



INSPIRATION PROFILE TUE 01 FEB 21

## How Brett Birkill started fresh after selling his business for more than \$10 million

Brett Birkill co-founded Prime Mover Workwear along with his wife Wendy in 2004, before selling the business in 2017 for \$10.4 million.

Along with the sale of the company warehouse, Birkill had \$15 million after closing it, and used it to fund his next business venture — property development business Birkill Developments.

Birkill hit the ground running, buying a townhouse development a month after handing over Prime Mover Workwear.

“It took a couple of months to get that block into motion, we started from the ground up, met as many good and new people that we could, and took a lot of skills from the previous business we sold,” says Birkill.

While moving into an entirely new industry after succeeding in one business isn’t straightforward, there are universal lessons you can apply from one to another.

In a recent interview, Birkill shared with *SmartCompany Plus* how he’s making his second wind a success.

### Key takeaways

1

Not everything you try will be a success, but it will be a lesson

2

Having the right team is essential to a business’ trajectory

Goals are challenging and scary. That shouldn't stop you from pursuing them

## On overcoming incumbents

In the property and property development space, as with most industries, time being in the game and building rapport helps a lot.

So how can you overcome the weight of relationships that already exist when you're competing with them?

Birkill says the company started by reaching out to key suppliers, speaking directly to head offices.

"You go directly to the source and work out the best deals, and best products," he says.

That included agents that they could work with and trust, and the supply chain in its townhouse segment, helping to ensure the "makeup of [the] product and townhouses is made up of direct relationships".

Existing businesses that have been in a sector for a long time have a clear understanding of where they sit financially, and what does — or doesn't — work. They can do their numbers, take positions on things and make moves.

Birkill says that as a new company, they've learnt not to procrastinate when they think things will work.

"It doesn't equate to everything being a great success, but like existing businesses, we do an analysis, making a call, and punch on.

"Now we've been able to get a foothold in a number of spots that may have taken a lot longer without it."

## Cashflow in a capital intensive industry

You need to keep your money and the finance portion of your business very organised in industries where you have a lot of parties moving underneath you to produce your product.

As a property developer, you sit at the top of the tree and underneath that every dollar you pass on gets paid to a lot of people underneath, including levels of subcontractors.

"If you fail in your management of your money, that will have a big bearing impact on a lot of people underneath, and the product," says Birkill.

You need to be organised on the front side with forward thinking. Consider different structures, capital partnerships, and (in the property space) mortgages.

"It doesn't need to all be signed, sealed, and delivered because it often can't be before you have something to sign, seal and deliver. You need to have a plan, and how you'll develop it.

"If your business is targeting growth, organising a million dollars today is not going to cut it tomorrow. How are you going to work that finance and grow that level of commitment from different people?"

## The right people

Birkill started by seeking out the people, companies, and players who had a lot of experience to get a better understanding of the field he was in, and drive his decision making.

"You need to meet as many people as you can, make an educated decision, then have a go" he says.

Conversely, Birkill selects staff and third-party contractors based on a genuine feeling that they want to be involved and part of it.

If there's an understanding that they have an interest in working hard, doing the right thing, with a great attitude, that's who Birkill will select — even if another option might have more experience.

“You can give up a little as far as education or experience is concerned to gain some loyalty, passion and desire,” he says.

But with every business, people's circumstances change and things need to be tweaked on a personal level, and operating with other businesses.

“That's why you need to be on-site, face-to-face, working out what's going on all the time. It's not that anyone is trying to hide anything, but you simply can't do that by sitting back and relying on too many people,” says Birkill.

Birkill says by going on day-to-day and improving little things — even if only by 1% — delivers the best outcome for the next job. That means dropping or changing one part of your supply chain when you know it's run its race.

When moving on from employees, Birkill says it becomes obvious when someone's heart isn't in it. Whether there are mistakes or not, it begins to tell.

“If you build an environment of success, with people around you who want to be involved in what's going on, and other people are there for a different reason, it can genuinely disrupt the entire supply chain.

“If you're pushing down one line, and there isn't buy-in from everyone, the fragments can turn into big splinters,” says Birkill.

With suppliers, these things can become obvious when supply slows down, or prices raise overnight after things have been fine for a longer period. That's when it's time to move on.

## **The satisfaction of a new challenge outweighs the risk**

Birkill already had a successful business, with the harder yards done, and the ability to step back a bit more and bring in income.

But life doesn't go on forever, and that wasn't as satisfying as it once was.

“It is nerve racking cashing in what you've built up and backing it on something else you don't know as well. The transition isn't easy,” Birkill says.

“But once you wake up in the Monday morning and go okay, let's make this work, the underlying desire to grow something again and get involved just takes over.”

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