



# Lessons from a Natural **Entrepreneur:** Growing The Little Potato Company.

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Like most entrepreneurs, Angela Santiago, CEO/owner of The Little Potato Company, appreciates the value of hard-won lessons from business and life.





## Rooted in Values: The Germination of The Little Potato Company.

In 1996, after overhearing a diner conversation by a group of men speaking his native, northern Netherlandic Frisian language, and remembering the delicious little potatoes harvested on his childhood farm, Jacob Van der Schaaf rushed home, eager to share a new business idea with his daughter Angela Santiago.

Although a product of entrepreneurial parents, Angela, who had just graduated from the University of Alberta with a political science degree, envisioned a life in government or politics – certainly not as CEO of an agricultural enterprise. But she agreed to help her father to explore the idea.

Together, they hand-planted and harvested their first acre by hand, then gave away the entire crop at the local farmer's market to get feedback.

That led to planting thirty acres of borrowed-from-friends land, equipment and a place to wash their crop. The Little Potato Company (the Company) took root.

**“Everything was begged and borrowed at the time,” says Santiago.**

Almost 30 years later, The Company is the number one little potato brand in North America with 400 employees, 14,000 contracted acres and three plants, including a new state-of-the-art plant featuring sustainable water conservation and solar technologies.

- **400 employees.**
- **14,000 contracted acres.**
- **3 plants.**



# Founder-Driven Values.



Santiago credits her parents for seeing something in her that she didn't yet see in herself – and for instilling the values which guide the company today.



**I don't think the values of a company, especially when its founder driven, can stray too far from who the founder is at their core.**

– **Angela Santiago**, CEO & Owner of The Little Potato Company

She remembers a values exercise, done with their employees, in the early stages of the Company's development, when they asked themselves: If you were to start this company on Mars, who would you send and why?, their answers led to articulating LPC's values which has guided their purpose, strategy, goals and decisions, as they grew and scaled.

Those values represent her family and her team and continue to resonate.

"They're often the thing that attracts people to the company," she says. "Or the deciding factor for why they choose to work for the company."

Santiago loves the simplicity of agriculture: visiting the farms and walking the fields with the farmers.

"There is this sense of grounding that happens when you're with a farmer. I think you just breathe differently."

**"Our purpose is our north star and drives every decision. Our values are at the center of everything we do."**

#### ***Purpose:***

**➤ Feed The World, Better.**

#### ***Core Values:***

- Family**
- Go Beyond**
- Do What You Say**
- Elevate Others**
- Down To Earth**





## Growth spurts.

After giving free samples to local restaurants and delis and gathering feedback, they knew they were on to something when the chef at the renowned Fairmont Banff Springs Hotel told them how much he loved their potatoes.

And then during a cold call, a local grocery retailer bought their entire 30,000-pound crop.

Today, The Little Potato Company products are in about 20,000 stores in North America.

Annual net sales, over the last 12 years, have grown on average +19.4%, while gross margin dollars have had an average annual growth rate of +25.3%.

**+25.3%**  
annual growth rate.

- 1996:** The Little Potato Company is born.
- 1998:** 30 employees, little potatoes in supermarklets across western Canada.
- 2002:** Two years after purchasing their first plant, expansion to a 32,000 square feet facility. Named one of Alberta's Fastest Growing Companies.
- 2007:** Family-farm partnerships across North America enable nation-wide, year round growing & shipping.
- 2008:** Named Best Workplace for New Canadians & runner-up for Best Overall Workplace.
- 2010:** Expansion into the US.
- 2012:** Recognized as one of Achiever's 50 Most Engaged Workplaces in Canada. Santiago honoured at Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Prairie Awards.
- 2013:** Opened 95,000 square foot plant in Edmonton
- 2016:** 20th anniversary. Construction on a new plant in Deforest, Wisconsin.
- Today:** Little Potato Company delivers in every Canadian province & US state.





# Lessons in Scaling, from Field to Table.

Santiago reflects on their humble beginnings, when they washed their first-acre yield in a bathtub.

"It reinforces, I think, the whole idea of how people start a business. It's a little bit chaotic," says Santiago. "It's not always completely planned, and I think that's what's exciting. If you read the stories of Apple or Amazon, they all kind of started out of garages, basements and apartments.

"Everybody wants to hear about sales, as that is what we see on the shelves, but what happens behind the scenes is often quite a different story,"

In those stories are the lessons, particularly as they relate to scaling up, she wants to share with other entrepreneurs.

## 7 Find passionate partners

The quality of the value chain is critical for scaling. People who are engaged and passionate and who are knowledgeable, experienced, and effective leaders.

"You're only as fast as your slowest link," she says. "And still, no matter the cohesion, passion, energy, and engagement of your team, when you're really scaling, it's a game of whack-a-mole. There's always an area of playing catch up. Just as you get a problem area under wraps, something else crops up.

"Seamlessness of the process is a product of coordination and intentionality."

## 7 Find your north star

Be clear on your vision and purpose, and let your values guide your work. Repeat, repeat, repeat and integrate your values and purpose.

## 7 Be authentic

After a period of doubting herself as a leader, partly because she didn't see her characteristics in male counterparts, she embraced who she is.

"I'm human and therefore emotional. I show my feelings, but I stopped apologizing for who I was and embraced it authentically. Whoever you are, be authentic. Don't try to be this person or that person."

## 7 Be strategic and set long-term targets

Learn to effectively articulate a five-to-10-year plan. Don't apologize for your dreams, your ambitions.

"I want to be a global brand. I want to be a billion-dollar company. Yes, I do."

## 7 Use the Rockefeller Habits

A clear, simple, understood-by-everyone system is critical.

**"It completely changed productivity, accountability, and our ability to pace."**

## 7 Hire a Coach

Santiago has worked with Lawrence & Co CEO/founder Kevin Lawrence, now a member of her advisory board – who she credits for supporting her early learnings and for being a valued source of wisdom to this day – early in 2010.

**“A coach is invaluable. I actually can’t put a price on it.”**

“I fundamentally believe that the difference between a good and great leader,” says Santiago, “is the person who’s willing to work on their stuff.”

She draws a parallel to a hockey team of athletes supported by coaches.

“Why would it be any different as a leader in business?”

Today, Lawrence & Co Advisor Tim Schokking supports the Company’s strategic planning.

## 7 Invest in your product

The Company invests in their product with potato breeding programs – the largest in the world for little potatoes – in Saskatchewan, Chile, and the Netherlands. This involves the natural cross-pollination of cells to produce new potato varieties.

The masterful, scientific, observant, and patient process results in high-quality, nutritious, disease-resistant potatoes, perfectly balanced in taste, texture and appearance.

The Company is also committed to sustainability strategies, to leave what they have used better, through best practices and operations, sustainability partnerships and resource management. That means optimizing irrigation, soil erosion control, reducing and recycling water.

The Company was the first fresh potato company to join the Potato Sustainability Alliance.

## 7 Manage resilience and life balance

Balancing business, a family life of four children and self-care is tricky, and Santiago knows she’s not alone.

Knowing it’s impossible to keep all the buckets of life full, at the same time, she created a vision board tool to help her measure the fill of each bucket – herself, her children, her marriage, and work.

While the work bucket always overflows, since surviving breast cancer at 39, she never lets the other buckets run dry.

“Balance takes as much planning as a budget or a strategic plan, because if you don’t plan balance, things will just happen to you.”

## 7 Give Back Authentically

Make sure charitable partnerships came from a place of authenticity and connect to your mission.

To help “feed the world, better”, the Company:

Donates a minimum 2,500,000 pounds of potatoes – the equivalent of 3,000,000 meals – to food banks near headquarters in Edmonton and Deforest, Wisconsin.

Supports Second Harvest Food Bank’s annual Share Your Holidays Food Drive with platinum-level sponsorship.

Plants and harvests Little Potatoes – this year, over 2,000 kg – for the Fort Edmonton Food Bank communities and elementary students.

Employees annually help to plant and harvest donated seed potatoes in local community gardens.

Participates in free community barbecue events throughout the summer in Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, and the greater Toronto area; and assists organizations like children’s hospitals, homeless shelters, local sports teams and church groups.



## 7 Treasure the lessons

While lessons can be painful, she calls them “little treasure boxes”, and has learned to pause, take them in and, harvest the priceless lessons..

That approach, she says, has made her wiser, calmer and a lot more accepting of others.

## 7 Pace yourself

Don't be in too much of a rush. Take in the good lessons and the great celebrations and milestones.

“It'll all unfold the way that it needs to unfold.”



Since we first started working with Angela and The Company, in 2010 – on the cusp of their expansion into the US – we've been proud to be part of their growth and maturity, on an individual and corporate level.

Their journey represents the importance of an unwavering vision and clear values to guide how to operate, who to invite and how to grow.

Smart, grounded and inspiring, Angela's vision, clarity of purpose and ability to create a 'family' of passionate employees and partners lies at the heart of The Little Potato Company's success.