

“first person”

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While I was talking and laughing with my six-year-old daughter Elouise on the chair lift for our third “one more” run at Purgatory, Colorado (enjoying an unseasonably warm weekend ski day in February 2020), my phone rang. “Hi, Adam, it’s Janet—how’s your weekend going? Unfortunately, we’re experiencing a serious security issue. Please don’t use your work computer with our normal network until we meet as a team Monday — please check your email at home for additional details from KP.”

I am paraphrasing, but I remember clearly this call from my supervisor and the email from our CEO announcing the cyberattack. This memory sticks because it was the start of a difficult scenario for any company, and it heightened my gratitude for my fellow ESOP participants as we navigated the following month with a “one-team” mindset. I attribute much of this teamwork/effort to the fact that we are all vested into the success of the company through an Employee Stock Ownership Plan.

I am an employee-owner at StoneAge, Inc., where I am part of our customer service team. Employee ownership has had a massive influence on my life over the past five years. I was impressed from day one during my initial facility tour. As a company we design and manufacture tools and automated equipment used for a variety of high-pressure waterjet applications. At 40, I’ve held a pleasant selection of jobs; however, it wasn’t until I joined this team that it became clear my prior experiences hadn’t brought me as much pride, motivation, self-worth, respect for

teammates, and work/life satisfaction as I enjoy today. Come visit us some time — you’ll likely notice it yourself! The culture and the teamwork mindset are often praised by customers and industry partners who have stopped by any of our locations. What can be more rewarding than that?

Back to February 2020:

At the Monday morning meeting, we learned additional details about the security issue and recovery plan. A team had strategized, over the weekend, how to continue doing business with limited access to the systems normally used for all aspects of operations so our customers wouldn’t be penalized. I don’t believe we missed a single opportunity to serve our customers during “the hack.” Engineers helped run paperwork from one building to another, and all our departments helped outside their normal roles, too! Everyone pitched in with a positive attitude. An Excel spreadsheet was built by senior teammates to help us process, track, build, ship, and invoice quotes and orders accurately. Input from individuals and teams across the company helped shape and refine these on-the-fly processes as the month went by. Leadership kept us motivated and focused, worked to resolve the encryption issue, and provided visibility into the state of things as we worked together to serve customers that generally work in “need-it-now” industries. You could see the pride on everyone’s faces as we celebrated the first day our systems were restored. Coincidentally, I think it was the next day we were asked to go home to work remotely due to COVID-19. I strongly believe our employee-ownership mindset helped carry us through the cyberattack and prepared us for the unprecedented “new normal” scenario we all faced, and continue to face to



some extent, due to the pandemic.

From my perspective, employee ownership boosts company culture, rewards the streamlining of operations and processes, fosters transparency in leadership (both formal and through self-leadership), positively affects company and personal financial wellness, and incentivizes continuing education and growth. I am grateful to have visibility into and access to the company’s strategic plan and goals, along with our candid discussions and feedback among peers and supervisors about how I as an individual, and how our teams and adjacent departments can get involved and affect our plan. I love the flexibility and genuine care from co-owners, the lack of “silos,” and the strong positive impact of a culture of ownership on so many areas of our business. Through our continuous improvement and ownership mindset, we can better our workflow and processes as we help our customers complete their waterblasting jobs safely, easily, on time, and on budget.

My family notices it at home, too: The feeling of value, enjoyment, and gratitude for fellow co-owners is something they genuinely appreciate. The ESOP mindset ultimately allows me to be more present at home with my family. The knowledge and skills gained by working somewhere that encourages self-growth for the benefit of our one-team workplace have also improved my personal life. I’m very grateful to have found a company with an ESOP program; it’s changed my life for the better, and I don’t think I can imagine going back from this “new normal”—being part of an employee-ownership culture. ■