Going Global

Now the vice president of ExxonMobil’s Global Polypropylene Business Unit, Grabham has helped pioneer the global plastics market for both polyethylene and polypropylene.

“When I went to work for ExxonMobil, we had one plastics plant with a 200,000 ton annual capacity,” says Grabham. “Today, we have nine million tons worldwide. We are the largest manufacturer of polyolefins in the world.”

Grabham was part of a group that transformed Al Jubail, Saudi Arabia, from a tiny fishing village in 1985 to one of the world’s largest chemical sites. “That was a period when Saudi Arabia was starting its chemical industry. We were one of fifteen or twenty companies helping them get started from ground zero. They had no infrastructure. It was very gratifying to be part of that startup.”

Grabham gets immense satisfaction in his role as a leader of cross-functional teams. “Leading cross-functional groups is challenging as well as satisfying. I’m kind of a natural leader,” he reflects. “Maybe it was from athletics, but in a team I always seem to earn the respect of the group and help set the direction. I have the ability to see the mission and get everyone aligned with the same goals. I also believe that you lead by contributing, not by virtue of the position you’re in. I was part of many cross-functional teams during expansion of the polyolefin businesses of ExxonMobil. In the end it takes somebody who believes in the business, believes in our ability to succeed, and then backs it up by delivering good performance.”

Spreading the Wealth

Grabham is actively involved with the Houston Children’s Museum, which, along with the Indianapolis Children’s Museum, is one of two top-rated children’s museums in the country. “I didn’t get involved when my children were young,” he says. “We’re contributors of sweat equity, financial contributions, and advice on how to run a business. We provide funding and support on how to use it to train and develop young people. We want to spark curiosity. Our theme is ‘A Lifetime of Learning.’ We want children as young as grade school to get that philosophy.”

Like the museum, Purdue also benefits from Grabham’s leadership. He was part of the group that developed the strategic plan for the School of Chemical Engineering and helped raise the funding for the new Forney School of Chemical Engineering.

“Funding is a great challenge for Purdue,” says Grabham. “They have a low level of funding from the state, relative to other institutions like it around the country. It’s a great challenge to get the private funding. But I’m always impressed with the energy, enthusiasm, and curiosity of students at Purdue. That’s what I see and feel when I go back to campus.”