Lawsons - 93-year-old gives away control of £180m business. Richard Higginson interviews John Lawson.

1. John, congratulations that you are still going strong well into your 90s. It has been great for Faith in Business to have a strong relationship with your son Simon over the years, so I know something about Lawsons. But for the benefit of our readers can you please give a brief description and history of your firm, explaining its scale of operations and what it manufactures and supplies.

Lawsons was founded in 1921 by a Christian family and has grown over more than a century into the largest independent timber, building materials and fencing merchant in London and the South East. Today the business operates 35 branches stretching from Lincolnshire to the South Coast, employs more than 700 people and generates annual revenues of around £180 million. Alongside the core Lawsons business, the Group includes a number of specialist timber, fencing and landscaping brands serving trade professionals and homeowners across the region.

We hold net assets in excess of £87 million, operate a fleet of around 150 vehicles and own much of the land, timber yards, offices and depots we operate from. We have always taken a long-term view of the business, building for future generations rather than chasing short-term gains.

I have been involved in the family business for 70 years now. A great deal has changed in that time, from the scale of the business to the way our industry operates, but some things have remained constant. Good people, strong relationships and doing what you say you will do still matter. I'm incredibly proud of what the business has become, but even more proud of the people who have helped build it over the years.

2. I know that the company sets great store by its distinctive values. Can you explain what these are, and illustrate how they are embodied in the firm's practice?

The values at the heart of Lawsons are straightforward: do things properly, treat people fairly, and take responsibility for the communities around you. We have always believed that commercial success and ethical responsibility are not in conflict, that a business can be financially strong and still operate with integrity. Long before ESG[1] became a boardroom acronym, those principles shaped how we hired, how we treated suppliers, how we engaged with customers and how we invested in the communities we operate in.

In practical terms that means a people-first culture in which staff welfare genuinely shapes decisions rather than sitting as a footnote in a values statement. It means long-term relationships with suppliers and trade customers built on trust rather than short-term commercial advantage.

One of the things I have always believed is that businesses should look after people through good times and difficult times. You do not build loyalty by treating people as numbers on a spreadsheet. You build it by standing by them when it matters. That philosophy has shaped many of the decisions we have made over the years and remains central to how we run the business today.

3. Do you see these values as an expression of yours and Simon's Christian faith? Please tell us something about this.

Yes, I do. Lawsons was founded by a Christian family, and my son and I have become increasingly close to the Quaker movement. The Quaker tradition has always held that there is no meaningful separation between faith and commercial life. The same

John Lawson

values that guide how you live - honesty, simplicity, equality and responsibility to the community around you - should also guide how you do business.

My faith has always encouraged me to think about stewardship rather than ownership. Businesses have responsibilities beyond generating profit. They create opportunities for

John Lawson and Simon

people, support families and contribute to the world around them. Those beliefs have shaped my approach to business for many decades and I know they have influenced Simon's approach as well.

While Lawsons serves people of all faiths and none, many of the values that define the business today are rooted in those principles.

4. What is the major decision you have recently made about the future of the firm?

This year I transferred 51% of Lawsons Group into an independent ethical trust. There was no sale, no private equity deal, no management buyout and no cash consideration. It was a gift - permanent, irreversible and made with no financial return to myself or my family.

The trust is overseen by five trustees, myself, Simon Lawson, Andrew Henshaw, Ciaran Morton and Chris Harrison, whose role is to ensure the principles set out in the trust are upheld over time. Under the new arrangement the business cannot be sold to the highest bidder, floated on a stock exchange, or absorbed by an acquirer that does not share its values.

My question has always been what happens to the values of this business when I am no longer running it. This structure answers that. It protects them in law.

It was not a difficult decision because the purpose was clear. I wanted to ensure that the business continues to benefit the people who help make it successful and that the values which shaped Lawsons for more than a century remain protected.

5. I understand that you are going down the EBT (employee benefit trust) rather than EOT (employee ownership trust). Can you explain the difference and why you have chosen EBT?

The distinction is important and often misunderstood. In a standard Employee Ownership Trust, employees effectively acquire the business over time through the trust structure and the founding family typically receives payment for their shares.

Our approach was different. This was a genuine gift. There was no transaction and no financial return to me or my family. The objective was not wealth extraction, it was stewardship. By choosing an Employee Benefit Trust structure, the shareholding is held for the collective benefit of employees while helping to protect the company's independence and values for the long term.

6. Would you recommend other well-established family firms considering succession plans to follow in your footsteps?

Every family business is different, and I would not suggest there is a single right answer for every situation.

But I do think every founder and family business owner should ask themselves this question when the time comes to think about succession. As well as asking how to maximise the value of their shares, they should also ask what they are trying to preserve.

For some the answer will be independence. For others it may be culture, jobs, long-standing relationships with suppliers and customers, or a commitment to the communities that helped build the business.

I would encourage business owners to think carefully about the legacy they want to leave behind. Not every business will choose the same route we have, but I believe it is worth considering whether success should be measured only by what you take out of a business, but also by what you leave behind for others.

John, thank you very much for your time and for answering these questions. We wish you and Simon well. Thanks also to PR Consultant Kelly Lewins for organising this interview. FBQ

1. ESG stands for Environmental, Social, and Governance. It is a framework used by investors, businesses, and regulators to measure the sustainability and ethical impact of an organisation's operations.