



For TAB Member Bob Howden, TAB has taught him important lessons on how to empower his management team

YOU WOULD BE FORGIVEN IF YOU COULDN'T SEE A LOGICAL CONNECTION between the products of Grass Concrete Limited and the world of cycling! What they have in common is the owner of Grass Concrete Limited, Bob Howden.

Grass Concrete, providers of the unique Grasscrete environmental paving system, was set up in 1970 by Rodney (later Sir Rodney) Walker. Bob, with a background in Quantity Surveying and Contracts Management, joined him in 1981, with a brief to turn around the fortunes of its newly established but ailing contracting arm, Chantry Contractors Limited. The role developed from there to become in time the group MD, before Bob launched his own MBO of the group some 23 years later, to take over the full ownership of both Grass Concrete and Chantry Contractors. Over the lifetime of Grass Concrete, things have changed significantly. Back in its early days, Grasscrete was being sold into a market that had yet to become fully conversant with environmental need and so establishing its relevance could be a challenge.

Now the company is working within market sectors that have become much more in tune with our environment, enabling products such as Grasscrete to become very much a mainstream specification item. Education has played a significant part in the development of Grasscrete, with much time having been given over to working with engineers, architects and environmental groups to gain a better understanding of how traditional constructional problems could be overcome with a new environmentally sound approach.

So where and how does cycling feature? In managing to run a successful and forward-thinking business, Bob also managed to fit in a moderately successful 24 year long career as a racing cyclist. As the wheels began to slow, he transferred his interest to working as an official within cycling's governing body, British Cycling. From being its Yorkshire Regional Chair, a position he still holds, he was elected to the main Board of British Cycling in 1998 at a time when membership stood at just 14,000 and international sporting success was a rarity. In time Bob became Chair of the Board and President, the latter being a position he still holds after stepping down from the Board in 2017, at which point membership had reached 140,000 and Great Britain had become the World's top cycling nation. Since 2005 Bob has also been the organiser of the annual Ryedale Grand Prix, one of Britain's top bike races. Prior to stepping down from the Board, Bob was awarded the OBE for Services to Cycling.

With a lifetime spent juggling a number of challenging roles, Bob had by now begun to realise a need for change within both his business and life style commitments. "I was beginning to feel isolated as a business owner and although I've been around the block quite a few times and I feel that I'm pretty savvy, I was beginning to have doubts and uncertainties about direction of travel within a changing and ever more complex business environment," shared Bob. At that point he found TAB and knew it was what he needed. "I had lots of unanswered questions and I needed people to give me the sort of checks and balances that I couldn't find in my own head," he continued.

On joining TAB, one of these challenges and a potential opportunity was to seek ways of breaking

down the isolated structure of a sole business owner. Bob realised that for the future benefit of the business and his own personal well-being he needed to empower his management team to step up in their roles both collectively and individually. Ultimately, this should see the introduction of a seamless succession plan.

"Simply letting go can be an issue," says Bob. "Particularly for someone who is a bit of a perfectionist and so finding an acceptable balance for others to step into is a challenge, as is the realisation that on occasion others might actually come up with something new and better." Bob's TAB facilitator helps him with this and also facilitates a monthly Management Team meeting where in Bob's absence the team is encouraged to develop new ideas and a higher level of input.

On a personal level, TAB has helped Bob to rationalise his time spent in the office without impacting on performance. With weekend working now largely a thing of the past, he is also able to commit more time to his home life and to getting out on his bike more.

Bob has no intention of 'hanging up his boots' any time soon, but does take comfort from the fact that he's working towards having a business that's less reliant on him.

"I really care about the people within the business and if I can help with their development, in the same way that many years ago I was given that help, then it would give me great satisfaction. It would also mean that Grasscrete will continue to be a product of both the present and the future."

