

Instead, the company is targeting forty to fifty new stores per year, which translates into a \$120 million annual fixed investment if the stores are all owned rather than leased, a 5 percent growth rate for stores and a long queue for potential store managers. The management team has learned the lessons of companies that, like armies, moved too far ahead of their supply lines. Halle and his team won't grow as fast as possible, because they are unwilling to spread capital or manpower across too broad a network. As Halle sees it, employees are better off being well compensated in a stable company than they would be in a risky environment of overly rapid growth.

Even with a "responsible growth" strategy in place, the target of forty to fifty new stores has Halle walking several times that many sites each year. Once a site is chosen, it can take a year or more to build and open a store, and most of the long-term benefits from those stores will accrue to a company that no longer includes Bruce Halle. While Halle's father lived to be ninety-two, and the chairman continues to enjoy robust health, most octogenarians would not be placing bets with a thirty-year payoff.

Halle is aware that his time with the company will come to a close someday, but that's a decision for The Boss to make. As long as The Boss allows him the opportunity, Halle will keep building the company as if he will always be there to lead it. His wife, Diane, has led him into a more aggressive estate planning process, forcing him to prepare for the needs of both the company and his own family in case he does not live forever. The plan is largely complete, Halle says, with a mechanism to keep the company private, out of the clutches of Wall Streeters and their ilk.

Within the company, most of the management team is confident that the culture and systems are sustainable, that Discount Tire has the people and drive to continue to thrive without its founder.

In one sense, Halle is irreplaceable. Someone else can be the chairman, but nobody else can fill his shoes as founder. The question "What would Bruce do?" does not transfer to anyone else in the organization.

At the same time, the twenty-three regions and more than eight hundred stores are filled with lost boys who swallowed the pill and agreed to