

Executive profile

Tested by fire: Gerald Kokos

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It's hard to imagine tougher circumstances for a new CEO than those Gerald Kokos faced early in his tenure at facilities capital planning and management firm VFA Inc. Eight months after he took the job, Kokos' daughter died of melanoma. She was 23.

"It was the one thing in my life that brought me to my knees from an emotional, personal level," he said, adding that he "sobbed" in the car but kept his emotions in check at work.

A year later he got divorced. Shortly after that he was told he had prostate cancer and would need to endure six months of daily radiation therapy. Throughout each painful ordeal, he continued to work.

VFA was small when Kokos took over. The company had about a dozen employees, and there weren't many people to pick up the slack. It was then that many of his new employees, if they didn't already, got to know him.

"I'm a big believer that if you share everything with people and they know and trust that you're sharing everything, they don't guess what's really going on," said Kokos, whose friends call him "Jerry."

That philosophy has endeared Kokos to employees and customers alike who say, despite many personal struggles, Kokos is optimistic and genuine.

"Jerry is one of the few clients I take to lunch on a regular basis because I just love him to death," said Dora Vell, who runs executive search firm Vell Executive Search in Waltham. Vell has placed two executives at VFA and said "managers love him" because he's decisive and fair.

Almost 10 years after his difficult start, Kokos runs a 200-person company that reached \$40 million in revenue last year.

This year, even as clients cut back spending on the very facilities management services his Boston-based company offers, Kokos has projected 20 percent growth. Kokos' management career began nearly 10 years after those of many of his peers.

Raised outside of Pittsburgh by a single father, Kokos figured the only way he could afford college was by joining the military.

He graduated from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in 1971 and spent the next eight years on active duty. He got his MBA from Yale University. When he finished his studies, Kokos entered the corporate world in 1980s during the technology boom. He worked for high-flying mini-computer companies like Digital Equipment Corp., Prime Computer and First Data Corp. and purposely didn't spend a lot of time in one aspect of management, wanting to get a feel for a variety of roles and corporate cultures.

When Kokos decided he wanted to be a CEO, startup companies were telling him they were going to reinvent the world. Kokos was trying to figure out exactly how the companies would make money.

At 50, he thought he was past his prime.

"I literally went home one night driving on Memorial Drive saying, 'oh my god, I'm a dinosaur. The world has passed me by. The world has gone to this new model and everybody is making all this money and I can't understand it."

"In the meantime I come here and here they are talking about helping people with buildings and bricks and mortar and it was a real problem that I understood. I understood how to generate revenue, I could see the profitability from this."

Kokos joined VFA in 2000 — just as many of those startups were going bust before ever realizing the wealth of riches envisioned.

Though his new industry was not as sexy as the players in the Internet boom, Kokos grew VFA into an \$8 million company from a \$3 million company by optimizing capital-asset management software VFA already was selling to customers.

The software, along with customer relationships, is the company's bread and butter. VFA now has three licensed software products that help customer evaluate and audit their facilities and stay on budget.

Clients continue to be impressed by Kokos' responsiveness and approachability.

Ken Fletcher, a project manager at one of VFA's longtime clients, the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, said Kokos "is one of those folks that he can talk to anyone at any level."

"Even if you're not on the same side as he is, when you're done talking to him he's your best friend," Fletcher said.

While he's had major clients suspend jobs or tell him they're not spending money on his company's services in certain years, he has other clients, such as the federal government, that continue to spend on defense and intelligence facilities. VFA has a backlog of work that will take it out two years.

Local health care and education clients such as Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, University of Massachusetts Medical School and Brandeis University are taking a break until endowments and donors come back.

In Canada, where business had been stronger than in the United States, clients are now slowing spending in response to a weakened economy. In Canada, where VFA has two outposts, Kokos has had major clients, such as the Ministry of Health, tell him they won't be doing new business with him this year because of budget constraints.

"These are still customers you want to treat well and support and they'll be back again, but they aren't going to back in this climate."

Dora Vell is the CEO of VELL Executive Search, a premier retained technology executive search firm in Boston. Ms. Vell is an internationally recognized expert in executive search for technology CEOs, COOs, CIOs, Vice Presidents and board members. She works with startup organizations through Fortune 50 Firms. She can be reached at dora@vell.com.