

Lessons in Leadership

Mike Quaranta leads the charge for the future of the Delaware State Chamber of Commerce PHOTOS BY DICK DUBROFF/FINAL FOCUS PHOTOGRAPHY



MICHAEL J. QUARANTA sees changes coming and he wants us all to be ready.

He doesn't know what the changes will look like or from which direction they will come. He doesn't know whether the changes will be big or small, fast or slow. He only knows they are inevitable.

After all, we are almost to the third decade of the 21st century. Change should be considered a fact of life by now. In a world churned by globalized markets, roiled by unpredictable politics, and disrupted by relentless technology, tomorrow is less and less likely to look like today.

So Quaranta preps for change. And he wants Delaware to get ready with him.

It's his new job. Quaranta becomes president of the Delaware State Chamber of Commerce on July 1. He succeeds Rich Heffron, who retired June 30.

Quaranta salutes Heffron's accomplishments as Chamber president, saying the Chamber is on solid footing. In fact, thanks to Heffron, the Chamber and its members, Delaware is better positioned for growth today than it has been in years.

Still, tomorrow and its changes loom. And, Quaranta says, Delaware needs to be ready.

He has an idea of how.

Quaranta cites two lessons Mike Castle taught him about Delaware. First, always remember that Delaware is a small state. When it comes to the giant states rolling around and bumping into one another, being small is a disadvantage.

Castle's second lesson about Delaware is the reverse. Delaware's small size becomes an advantage if its leaders can be flexible and quick, if they can hone a policy that brings all sides together without drawn out in-state battles.

"We have to be faster, smarter, more nimble and more efficient than anyone else," Quaranta says. "If we're going to be small and slow, well, that's not going to get us anywhere."

Quaranta learned those lessons about Delaware when he served as Castle's chief of staff during the former governor's tenure in the U.S. House of Representatives. Not only did Quaranta have to

know the state well, he had to learn how to represent it, how to explain it to strangers in Washington, and how to articulate Delaware's goals and interests.

That insight into the way Delaware finds its place in the world of Washington expanded when he moved on to national and international problems. During a spell with the lobbying and public affairs firm The Podesta Group and then with Cogent Strategies, he saw first-hand how rapidly changing developments in trade, technology and politics reach across borders to affect all of us. The takeaway? In a world of clashing voices, find the story you need to tell and tell it clearly and intelligently.

Yet there were other lessons to absorb. These came much closer to home. He and his wife, Michelle, live in Old New Castle, where they operate a small business. There is more. Quaranta was elected to New Castle City Council in 2017 after several years on the planning and historic area commissions.

Small business? This is where people talk face to face. This is where a government regulation from on high affects your bottom line. Hometown, local government? This is where a law you enacted directly affects the people who voted for you. Neither is a world of smoke and mirrors.

It all comes down to knowing the people you serve.

Following that, Quaranta says the big question is: "How do you get one-to-one with people? How do you reach through the blizzard of choices?"

"We need more storytelling," Quaranta says. "We have to have a steady conversation with the voters of Delaware."

Where would the conversation take place? Look around, he says. Social media are everywhere. Young and old are tied to their smart phones. Business and political campaigners track customer data, constantly researching the public's wants and needs. That is where the conversation begins.

What would that conversation be about?

A good portion of it would be about the process of business. Successful businesses just don't happen. They don't magically create profits. There is a process of creating a product or a service; of hiring, training and paying employees; of putting the product before the public; and of paying for the cost of the product rent on the building, and interest on bank loans.

Finally, there is the process of reinvesting a portion of whatever profit is made so that the business has a future. It is a hard, often messy process. It is filled with uncertainties and doubt. Many businesses fail. Most struggle. Competition is relentless. But this is how jobs are created, how tax bases are formed, and how livelihoods are earned.

We need to engage the Delaware public in a thoughtful conversation about this process, Quaranta says. When we talk about the effect of a minimum-wage law on small business, for example, we must make the public see how it affects the process.

"We have to have a fact-based conversation," he says. We have to show that



Mike and his wife, Michelle, at her business, 2nd ACT Antiques Collectibles & Treasures.

our talk is not just rhetoric. We have to show the realities of the business world, how regulations and policies affect commerce. We have to explain the implications of these actions, Quaranta adds.

Too much of the political world, and thus public policy, runs on a short-term clock. In other words, it moves from election to election or from one June 30 budget deadline to the next. This cramps long-term thinking. It hampers planning. That is not good for businesses, government agencies or taxpayers.

"I've never written, or been party to a perfect bill draft, or seen a perfect

regulation," he says. "Perfection is the goal, but never the outcome. And, when you consider business and technology cycles today and the pace of change, we need to go back and look at existing laws and regulations and ask ourselves if those policies are effective, efficient and accomplish what was intended."

By engaging Delawareans in this conversation, we can see the goals we share, Quaranta says. "We in the Chamber have to have a clear-eyed agenda for businesses of all sizes. We have to have a view of legislation and policy that goes beyond the next deadline. The business community has to come forward with plan of our own. Some of it, of course, will be defensive in nature, but not all of it." The idea is to keep moving forward.

Quaranta believes Delaware is already well situated to make that progress. The Delaware Prosperity Partnership is underway. Plans for a revitalized port in Wilmington are progressing. And other business ventures throughout the state are pointing the way to a stronger economy. A key to that progress is building on some of the strengths Delaware already has – agriculture in Kent and Sussex counties, tourism in Sussex, Dover Air Force Base in Kent, and the research centers in New Castle County.

"Do we have the vision, the strength, the guts to withstand the pressure to stand still?" Quaranta asks. "Or do we do what is in the best interests of the men and women of Delaware?"

That approach has his predecessor's endorsement.

"Mike has experience in the public and private sectors, particularly in the areas of public policy and the legislative process," Rich Heffron says. "In the last few years he has developed expertise using social media to deliver a message designed to engage our membership in advocacy.

"The state business community will continue to evolve as the global economy changes," Heffron adds. "With Mike's leadership, the Delaware State Chamber will continue its 181 year tradition as the voice of Delaware's business community." ■



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