (*Mentee Kara Hernandez*)
- "Honor what you inherited but move forward!"--Agnes
- "Leadership is good--ask Putin"--Stuart (When asked how he liked being in a leadership role)



Agnes brought Valley Lahvosh crackers for the EMP mentees. The heart shaped cracker has been popular since 1983 when Agnes' mom brought in the heart shaped cutter.



Congratulations to EMP Alum, Kodey Wells and Wells Upholstery for being named the 10th fastest growing company in the Central San Joaquin Valley for 2021 by the Business Journal.