

CONSTRUCTION CONNECTIONS

A PUBLICATION OF EASTERN CONTRACTORS ASSOCIATION, INC.

Summer/Fall 2019



**New NYRA 1863
Club opens**

**Future leaders:
Where do they
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**How to hand
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www.delcommunications.com

PRESIDENT & CEO David Langstaff

EDITOR Cindy Chan
cindy@delcommunications.com

ADVERTISING MANAGER Dayna Oulion
dayna@delcommunications.com

ADVERTISING SALES Brian Gerow
Jennifer Hebert
Kari Philippot
Dan Roberts
Anthony Romeo

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ART DIRECTOR / DESIGN: Kathy Cable

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Dana Jensen

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MESSAGE FROM EASTERN CONTRACTORS ASSOCIATION PRESIDENT AND CEO **TODD HELFRICH**



When it's time to move on and pass the torch on to someone else, many questions will come to mind. Who will you choose to take your place? How will you select this person? Will they continue the company mission that has been around for years or will they change things up?

We hope to answer those questions in this edition of *Construction Connections*. As you'll read, when thinking about retiring and handing over the reins, timing is everything. In fact, a lot of those interviewed say it's better to have a plan ASAP than to wait until the last minute.

Choosing a good leader also entails understanding their priorities. It's also not enough to simply choose someone – retaining the talent is a big part of the process too. As we've all seen and heard, a multi-generation workforce is the norm and you need to tap into what motivates and develops your current and emerging leaders. And remember, these employees could be a part of your succession plan, so developing their skills will pay out in both the short and long terms.

One can also gain a worthy successor by being an example of one. You'll read in another article about the benefits of positive behavior by the boss, which includes actively listening to others, providing encouraging feedback and recognizing achievements.

Also in this issue is a feature on the New York Racing Authority's new 1863 Club, which opened in July of this year just in time for the Saratoga race meet. ECA member companies – including the general contractor, MLB Construction Services – and most of the Building Trades Unions were all a part of pulling off this project in just nine months.

We're also happy to feature member firm T&J Electrical Associates in this issue. The company started out as a humble business venture between two brothers in a basement and has grown into so much more.

As you flip through this edition of *Construction Connections*, I hope you're able to take away points that make you think about your own companies and how to apply strategies to make your business stronger. As always, we welcome your input on projects and topics to be featured in our upcoming publications. 😊

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Todd Helfrich". The signature is fluid and stylized, with a long horizontal line extending from the start of the name.

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OFF TO THE RACES: NYRA 1863 CLUB OPENS

By Cindy Chan

Photos courtesy of MLB Construction Services

The horses weren't the only ones racing at the NYRA 1863 Club this summer – guests were also quick to take in the sights and sounds at the new facility.

According to Jeff Lino, Project Manager for MLB Construction Services, LLC, the 1863 Club is a brand new, three-story clubhouse at the Saratoga Race Course. Lino says the 1863 Club is a freestanding building attached to the existing clubhouse, which is connected by a pedestrian walkway.

For such a daunting project, MLB Construction Services completed it in less than a year – nine months, to be exact. Construction began on Sept. 14, 2018 and was ready for occupancy on July 8, 2019 – two to three days before the track season began.

Lino says the reason the project wrapped

up so quickly was a mix between a ton of hard work, long hours and the use of union contractors.

“At times, we probably had over 150 people a day working on the job,” Lino recalls.

“Work was performed on Saturdays and, later in the job, on Sundays. It was a very hectic schedule, and design details were developing while we were building the project, which was also challenging.

“I think everyone understood the fast-paced schedule we all had, so everyone was geared and prepared to man this job properly.”

Union labor was a huge factor in this project. The subcontractors on the job were August Bohl Contracting Co. Inc. (site work); Breton Steel, Inc. (structural steel); Collett Mechanical (HVAC), Kone, Inc. (elevators); Mid-State Industries

Ltd. (roofing); Schenectady Hardware & Electric (electrical); SRI Fire Sprinkler (sprinkler system); Reo Welding (structural, miscellaneous steel); Parker & Hammond (framing, trusses, carpentry); DeBrino Caulking Associates (waterproofing); DiGesare Mechanical (plumbing); NEP Glass Co. Ltd. (curtainwalls, entrance doors); Bonded Concrete (concrete); Landmark Flooring Concepts (flooring); American Iron & Crane, Inc. (wire mesh, coupler, rebar installation); DJ Rossetti Inc. (concrete slabs, stair pans); Bruce W. Bochette (painting); A.H. Harris & Sons, Inc. (tile); Windham Millwork (millwork); D.S. Specialties (doors/hardware); Legacy Timber Frame (timber trusses); Curtis Lumber; Northeast Stairs; Granite and Marble Works (countertops); MBM (carpentry); Ernesto Upholstery; Tralongo (precast concrete); and Papa Construction (masonry).



“Union labor was used in all aspects. They were really able to provide the manpower needed to keep this fast-paced project moving along,” Lino says.

“The entire facility has always been an outdoor venue, and NYRA management and Chris Kay, the previous CEO, conceptualized an indoor facility to be added to this magnificent architectural masterpiece,” Nory Hazaveh, Principal of SOSH NY, says. “My team was selected through a competitive design process to design and build this project to provide an indoor facility to be compatible with what has been offered for many years.”

The 1863 Club consists of three stories and a basement. The basement houses an 11,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art, full-service kitchen and a few back-of-house kitchen offices.

The first floor of the clubhouse has a smaller, full-service kitchen, 10,000 square feet of open-banquet space with a seating capacity of 500 people, a bar, teller lines and bathrooms.

“The track-side elevation is all full curtainwall systems, so you can get a full view of the racetrack,” Lino says. “That



“Union labor was used in all aspects. They were really able to provide the manpower needed to keep this fast-paced project moving along.”



“There’s custom mahogany and crown molding, a raised ceiling with nice cove light details. The bar is mahogany with a black granite countertop.”

south elevation that faces the track is probably 15 feet away.”

The first story of the building also has a main entrance lobby, which takes up two floors, with a monumental staircase built out of steel but is covered in wood to make it look historical. The ceiling of the lobby is high with wood beams and wood ceilings to commit to the historical appearance.

“The walls are all clad in white panels and special, custom trim,” Lino adds.

The second floor is accessible via the lobby on the first floor, as well as by the two passenger elevators and a freight elevator that services all floors.

“The second floor is a little more upscale. There’s a large bar – all custom mahogany – that’s over 50 feet long,” Lino explains, adding there is a full-length balcony with a 200-foot-long glazing system that faces the track. “Patrons can walk out on to the balcony.”

The second floor’s main dining room is connected to the existing clubhouse by a pedestrian bridge. The dining room, which seats 280 people, is only accessible to clients that have rented a table for the day and are existing box holders, says Lino.

“There’s custom mahogany and crown molding, a raised ceiling with nice cove light details,” Lino says. “The bar is mahogany with a black granite



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countertop. Adjacent to this main dining room is another room that holds 120 people.”

All the spaces throughout have television sets broadcasting the races and other sporting events, as well as food service equipment, banquet equipment, counters, tables and chairs. There is also a full-service kitchen on the second floor.




Lastly, the third floor contains six luxury suites, a common lounge, a smaller custom bar and a seating area. Each luxury suite is fully furnished and carpeted with custom millwork and paneling. Each suite has a door accessing the third-floor balcony, which is stacked over the second-floor balcony. Each suite holds anywhere from 30 to 50 people.

“The architecture of the building, rooflines, scale and materials used complement the historic building, while the amenities inside and the glazing facing the track is ultra-modern,” Hazaveh says. “Our design approach was to be respectful to the long history of the Saratoga Race Course while creating an ultra-modern and functional facility with all amenities.” ☺



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HANDING OVER THE REINS

By Ulf Wolf

Many of you have spent a significant part of your lives planning, creating, nursing, growing, consoling, celebrating, aggravating over (kept up at night by), directing and managing this rambunctious baby known as “The Company”. And now, you realize that one day (soon or not-so-soon), you will have to hand the reins over to someone else.

What does this involve, and what should be uppermost in your mind at this prospect?

PRIORITIES

We turned to some members of the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industry (AWCI), and this was our first question: What should be the top priorities when planning succession? Many agree that starting early is key.

Howard Bernstein, president of Penn Installations, Inc. in Pennsylvania, puts it succinctly: “Start now. Follow the lead of others in the industry who have successfully accomplished this task. Start now.”

Robert Sutton, a Texas consultant and owner of Sutton Inspection & Consulting, LLC in Texas, agrees, “Start early. You can never begin the process too soon.

“If not a family organization, you should

ask what the future holds for the industry and whether there is someone inside your company who could navigate the company into that future.

“If it’s a family organization, it’s very important to ask who actually wants this responsibility.”

Suggests Fritz Reitter, president of Reitter Stucco, Inc. in Ohio, “Start early. We have found that succession is a process and not an event and takes much longer than you think.

“Then, if not already done, write a job description for the successor and establish a hand-over date. Based on that, identify training needs and establish a timeline.”

Gabriel Castillo, director of business development at Pillar Construction, Inc. in Virginia, also says to start early: “Don’t wait until ownership is about to retire. Brew and groom successors from within, someone with shared values and vision. Make sure you have structured procedures. The processes in the company should transcend the person who created them. Create order that has no dependency on ownership.”

Says Craig Daley, president of Daley’s Drywall & Taping in California’s Bay Area, “Make the right hires. If you don’t see someone in your organization capable of running it like you do, or better, you haven’t made the right hires.

“Then train them. Expose them to every part of the business so they are well-rounded – until they make correct decisions without you.

“Once hired and trained, hand over your duties one at a time until you have none left to turn over. That’s when you can feel good about handing over the keys.”

Adam Navratil, partner/CEO of J&B Acoustical, Inc. in Ohio, says this is what you need: “Total buy-in from all stockholders, early planning and make sure the correct mentors are in place to advise when needed.”

John Kirk, owner of Kirk Builders in California’s Bay Area, has this to say: “I would want to make sure that I’d leave the company well-organized, almost self-operating, and that I don’t leave any surprises such as a hidden debt.”

Advises Gene Cox, president of Custom Drywall, Inc. in California, “You need to figure out how you can get the money out for retirement, especially if a big portion of your wealth is tied up in the company. Also, you need to work out how to safeguard the company’s good reputation.”

Phil Ruffin, president of Pontiac Ceiling & Partition, LLC in Michigan, views it this way: “Choose your possible replacement or replacements years prior to your anticipated departure – you have to look

into the future and create a path for individuals who you anticipate would be the best to replace you.

“That done, training is paramount. Provide challenging responsibilities and monitor results to determine whether he or she is the right person.

“Once ready, create a financial path for the individual that will motivate and ensure their success.”

Suggests Charles Antone, consultant at Building Enclosure Science in Rhode Island, “The first step, as the owner, is to sit down and write down an exit strategy – this could mean sell, pass on to children, pick a successor, transfer ownership over time or through a sale, etc. Once that’s worked out, form a business continuation plan detailing how the business will sustain itself should you, say, be hit by a bus.

“And don’t forget, a key question is, ‘Does the successor want to be a successor?’ That is key – really key.”

Advises Art Trautman, principal of Sonora Drywall in Arizona, “Set a clear direction for the company, both prior- and post-departure; ensure your company has a professional image; document a clear set of policies that have worked for you to guide both the transition and future operations.”

Mike Heering, president of F.L. Crane & Sons, Inc. in Mississippi, suggests involving the “person or persons who will take over the business as early on as possible – to learn and understand all aspects of what the company does and what it stands for.

“Let them take on various task to teach them how to do the things that make the company run, and once they have a firm understanding of the business, you should begin delegating some of the important tasks to them. Keep this up until they are comfortable executing such tasks and are ready to take on all aspects of running a successful business.”




Scott Bleich and Scott Turczynski, principals at Heartland in Iowa, look at priorities from the standpoint of

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selling the company and would set these criteria: A buyer must align with their company's culture and core values, must have excellent leadership and must be financially capable of purchasing the company.

Offers Greg Smith, executive vice president of Superior Wall Systems in California, "Ideally, you want to find someone who is as passionate about the business as you are. Things can be rough at times, and passion is what carries you through when you want to throw your hands in the air.

"Also, you need someone who can think through situations all the way to the end and reach full, well-thought-out decisions, someone who is strong enough to then stick with those decisions but flexible enough to modify them as and if things arise or change."

TIME FRAME

At which point should you start planning your succession? Many of the contractors we interviewed, including Navratil and Trautman, say five to 10 years, but others had different opinions.

Emphasizes Bernstein, "Start now. Don't think that you will figure this out later as the process will not happen overnight, at least not successfully. And realize that just as your successor can learn from you, you will learn from him or her."

Suggests Daley, "Start five years ahead of exit date, as it takes longer than you think to expose your successor to everything you do."

Smith says five to 10 years is a good timeline, but "sometimes you don't get that kind of time. You need time to see how your potential successor handles big decisions. Is he or she calm and calculated while arriving at the right decision? Are all in the company embracing him or her as an emerging leader?"

Kirk's time frame is slightly shorter. "About two to five years prior to handing the company over," he says.

Cox says it's time "when you have enough to comfortably retire in the manner that you want to retire, and when the business isn't enjoyable anymore."

Suggests Ruffin, "Once your financial goals as well as your 'I-want-to-be-out-by' goals are set, you work backward from that date. This process of choosing, training and planning can take anywhere from five to 10 years. The sooner you set these goals and create these paths, the more flexibility you will have."

Says Reitter, "The earlier, the better. It is a long process, not an event, so even if your plan to move on is 15 to 20 years out, it is prudent to plan now."

Quips Richard Wagner, owner of RWE – Richard Wagner Enterprises, LLC in North Carolina, "For me, after my first heart attack. For someone who has not developed an exit plan: Start today."

Says Heering, "I think you should start as soon as you feel that you have identified the right person for the task."

Bleich and Turczynski both say the planning should start on day one of the company.

CHOOSING

How would you choose a successor?

Bernstein says to be open-minded because "the next generation and the one following are so very different from us. Don't expect to find someone who looks, acts and thinks as you do. That said, hard work and honesty should migrate from one generation to the next with the right candidate.

"If you find those qualities in a young person, there needs to be a leap of faith to some degree, understanding that their methods are probably going to be quite different from yours. If the results bear them out, give them space to make the changes they believe in."

Suggests Sutton, "The individual must be, or learn to be, a person of the people. Effective leadership starts with communication; it is key when holding a

position of authority. The employees need to respect and trust the incoming leader – they want to know things will continue well and possibly even improve over time."

Gary Dillman, CEO of Baylor Construction, Inc. in Florida, points out, "Find someone who is in line with your values and your morals, your likes and dislikes. If you don't really gel with them, it will not work."

Observes Cox, "Sometimes, as with me, it's a family member or close employee who has helped to run the business. It has to be someone you trust because you need to finance the money over a number of years for them to buy you out."

As Ruffin sees it, "Choosing a successor from within should be your first choice. If this cannot happen, then the sooner you get an outside person hired and integrated in your culture, the better."

Says Reitter, "Ensure you have a job description of your position and using that, identify the traits needed for someone to fill your position. Then test candidates to find someone who meets those criteria.

"Also, make sure that the person chosen understands that the position is earned and is not an entitlement."

Daley counts himself lucky. "For me," he says, "it's an easy choice. We have an excellent executive team, and I have two smart kids in the business who happen to have people skills as well. They all work together well now and will continue to do so when I leave."

As does Wagner. He says, "I have two sons and one daughter working in the business. They each have their own roles, and I hope they will each run their own branch soon."

Shares Trautman, "If family is involved, like father and son, don't just assume that they want the business, or worse yet, force it on them. That said, my son has been working in my company since he was a teenager and now at 31, he will be taking over the company in the near future. I consciously never said anything like, 'This will be yours someday' or 'You will have to take this

over. I wanted him to want and work for it, and he has.”

Observes Heering, “If you are in a family-owned business, it might already be decided, but you will still have to monitor that person’s or persons’ actions to see if they are capable and willing to take this role on.”

Bleich and Turczynski say that the cream rises to the top. You really don’t choose a successor, they say, because the successor(s) will eventually set themselves apart.

Suggests Smith, “In choosing a successor, I would be looking for someone with a fresh set of ideas that will dovetail into the corporate mission statement.

“Also, the successor must be a very effective communicator. In some aspects you want someone who thinks like you do, but you certainly don’t want a clone.”

Says Castillo, “Pick someone who has passion and skills to grow the company – a respected, seasoned person who is willing to take risks and challenges.”

GROOMING

How would you groom your successor?

Suggests Sutton, “Slowly exposing the successor to the day-in and day-out tasks will help him or her appreciate and absorb what lies ahead. Place the targeted individual in training/development programs to help him/her grow and learn how to lead properly.

“Begin with basic leadership classes and move on to joining organizations such as successor groups, industry networking and executive organizations. Don’t be afraid to bog down [the potential successor] with after-work events. If he/she truly wants the task, he/she needs to grasp early the number of hours and amount of work it takes to captain the ship.”

Norb Slowikowski, president/productivity consultant at Slowikowski & Associates, Inc. in Illinois, suggests that “the chosen successor should be assigned a mentor who can provide one-on-one coaching to refine

the skills required for the position.”

Observes Daley, “We found sharing an office helped a lot. We hear each other’s conversations and provide continuous feedback, no matter the issue, large or small.”

Quips Wagner, “Every day is their education. I work with each of them until they beat the teacher, and then we move on to the next subject.”


Offers Antone, “Training includes letting

a person fail and then learning from that. Some business owners cannot see themselves other than as the owner of the business and cannot give up control. Successful training starts with the owner truly wanting to let go.

“I think it is important to experience all aspects of the business – not necessarily know how to do everything, but understanding the challenges of the field as well as the management side of the business,” Trautman says. “Give the

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successor all the experience opportunities you had or have and discuss with him how decisions are made.”

Suggests Heering, “You should always back your successor up on any decisions he or she has made. It might not have been the best one, but you have to back them up and then discuss other options they may have looked at before making the decision they did.”

Smith says, “Grooming successors would start with giving them larger tasks and larger problems and as they handle each of these, increase the size and magnitude of the issues. Counsel them along the way until they are making these decisions with confidence and achieving the results you want to see.

“Essentially, you put them out there on the high wire and let them walk it. You are the safety net to catch them as they fall, and you put them back up there until they can cross the wire without falling.”

Suggests Castillo, “Provide increasing autonomy. Let that person make decisions and assume the consequences of those decisions. Don’t be afraid to foster a new management style. Each person has his/her own way to do things and direct people.”

LEADERSHIP

What qualities make a good leader? And when it comes to leadership, which do you value more, managerial or craftsman skills?

Slowikowski reflects that, “Leadership is all about improving productivity and developing people.”

Navratil observes, “Those who can communicate and have an overall positive attitude toward life in general tend to be those who look at all options and help others succeed, which in return helps both the successor and the company thrive.

“Managerial skills are imperative in a company leader. Some craftsmen are good at their skills because they limit interaction with others and focus solely on the task at hand. If you can find someone who is equally talented as a manager and a tradesperson, you have struck gold.”

Says Kirk, “It takes people skills, managerial skills, craftsman skills and communication skills. I definitely value craftsman skills more. I believe that whoever is in charge must know the trade.”

Says Cox, “Our business is built on good estimating skills, good project management skills and excellent people skills. Whoever takes over will need to build their own team eventually, and they need to be able to recognize who’s good and who’s not, as well as have the ability to build loyalty.”

Ruffin’s view is that a “leader has to have an all-around skill level in everything in order to ensure a loyal following. Respect of the leadership is key. The leader has to understand when the decisions made are right for the company and not just for a few individuals. Everything must be taken into account.

“As a manager, I value my skilled crafts people. They make us what we are. Without grassroots people in your organization, you can have the best office team around, but that would not matter if the end result is poor.”

Observes Reitter, “A good leader can put himself in the shoes of anyone in your organization, empathize and understand their perspective. He gets things done through his people by enabling them with the appropriate autonomy, and pushing decision-making to the lowest possible level. People skills enable him to lead versus manage, and good communication skills help accomplish things the way he or she wants.

“As far as skills, I would value leadership skills over any other skill set. Obviously, a leader with some craft experience will have an easier time relating to the front line of the organization; however, a good leader with little trade experience can earn the respect of the craftsman if he can communicate well with him.

“I’ve seen great craftsmen make lousy managers – people are much different from products. During the grooming stage, ensure the successor has exposure to all facets of the organization so that he or she has at least a basic understanding of how things are done and understands that everyone’s role is just as important as his or her own.”

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As for Wagner, "Confidence, not arrogance. He must be a great teacher and a creator of team effort. It takes both managerial and craftsman skills to get the job done."

Says Trautman, "My order of priority: Managerial, communication, people, craftsman. Managerial comes first because you could be the most skilled craftsman in the company but if you can't manage the business, you will most certainly fail as a successor."

Observes Heering, "I don't think you have to know the skills of all the crafts to be a good leader of the company. You have others who are experts in the field, and with all there is to do just to keep the business running, you can't also learn craftsman skills."

"Now, junior leaders (foremen, etc.) who work closer to our craftsmen do need to know the crafts well or it will be hard to gain respect when you are telling them what you need them to do."

Bleich and Turczynski say the successor needs people skills, communication skills and problem-solving. As for managerial versus trade skills, this depends on the size of the organization. The larger the organization, the more managerial skills would be needed.

Smith's view is that "a good leader can see far down the road and help avert negative situations that may develop or take advantage of positive opportunities that arise."

Says Castillo, "Leaders should listen to and empower others."

FINAL THOUGHTS

Summarizes Reitter, "Succession planning is a continuous process that should be started as soon as possible. It entails much more than you would ever think, and the process is very fluid. Transferring the stock and handing over the keys is the easy part. Ensuring success of the successor(s) is the biggest challenge."

Advises Trautman, "Start early, even if you

have no end date. Life throws you curve balls, and the more you have planned early, the better it will be to navigate the unexpected when it arises."

Heering suggests, "The important thing is to always pay attention to your people to see who might have the desire and who wants to go into management. You have to recognize whether they possess leadership qualities and whether they gel with the other members of the team. You have to

observe whether they work to make the whole team successful, or if they work to do it all on their own.

"The right person knows how to delegate to others in a way that make them want to help him or her to be successful, which in turn makes the whole team a success and leads to a very successful business." ☺

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DEATH OF THE HANDSHAKE

Leader-driven ethics as an alternative

By Mark Breslin

I have heard for many years the lament over the loss of “the handshake” that once defined our industry. It was an unspoken honor system that governed contractor, union and employee relations more than any contract or attorney ever could.

Where did the handshake go? It was not just one great dark cloud that swept away the handshake, but small chips knocked out from the foundations of trust and ethics in business. Now, many years and chips later, the costs have become highly visible, as has a general acceptance of “situational ethics” as a price that must be paid if one is to avoid being “rolled.” Must it be this way? Not entirely.

There may be many who think that the words “ethical union” or “ethical construction” are self-canceling. And in the very complex, competitive and unforgiving world of our industry, it often is. Survival in the business now demands that you look over your shoulder at all times because the naïve or trusting pay the price more often than the hardened cynic.

In 25 years, I have seen it all, as have you: self-interested leaders, delayed or denied contractor payments, ugly claims, unacknowledged bad specs, brutal sub-contracts, jurisdictional claim jumping, skimpy bid protests, back door PLA clauses, agency false claim threats, groundless employee lawsuits or workers’ compensation claims, change orders uncompensated,

bid shopping, embezzlement, bloody internal union betrayals, employee mistreatment, general C-Y-A and worse. So what to do in a Darwinian environment that does not provide a direct incentive for ethical behavior and business practice? Everybody bends. Everybody rationalizes. Everybody lives in the gray area. Mine is not a foolish call for perfection or a judgment of others, simply an observation of an area of business in need of improvement, with a significant potential for economic reward.

Organizational leadership requires alignment with some form of values that you, your managers, employees and clients clearly understand. So the first question is, “What are the values (visible and invisible) at work in your organization?” And are ethical practices a part of this? According to the Conference Board, a national business leadership organization, some 75 percent of companies have a code of ethics as a part of their business plan and operation. The question (besides to simply look good) is why?

Let’s take a quick look at some of the building blocks of ethical behavior:

- Wisdom and knowledge
- Self-control and discipline
- Value of others versus self
- Courage and integrity

What business or union leader would not want an organization populated by individuals who possess these characteristics? Is it a stretch to think that having an organization built on these values might have some inherent competitive advantages? Or even defeat long-standing stereotypes of an industry that does not value ethics?

The primary business benefits of good ethics are trust and loyalty. Now putting a price tag on these is pretty difficult, especially if you stand to lose an opportunity as a result. But truth, trust and loyalty are foundational elements that, in absence, kill a business's image, relationships and brand. This is a lesson that some unions have had to really consider; when no one wants to do business with you, it is time to take a very hard look at your ethics in policy and practice.

Leadership ethic is most important of all. If leaders cannot display uncompromising integrity and ethics, they simply invite less than that among their employees and associates. For many years as a CEO, I made every employee go through a 360 Review process with every other employee they work with at the end of each year. Everyone anonymously rated each other on 16 key attributes that we used to define our organizational values. Each person's tabulated summary data was given only to me and the individual only to improve performance. As CEO, I was rated along with everyone else, including on trustworthiness, office politics and integrity. I chose year after year to publicly post the entire results of my 360 Review on my door for all to see. Why? I must be both transparent and bulletproof. If not, I am just bullshitting myself at the expense of others. And more importantly, "leading by example" in the area of ethical practices can have no compromise. This we must teach.

A leader is being watched every minute and every action is a signal of what is acceptable or encouraged. No organization can, in my opinion, create business success and fulfilled, motivated employees with an internal ethical disconnect. A devolving ethic in a union or a company leads to all kinds of discord, conflict, politics and financial impacts.

Also critical to the future of our industry is the coming demographic shift of both Generation X and Y into the workplace. Ethics, integrity and a sense of purpose are valued in most surveys even higher than money by these young and talented prospects. And it is because they have become so cynical at seeing everyone in the public eye talk the talk but rarely walk the walk. Attracting and retaining the best talent will soon have as much to do with "how you ethically do business" versus "how much you pay someone" to do it. Values and attitudes influence performance more than any other factors; what kind of values and attitudes are you recruiting, promoting and training for within your union, contracting firm or agency?

There are proactive steps you can take within your union, company or even our industry. Some basics you should consider might include the following:

1. Identify the values and principles by which you want your organization and your people to be known by.
2. Adopt or develop an ethics policy for your organization or agency that directly supports these values.
3. Include training on it as mandatory for all managers (not only situational ethical policies like harassment, safety, discrimination etc.) that identifies the purpose and benefit to the company or agency.
4. Reward and highlight ethical practices by staff.
5. Outline and enforce consequences for unethical practices and do not compromise.
6. Promote your ethical values, principles and policies as part of your organizational brand, culture and identity to your clients.

Though the handshake may be almost dead, that does not mean that honor and integrity are not still a choice. ☺

ABOUT

Mark Breslin is a strategist and author of several books, including most recently, *The Five Minute Foreman: Mastering the People Side of Construction*. Visit his website at www.breslin.biz or contact him at (925) 705-7662.

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T&J ELECTRICAL ASSOCIATES: A FAMILY AFFAIR

By Cindy Chan

Over 40 years ago, T&J Electrical Associates began with two brothers, a basement and a service van. Today, it is a full-fledged business that services the northeast region of the United States.

Everyone loves a good origin story with humble beginnings – and T&J Electrical Associates is no exception. According to Nick Sestito, current partner with T&J Electrical Associates, his uncle Anthony Sestito founded the business after graduating from Hudson Valley Community College, and his younger brother Joseph – Sestito’s father – joined him in 1981.

The brothers performed all phases of

electrical work, from small projects to light commercial jobs. Eventually, they started growing and their list of clients included Grand Union Supermarkets, CVS, Price Chopper and more.

Sestito officially joined the company in 2009, but he’d always been involved with the family business prior to that, making deliveries and completing odd jobs. However, in 2009, Sestito became an apprentice, and came on board with the company with the intention of growing the service and maintenance division. Sestito is currently running the show with his business partner, Tony LaFoy. His uncle is retired, and his father is managing partner and nearing retirement.

“Now we’ve got 20 full-service technicians covering the whole northeast region,” Sestito says, adding that region includes New York, New Jersey, New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

T&J Electrical Associates is primarily a retail electrical construction company, servicing clients such as Walmart, Target and a lot of local supermarket chains.

“We do anything from changing a lightbulb to building a brand new, 100,000-square-foot, \$5-million grocery store,” Sestito says.

The company’s overall services include new construction; remodels; installation

“We do anything from changing a lightbulb to building a brand new, 100,000-square-foot, \$5-million grocery store.”



of all electrical systems and generator systems; and LED lighting upgrades. On the maintenance side, T&J Electrical Associates provides 24-7 service and maintenance for commercial customers ranging from lighting maintenance, fire alarm systems and generator systems.

“Anything that requires a wire, we do it,” Sestito says.

T&J Electrical Associates has been involved in many interesting and notable projects, such as the U.S. Lake Placid Olympic Training Center in Lake Placid, NY. More recently, the company has done a lot of work at the General Electric local campus, where they were one of two contractors that did multiple scopes of electrical work on the \$200-million battery plant. T&J Electrical Associates also completed all the electrical work for the Golub’s Gorcery headquarters, the parent company of Price Chopper.

The company has achieved so much in its 40-plus years, but Sestito is always looking ahead.

“Growth is in everybody’s plans,” he says. “We plan on steadily growing and maintaining our standards as we do it, as well as finding new customers in our retail niche.”

For more information, visit tandjelectric.com. ☺

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THE EXPANDING USE OF VIRTUAL REALITY TECHNOLOGY IN CONSTRUCTION SAFETY TRAINING

By Thomas H. Welby and Geoffrey S. Pope

As the cost of the applied technology drops, bringing it within reach of more potential users, virtual reality (VR) – a shockingly useful outgrowth of the video gaming industry – is finding an increasing range of uses in the construction industry.

VR employs hardware and software to create an artificial, computer-generated simulation (or re-creation) of a real environment. Images and sound are used to make the user feel as if he were experiencing the simulated environment firsthand. Ubiquitous in video games, VR has many other uses, one of them being in flight simulators, which exist both as recreational applications, and in advanced versions, used in training pilots.

A related technology is augmented reality, which adds a computer-generated overlay to something real. One example is historic street views, where computer-generated simulations of how central London or Paris looked, or are thought to have looked, in times past have been created, based on available photographs, historical works and paintings. These images are available for your smartphone as an app, and can be accessed via your phone's camera, as you walk around the actual area, to see what it looked like long ago.

These technologies are not new, but are increasingly becoming affordable for a wide variety of purposes. Novel items are coming to market all the time, including headsets with a dock for your smartphone, that can deliver VR or AR to any user within reach of a cellphone signal.

Reality technology is already in widespread use in the construction industry. As prices fall, it has the potential for enormous benefits in a wide, and expanding, range of construction-related applications.

VR technology is already at work in helping owners, design professionals, builders and other industry players address the perennial (and, often, costly) problems as arise on many projects when – as the work progresses, errors in design and execution become apparent – the technology enables clients, architects and builders to don a head-mounted display to take a virtual tour of the structure, as first designed. Then, as changes to the design are proposed, whether as matters of necessity, to address design deficiencies, imperfectly coordinated drawings, etc., or as matters of choice, to accommodate client preferences, users can see what the structure, as modified, will look like, before any physical work to carry out the changes is performed.

This technology also permits project participants at diverse locations, anywhere in the world with landline or Wi-Fi coverage, to view and discuss the evolving plans, as the same unfold.

Other uses for the technology involve the management of the job site, workforce, equipment and receipt and storage of materials. Similarly, it is simple to create an apparently life-size, visual depiction of the site (or set of depictions) as the software can be programmed to show what the site, or any part of it, looks like, or will look like, from any desired viewpoint.

As costs drop, and interfaces become easier to use, augmented reality technology (which allows the user to maintain full awareness of the “real world”, with additional information superimposed) may, within a few short years, transform drastically the way that construction workers perform their tasks.

While still in its initial stages, the use of this technology allows workers, wearing “smart helmets”, to receive, wherever they may be, safety and other information, as appropriate, in light of the specific tasks they are performing. The technology can also be used to transmit visuals of project drawings for remote viewing.

The technology also allows for the immediate, and detailed, transmittal of information regarding the locations of other workers, vehicles or heavy equipment, emergent dangers, and the like.

One area of special promise for reality technology is in safety training for the construction workforce.

While OSHA, and an increasing number of governmental authorities, prescribe employee training in safety and OSHA compliance, a range of factors limit worker comprehension of safety training, and the practical effectiveness of even well-designed safety programs to bring about habitual employee compliance with the full range of OSHA mandates.

Both studies and experience have shown that conventional safety training – even when done by OSHA, or by well-paid professional consultants – is of limited effectiveness in making the precepts understood, and even less effective in fostering conformity with OSHA's rules.

Part of the problem is linguistic. Most training materials are in English (or Spanish) but, for example, dozens of other languages are spoken by construction workers in the greater New York City area.

Another difficulty is that safety trainers are exceedingly enamored of acronyms, buzzwords and technical terminology, that too often goes right over the heads of the intended audience. We read of one study, in which the OSHA 10-hour course was but faintly understood by graduate students in engineering at Tulane University. If graduate students don't assimilate most of what's in the 10-hour course, chances are your construction workforce won't either.

It's not just a question of construction workers, or many of them, being not the most highly educated demographic. It's also that adult learning happens in several different ways. Some people learn just fine by listening. Others do better by reading, by watching, or by doing. While professionally produced, site-specific “full bells and whistles” VT safety tutorials may still be too costly for many smaller companies, we expect that, within a few years, most mid-size and even smaller companies will be doing part of the production work for VT tutorials in-house, with safety consultants adding some higher-end enhancements at moderate cost.

Not long from now, the VR job walk/safety tutorial is likely to become a standard feature of many larger projects. Such an “immersive” experience, as a complement or alternative to more traditional training modalities, will enhance the effectiveness of companies' safety programs, providing safety instruction, more extensive and accessible site views (including views of how the site will appear as the work progresses) and allowing virtual access, and teleconferencing concerning site conditions, from multiple sites all over the world.

A further advantage is that the workers' smart helmets can display images that walk employees through safe and OSHA-compliant ways to perform key construction tasks, as the same are being performed. Unlike comprehensive safety manuals, VR apps for the smart helmet or smartphone can readily and inexpensively be updated, as regulations change, and new ones are enacted.

The cost of deploying VR technology for safety training, design changes, logistical and other uses will be offset, at least in part, by reduced travel, executive and employee downtime and administrative costs and other savings.

And, as the expanded use of reality technology for safety-related purposes begins to have a positive impact on the number of significant jobsite injuries, reductions in lost profits associated with construction accidents will be a further offset. These include not only obvious, direct costs (medical, hospital/rehab expenses, higher insurance and workers' comp premiums) but the hidden costs, including such items as lost productivity in responding to and investigating accidents, the cost to train replacement workers, legal expenses, etc.

The use of virtual reality in construction may look like an expensive gimmick for the moment, but soon it will be indispensable. It's a tool to look at for purposes including your safety program. ☺

Thomas H. Welby is a partner at Welby, Brady & Greenblatt, LLP and Geoffrey S. Pope serves as counsel for the firm. The two provide counsel on all aspects of construction law. Reprinted with permission from Welby, Brady & Greenblatt, LLP.



KEEPING THINGS MOVING IN A POSITIVE DIRECTION

By Norb Slowikowski

It is relatively easy to get people to feel good about the concept of continuous improvement because it involves employees in the change process. Unfortunately, this does not always mean that change will take place. Taking people beyond the “feeling” stage requires some form of self-direction to do something – to achieve and see concrete results.

Getting people to adopt a new behavior as a consistent way of working takes a long time. If managers and staff have a role model who leads by example and reinforces good behavior, then the chance of success is much higher.

BEHAVIOR MATTERS

Remember, people are boss watchers. If the boss says one thing and does another, there is a sense of ambiguity between words and deeds. Managers and supervisors at all levels must lead by example.

Leading by example requires demonstrating the following behaviors on an ongoing basis:

- Actively listening to others.

- Experimenting and taking risks.
- Providing and encouraging feedback (both positive and negative).
- Stressing participation in problem-solving and decision-making.
- Engaging in planning and breaking the project down into achievable steps.
- Recognizing achievements through frequent positive feedback. Let people know that their efforts are appreciated.
- Behaving in ways consistent with the company’s values.
- Always focusing on the big picture.
- Managing resistance to change and holding people accountable for their actions.

Oftentimes, continuous improvement initiatives fail because they do not have the backing of upper management. The upper management team has to change the way it manages before the rank and file can follow suit.

Commitment to people is the foundation that leadership must build on for all effective continuous improvement initiatives to

take place. Without it, even the most carefully designed program will never work. The leadership we're talking about is based on the promise that people are our most valuable resource, and we need to utilize their talent and involve them in order to achieve desired results.

If the upper management team is truly committed to continuous improvement, it should demonstrate this by doing what it tells others to do. Commitment includes the following:

- Doing what you say you will do.
- Ensuring that your behavior and actions mirror leadership promise statements.
- Including others in the process.
- Making sure that staff is "sold" rather than "told" to get involved in continuous improvement.
- Ensuring that continuous improvement is not the flavor of the month, but a commitment to making things better—always.

KEYS TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Leadership. Leadership is based on fundamental values of respect, caring and achievement. Leaders reach out and inspire people to fulfill their potential. Together, leaders and their team members envision a better future, feel united behind this common purpose, empower each other to perform, explore opposing ideas to solve problems and create and reflect on their achievements.

Participation/teamwork. Team effort generates the commitment and capabilities to innovate. Everybody wants to be part of something bigger than themselves, which includes being respected and connected with others and feeling invigorated and accepted by them. Teamwork is the collaborative effort that revitalizes the organization and increases the competence and well-being of people. Participation causes people to buy in to the process and the ensuing results.

Commitment. Leaders need to build an environment where people want to come to work and do their best. This is the commitment necessary to grow the organization. Leaders can create this commitment by giving people a sense of control over the work

they do. Keep them in the loop and show them appreciation for a job well done.

Tracking and measuring. If you want it, track and measure it. If you can't measure it, forget it. People need assessments to excel and move in the right direction. With this in mind, it is essential to track and measure the effectiveness of the processes and procedures that have been put in place. The people who use them become the experts and catalysts for change and continuous improvement. With their feedback and involvement, we can make the necessary changes to improve both quality and productivity.

Accountability. Team members own the responsibility for delivering great performance. Leaders are responsible for creating the environment where ownership takes place. This takes coaching, developing individual skills and competencies and helping people do what they know they must do. When people deliver great performances, provide positive reinforcement. If there is substandard performance after ongoing coaching, clarify the consequences if performance doesn't improve. This sense of accountability is the last and often most important step in leading your team to continuous improvement. When people know the consequences, they can adjust their process to achieve the correct outcome. ☺

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FUTURE LEADERS: WHERE WILL THEY COME FROM?

By Ulf Wolf

Over the last several years, many contractors have voiced the concern that they see no clear candidate to hand the reins when the day comes to retire. Also, they wish there were more young aspirants entering our industry – both as crew and to select from and groom for managerial positions.

This situation begs some vital questions, which this article hopes to answer:

- How do we make construction an attractive career choice?
- What are the best ways of spotting managerial talent?
- What are the best ways of retaining managerial talent?
- How do you foster such talent to create skilled managers?

A CONSTRUCTION CAREER

For many young people today, construction does not top their list of career choices. How can we change that?

“I think it will have to start in high school,” says Gilly Turgeon, president of Green Mountain Drywall Co., Inc. in Vermont. “I truly believe that not all kids are meant to go to college, and I think that high school counselors need to push these kids toward a life in a construction field or another hands-on field of some type. I try to tell these kids that in a few years from now, the current workforce will be retiring en masse, and there will be plenty of opportunity to make good money by using their hands.”

Chuck Taylor, director of operations at Englewood Construction, an Illinois general contractor, agrees: “I think our biggest asset in construction is that anyone can make a really good living in this field and that it is a very welcoming industry, regardless of race, gender and, in a lot of cases, abilities. Ours is an industry that emphasizes training throughout our careers, and I believe that is the message we need to put out there. Also, we have to continue to be supportive of college and field-apprenticeship programs.”

“In the Bay Area,” says Craig Daley, president of Daley’s Drywall & Taping in California, “we promote the advantages of a building career in a union area with good wages and benefits, enough to allow a real retirement.”

“We need to hold career fairs for both high school and college students,” suggests Howard Bernstein, president of Penn Installations, Inc. in Pennsylvania. “We are proud of the rates and benefits our people earn, but not many young people have the trades on their radar because they are unaware of this information.”

“We need to reach them at a younger age, when at middle school,” says Scott Turczynski, owner of The Heartland Companies in Iowa. “Many schools have removed shop classes from their curriculum, so kids are not exposed to our professions. We need to work with the schools on that.”

“In the next 12 to 15 years,” says Pat Arrington, principal at Commercial

Enterprises, Inc. in New Mexico, “computers will replace a large percentage of jobs now being done by people – except, a computer cannot build a building. That’s why construction is a safe career for those who choose to learn our trades.”

“When we talk to potential recruits,” says Sabra Phillips, director of talent development at Marek Brothers Systems, Inc. in Texas, “we share with them our vision of our company’s future – just like we describe what a new structure will look like once we have built it – along with our roadmap for getting there. We then offer opportunities for them to be a part of building this future with us, and help us deliver on those opportunities.”

“When you want to attract great candidates,” says Norb Slowikowski, president/productivity consultant at Slowikowski & Associates, Inc., an Illinois consultancy, “it’s very important to create a positive image in the marketplace so that candidates can discover the quality of the company they are considering.

“A good candidate will look for the following (among other things) in an organization:

- Open communication encouraged at all levels of the organization.
- Employees involved in decisions, planning, implementation at all levels.
- Diversity.
- Institutional fairness emphasized in terms of equity, privacy and benefits.
- Performance is recognized and rewarded.”

While the college industry (a multibillion-dollar enterprise) would like to see every child in our nation attend and graduate college, many are neither suited for, nor inclined toward, academic achievements. For these young people, perhaps in the majority, construction offers a very well-paid career path, while their college-grad friends flip burgers.

SPOTTING TALENT

How do you recognize a potential future leader for your company?

“We have to want to spot him or her,” says Taylor. “We have to challenge people constantly and monitor and nurture their work and accomplishments. Employees with management potential will go above and beyond the task at hand, and we must be receptive to and observant of this.”

“Look for people skills,” says John Kirk, owner of Kirk Builders in California. “Also, look for things like being self-organized, being on time and being responsible. Keep the Boy Scouts’ motto – be prepared – in mind. That’s a pretty good yardstick.”

“I look for those who take charge of a task,” says Dave DeHorn, chief estimator at Brady Company/Los Angeles, Inc., “those who complete it with little or no help. These people make decisions and find a way of getting things done. I also look

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at employees who come to me and have a plan to do something in a more cost-effective manner. People who 'put in' more than they 'take out' will generally become long-term management possibilities.

"Lastly, I look at how these employees interact with their peers. Are they respected among their peers, or are they isolated from them? The latter could be a sign of a problem."

"I once heard that real managers are born, not trained," says Daley, "and there is some truth to this. A natural manager will just take charge, will suggest ways to do things differently to the point of driving you crazy. But you must harness that energy, provide specific training and, after some experience, you'll have a great manager."

"I believe," says Phil Ruffin, president of Pontiac Ceiling & Partition, LLC in Michigan, "that it is best to look inside your own organization for your next leader. Most companies have this talent if you provide them a path to grow into that role. Once you've set them a path, you'll see a change in the individual that will reflect the position where they are headed. If you don't provide such a path, there is no reason to expect that an individual will grow."

"Do they go above and beyond in what they do?" asks Turczynski. "Do they have a sense of urgency? Do they attend after-hour activities where they network? Do they work extra hours, or can you set your watch by their comings and goings? These are all good leadership behavior."

"I look for dependability," says Arrington. "Are they always available to assist another person? Also, do they want to learn? Do they want to lead?"

"From my perspective," says Phillips, "you are looking for a combination of a few things when identifying leadership talent. Keep your eye on people who consistently deliver great results, who do this in a way that aligns with the values of your organization and who others respect and seek to work with. Encourage these

individuals to continuously expand their leadership and learn by taking on more responsibility and/or stretch assignments."

A leader must want to lead. If he or she does not, it's leading a horse to water all over again – he will not drink if he doesn't want to. But if the individual you consider is looked up to by others, is ethical and innovative, always learns from his or her mistakes and does want to lead, you have a potential gem on your hands.

RETAINING TALENT

Once you have spotted and begun to rear young talent, how do you keep him or her in your organization? Bright people are sought after by other companies, too, and poaching, as you know, is not unheard of.

"We have to impress upon our younger employees that loyalty goes both ways," says Taylor.

DeHorn suggests you should "constantly look outside your company to see what your competition is doing for their employees, and make sure you are offering your people at least as good a deal."

"Hiring still remains largely word of mouth," says Daley, "and good word-of-mouth referrals are created by giving existing employees a good place to work. Be straight up, pay the appropriate rate, treat them as you would want to be treated and you'll have very low turnover and a positive work place to boot."

Bernstein muses, "It's tough for older generations to understand what motivates younger people, but hopefully an open ear and honesty still count for much."

"Internal paths are the best way to keep your staff and maintain stability of your company," says Ruffin. "This would be the first and foremost action to take."

"As far as retaining," says Turczynski, "culture is key. Having a fun, family-oriented culture with performance-based attitude and compensation is the mix that has helped us grow and retain talent."

Fairness and honesty are values that tend to flow both ways. Though they might not openly say so, employees will value this more than money alone. Feeling welcomed and at home in a company provides a security that money never will. It also makes for a happier life.

FOSTERING TALENT

Once you have spotted your talent and made him or her feel at home in your company, how do you train and grow this person into a true leader?

"Using a trade analogy," says Kirk, "it might be like an apprenticeship. Instead of a journeyman teaching an apprentice, you need a highly skilled leader taking the prospect under his or her wing. This, of course, would need to be someone secure and wise enough to want to share such skills."

"I believe you encourage people to ask questions," says Bernstein, "and give them the authority to take initiative without fear of reprisal. Southwest Airlines' reputation for 'hiring for attitude and training for skill' fits perfectly for our industry as well."

"Both college-educated and field-trained workers can be effective managers," says Robert Aird, president of Robert A. Aird, Inc. in Maryland. "A large and forward-thinking mechanical contractor in the Washington, D.C. region advertises 'laborer to apprentice to mechanic to foreman to project manager.' That is a viable path to management. Conversely, we see college-educated project managers who are unable to provide proper sequencing of trades or schedules that are realistic. They may be great on the computer, but they lack real-world field experience."

"By mentoring," says Turczynski. "Spend time with them. Show them the ropes and be available as much as possible so that your ways become their ways – or better. Don't always give them the answer. Make them give you an answer and try and go with theirs if it makes sense. Help them grow."



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“Those we foster,” says Arrington, “need to have a little ‘greed’ in their makeup. I do not gamble or get into football pools because I am a poor loser, and I will not accept losing. Those we train need a similar attitude; they will not accept losing. Yes, we all lose at times, but we try to design around that possibility, and we do not accept losing easily. Skill is self-generated. We all work for perfection. We may have to work longer hours to get the job done, but we will never tell anyone we worked extra. That is our secret. Teach this.”

“Developing people,” says Phillips, “isn’t all that different from constructing a building: Start with a future vision of what you want to create, develop a plan, find the right partners to work with you, build the foundation and hold yourself accountable to the schedule one floor at a time. Yes, surprises and challenges will happen. You will need to adjust your plans and resources, but knowing what will be built in the future and the impact it will make keeps pulling you forward.”

You can study management and leadership until it comes out of your ears, but nothing tops actually managing and leading, and this, almost without exception, is achieved through mentoring and guidance by an established and respected leader who is willing to train someone else.

OTHER THOUGHTS

“My fear,” says Turgeon, “is that the management part of our business is going to be the easiest part to fill. If we don’t have

a workforce, we won’t have to worry about managers.”

Kirk observes, “Most new construction project managers and project engineers I run into are graduates from Chico State and their special program. I can usually tell when a new guy has graduated from there after I talk to him for a short while. They all have the same mentality – more like school graduates than construction professionals.”

“One misguided notion in this country,” says Aird, “is that all youth must go to university. This has negatively affected many fields, from construction to manufacturing, and any field that does not necessarily require a college degree. And this has done a great disservice to the many who were uninterested, unprepared or unable to afford a college education. It seems this dilemma has finally come to public attention, and there is a rush now to make career training available. There have always been trade schools and training programs, but now the need has gained more traction.”

“You have to start training way, way ahead of time,” says Daley. “If you’re thinking of retiring in the next five years and you don’t have the next generation already trained and ready, you won’t make that five-year date.”

Ruffin concurs: “The biggest mistake many owners of companies make is not having a substantial transition plan for when they decide to let go of the business. A comprehensive ownership transition plan

could take five to 10 years just to develop and potentially another 10 years before transfer of ownership is complete. Don’t wait. Develop your talent years ahead of time.”

Barrington quotes Benjamin Franklin: “Experience is the best teacher.” Then Genghis Khan: “He who fails to plan, plans to fail.”

“Something important to remember,” says Phillips, “is that an individual may or may not be interested in leading and managing others. There are highly capable people who for any number of reasons may prefer an individual contributor role serving as a technical expert rather than a people manager role – either for a season or throughout their careers.

“Rearing leaders is easier said than done, and we work to get better at it every day. One way to ensure it stays front and center is to include people development as a standing agenda item in your monthly or quarterly management meetings or on your calendar. Set goals and timelines – who will do what by when. Treat it like a project.”

And finally, from DeHorn, “Be fair to all employees and respect them. And have some fun.”

Who can argue with that? ☺

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TURNING THE UNION CONSTRUCTION BRAND AROUND: A Q&A with branding expert Karen Post

The union construction industry is at a crossroads; our non-union competitors aren't going away – in fact, they're getting stronger. Regaining lost market share, winning new clients and expanding into new and exciting "niche" fields are our top priorities. But in order to succeed, it's clear we have to deal with our reputation in the marketplace – the union construction brand.

In this special Q&A, branding and marketing expert Karen Post reveals what it takes to come back stronger than ever. It's a message that everyone – contractors, labor reps and craft workers – needs to hear.

Let's start at the very beginning. Can you explain what a brand is, and why people in the union construction industry should care about their brand?

Karen Post: Back in the 1960s, when you said the word "brand", everyone assumed it was a logo for some sort of premium consumer product – you paid more because of the name and the identity. Over the past 30 years or so, though, the definition of "brand" has evolved a great deal, and it goes far beyond the consumer realm. Today when we say "brand", we are talking about the totality of what an organization does day in and day out – why they exist in the first place. The logo and the name are a tiny piece of it, but it's bigger than that. A brand is what a customer – or potential customer – thinks, feels and expects about your organization.

Let's take one of the building trades unions. Their brand is really what the marketplace *thinks* about their organization every time a customer sees a member wearing a pin or a T-shirt. It's what that customer feels when they drive by and see a billboard advertising the union. And lastly, it's what that customer expects when they decide to enter into a working relationship with the union.

A brand is part reputation, part mental and emotional associations, part behavior, part communication and part message. So if the word still feels strange to you – if it sounds too consumer-ish, because you work in industrial construction – just change it. Instead of brand, think "reputation" or "image".

There is near-universal agreement within union construction that our brand needs help. Once that has been accepted, what is the first step(s) we need to take towards revitalizing the brand?

Karen Post: First, think in terms of visuals. I checked out several of the union websites prior to our interview. Frankly, the design and imagery on these sites just makes them look old. The visual communication strategy is straight out of the 1960s and 1970s. A ton of research has been done, and it's been proven over and over again that visuals are the human mind's strongest trigger. People often make judgments based on what they see, pure and simple. That's why a brand's online presence is so crucial. What I saw looked very "old-school", not fresh and contemporary. Even if you are making fundamental, innovative changes within your industry and are moving forward, there's a "disconnect" if your visual presence doesn't reflect that.

Twenty or thirty years ago, there was a lot of focus on logic and features when it came to promoting a brand. But the research shows that while logic makes people *think*, emotions are what really make people *act*. In terms of visuals on websites and in advertising, although it may sound counterintuitive, I would try to move away from using so many shots of big equipment and big, industrial infrastructure and focus more on the human element.

It sounds like that's more of a commercial, consumer-oriented approach to branding. But we're dealing with big, industrial projects.

Karen Post: There are some differences between consumer branding and business-to-business branding, but many of the principles remain the same. I've worked with many industrial companies and trade associations, and this is always a struggle. In the industrial sector, leaders are often very left-brained, logical, driven kinds of thinkers. But we're talking about a more emotional, right-brained approach here, and it's a big step to buy into this new way of thinking.

Look at a company like Apple. Their appeal is very emotional. But when you think about it, they're selling something that's pretty darned logical – a computer that has a very definite function and purpose, just like the service product you're selling in union construction. Everyone can learn from what consumer brands do! Take Nike. They rarely have an ad that focuses on the inside of the shoe and the technical processes that make it work. They focus more on the emotion connected to having the shoe, what it makes the person feel like.

The clients you are trying to convince to hire you are the same human beings who buy Nike and Apple and other consumer brands. They are conditioned to respond to a lot of the same emotional techniques that these brands use. I believe that if a union contractor can take the leap and accept this idea, his or her company stands a much better chance of being successful. They will also immediately stand out, because there will always be a lot of contractors who refuse to participate in a more modern way of thinking.

In order to successfully turn around a brand, you must get buy-in from the people who work "inside" that brand or industry. You have to sell them on the idea of rebranding before you can sell the customers. How do you do that?

Karen Post: From my experience working with a lot of industrial organizations, the most successful way to turn around a brand is to introduce strong leadership with a heavy component of collaboration. If you decide to make a brand change, you can hire an outside person to come in and guide you, and they'll have a lot of insight and wisdom. But if the head of the organization takes those ideas and then just tries to shove them down everyone's throats, it's not going to work. However, if you spend a little more money and time and get the rank-and-file involved – if you engage in some collaborative thinking and problem-solving – then the whole process will be easier, because the people you need buy-in from will have been a part of creating the new brand.

If a contractor or union decides to reinvent their brand, they need to be sure that any consultant they hire agrees that collaborative problem solving is going to be a key strategy. That's something to bring up during the interview process.

But it's a delicate dance, and not all branding consultants are willing or able to do it. The tricky part is that while you want there to be a collaborative element, there still has to be a strong role for the leader, someone who will ultimately make and implement



KAREN POST'S SEVEN BRAND GAME-CHANGERS

In her book, *Brand Turnaround*, Karen Post delivers an in-depth game plan for any company or industry seeking to rebrand its image. "If and when your brand gets hit by outside forces and uncontrollable situations ... remember, there is life after a disaster and brand meltdown," she advises. "Take a deep breath and apply the seven game-changing strategies."

Here's a quick summary of her top seven "game-changers" – the absolutely essential things you must do in order to revitalize your brand:

- 1. Take responsibility.** Scandals, accidents and misfortune can strike like lightning and instantly handicap even the strongest brands. The public is shocked and the media goes into a feeding frenzy. To survive, you must quickly take responsibility and shift the brand tide from crisis to composure.
- 2. Never give up.** History is filled with true stories of companies and brands that suffered huge losses and still managed to bounce back stronger than ever. The key to recuperating your brand after a devastating hit is to never give up.
- 3. Lead strong.** It takes a special leader to spearhead a brand turnaround and bring an industry back from the brink: someone willing to step up, take the heat and make the tough but necessary decisions.
- 4. Stay relevant.** When it comes to brand recovery, one size does not fit all. Companies that have turned around have consistently identified, prioritized and crafted both strategic communications and relationship building programs.
- 5. Keep improving.** In addition to returning to that original state of glory, brands must also show that they are committed to doing even better than before.
- 6. Build equity.** In the face of scandal, successful brands create bonds with an increasingly cynical consumer market that will stick by them through good times and bad.
- 7. Own your distinction.** Call it your unique attribute, your "brain tattoo." What's your compelling differentiator? What are the unique qualities of your brand that will fuel your comeback?

decisions that not everyone will like. One of the big mistakes I see time and again with both non-profits and for-profits is that the collaboration process becomes a "committee of a thousand." Everyone gets involved, everyone gets their say, but nothing is ever decided. You need a person or a small core group that is going to act in a leadership role and champion the changes. You can't please every single person. This is why you don't see parks with statues of large committees – you see statues of strong leaders! Someone has to step up and take charge. They have to believe in it, and they have to do their homework.

One of the problems we face is that the union construction brand is very large and diverse. It is made up of thousands of local unions, more than a dozen different trades, and more than 2,000 contractor firms. There is no central leadership, no Steve Jobs-like CEO who can push through a series of changes. With such a diverse makeup, how do we implement the reforms necessary to reshape our brand?

Karen Post: Make sure that you have a clear and simple message for the industry, and that this message is being delivered consistently by not only the leaders, but the people out in the field as well. Also, I would choose to focus on what your brand members have in common. Look for common ground, like safety. Amplify the things that everyone agrees on.

And finally, keep things simple. When you go through a rebranding, there is an impulse to try and rewrite the encyclopedia. But the messaging needs to start off really, really simply. Build equity in that message. Make sure it's effective, and then you can branch off into other issues. But keep it simple. Simplicity is powerful.

And I'll say it one more time: don't overlook the importance of visuals. You have to look at your industry and ask yourself, do we look like we're modern, or are we the equivalent of a guy who walks into a bar wearing a light-blue leisure suit from the '70s? ☹

ABOUT

Karen Post is the author of the book Brand Turnaround: How Brands Gone Bad Returned to Glory... and the 7 Game Changers that Made the Difference (McGraw-Hill). Karen has spent years helping clients revive damaged reputations and get back on the path to growth and prosperity. She has worked with everyone from Fortune 500 companies to large industrial producers – even a Saudi Arabian airline! They all had one thing in common: their once-strong brands had been tarnished, and all were facing difficult, uncertain futures.

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