

Don Mead

President, The Gunlocke Co.

A SAVVY BUSINESSMAN, Don Mead was the vice president of marketing for a transportation-related firm, when in 2000 he came to the notice of contract furniture giant HNI, the parent firm of notables such as The Gunlocke Co., Allsteel, HON, Paoli and more.

The rest, as they say, is history. While he freely admits to never having "imagined a career in woodworking or office furniture at all," Mead's entry into HNI gave him the opportunity to work at several of its divisions, and learn the facets of the industry. In 2008 he was named president of Gunlocke.

He is justifiably proud of the achievements of the 113-year-old upstate New York firm, particularly as it rebounded from the recession in 2008-2009.

"Our industry overall was down 30 to 35 percent," he says. "We had to learn to adjust to not only the short-term difficulty, but also plan for the long term and position ourselves for when the economy came back." Mead credits the leadership team and employees for undertaking the 18-month challenge and helping leverage the company to remain profitable.

"It's a tremendous facility," he says of the 716,484-square-foot plant and approximately 700 employees.

This isn't the first time those at Gunlocke have stepped up. Renown for its



chairs, many of which have been used in the Oval Office, it wasn't until the 1970s "when someone had the foresight to say we can do something other than chairs and made significant investments into casegoods. It changed this business for the long term and opened up a bright future by leveraging new opportunities.

We wouldn't be where we are today if they hadn't made that commitment," he says.

It's now Mead's turn to oversee the evolution of Gunlocke's product line and business as it continues to meet the needs of a changing workplace. "We're living in a world of choice – we have to constantly challenge ourselves" to meet customer needs. That includes how and when information is

provided to consumers; i.e., print or digital. "You've got to have the right information when they want, how they want."

Service and responsibility are not items Mead takes lightly. "When I graduated from college, my Dad and Mom told me, 'Live your life for something bigger than yourself.'" As he explains, keep in mind each day that your obligations and responsibilities, to your family, members of your organization, customers and community. "If you ever forget that, you're in trouble."

Gunlocke is very involved in community service, as is Mead. In the off hours, he enjoys spending time with family and friends, along with an interest in wines which "draws on my agricultural [degree] background."

QUICK GLIMPSE

- **Education:** BS-Agriculture, University of Illinois; MBA, University of Iowa, Henry B. Tipple College of Business
- **Number of years at the company:** 16 years at HNI (Gunlocke president: 7 years)
- **Number of years in the industry:** 16 years
- **Who have you tried to emulate in business**

and why? Jack Welch, the CEO of GE, for how he was able to grow the business. During his tenure, the business grew 4,000%, and while it's easy to manage a business for the short term or the long term, a really effective leader can do both. I think he proved that with the results he got.