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John T. Greilick / The Detroit News

**Kyle Albertie, left, Kari Elliott and Keith Albertie, all siblings, run RKA Petroleum Companies Inc., a fuel products company.**

### Local spotlight

## Communication key in leadership change

Siblings find they have to hold more meetings to make decisions their late father did by himself.

By Eric Pope / Special to The Detroit News

**ROMULUS** -- When RKA Petroleum President Roger Albertie died after a car accident in June 2004, his three children in the family business were prepared to take on more responsibility for running the company.

Several years earlier their father had put them in charge of three divisions of RKA Petroleum Companies Inc. Kari Elliott, 36, manages retail sales, while brothers Keith, 34, and Kyle, 28, run the wholesale and transportation divisions. Albertie also decided that his successor as president would be David Doner, 57.

All agree that the transition to new leadership has been smooth at the fuel products company where revenues should reach \$126 million this year. But the three siblings are finding out they have to spend much more time in meetings now that their father is no longer around.

"Roger would make decisions and we would carry them out," Doner said. "We have a lot more meetings now because I want to make sure that they understand all the factors involved in making a decision. They need to be exposed to all areas of the business."

It's a big change from keeping track of one division and having major decisions made quickly by their father.



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**Kyle and Keith run the wholesale and transportation divisions while Kari manages retail sales.**

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"We've learned we make better decisions as a group," Keith Albertie said. "It definitely takes longer and it can be frustrating when there are disagreements between us. But you get a better decision that everyone is on board with."

He acknowledged that it's often hard for him and his siblings to wait until the next meeting because they are all "do it now" managers. "You definitely have to work on your patience," he said.

They also have to pay more attention to what is happening in the industry and the company's other divisions. "We've learned not to have the blinders on. We have to look at everything as a whole," Elliott said.

She said it's important to attract and retain managers who can help them make good decisions. RKA recently hired William Resch for the new position of chief financial officer, and Jason Hittleman, the company's information systems manager, is a trusted adviser.

Hittleman said the family members have improved communications by meeting more with managers and staff. They also hold more meetings with the board of directors and financial advisers to go over the financial implications for the family of owning a growing business.

Hittleman believes keeping family issues separate from business issues is important for the company's success. "If there are conflicts between family members, it's important to be very honest about them. It's all about what's best for the business," he said.

Since their father's succession plan has worked so well, the three siblings have started planning for what will happen when Doner retires. They expect that one of them will eventually become president, but don't know who or when. In an emergency, Keith has been designated to serve as interim president.

They also have thought about what would happen if one of them decides to leave the company. The first step in that process is a detailed job description -- something all 58 employees have -- that makes it easier to find a replacement quickly.

"We're trying to develop a game plan for what the next transition will be," Elliott said, " ... and put it all in writing."

*Eric Pope is a Metro Detroit freelance writer*

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