

The Empty Bench

by Wally Adamchik

Bottom of the seventh, bases loaded. The pitcher looks tired and the manager decides its time to make a change. Reluctantly, he picks up the phone. <ring . . . ring . . .> The bullpen answers and the manager asks the question to which he already knows the answer: "Do we have anybody who can handle this?" There's a long silence on the line, followed by the same reply as last time: "Nope, the bench is pretty much empty. All we have is the new guy, but he hasn't faced anything like this before. I hope he can handle it."

Fall, 2007. Construction volume in your market sector continues to be hot. In fact, you just might have your highest-volume year ever. Margins are slipping a bit, but volume will cover you. Your biggest client just let you know they have some additional work that needs to be done ASAP. You pick up the phone and call operations and ask the question to which you already know the answer, "Do we have anybody who can supervise/manage this project?" There's a long silence on the line, followed by the same reply as last time: "Nope, the bench is pretty much empty. All we have is the new guy, but he hasn't faced anything like this before. I hope he can handle it."

Concerned, you hang up the phone. This may be your best client. Or, maybe it's a client you've been pursuing. Or, that last piece of revenue to put you over the top and give you a record year. Whatever the case, this is a great opportunity, but you don't have great people to put on the job. You accept it anyway and cross your fingers. Heck, back in the old days, this was how you tested and developed your guys. Things might still work out well.

In the words of former Army Chief of Staff, General Gordon R. Sullivan: "Hope is not a method." Yet, that's the primary philosophy for developing leaders in the construction industry today: Throw 'em in and hope they work out. Most contractors are doing some leadership development these days, but the sad truth is that two models prevail. Model #1 sends a chosen few high-potentials to some off-site, high-dollar seminar or learning experience.

Model #2 brings everyone in the company together on some Saturday for the Annual Training Day. Contractors know they need

to do something to develop future leaders, but they don't know what. They figure these methods are as good as any. The problem is that, by themselves, these methods don't develop leaders at all.

Another option

There is a third model. It takes the best of the two previously mentioned approaches noted above, and adds a third element – the critical piece that the most successful contractors have figured out. It involves the rest of the supervisors and project managers in a focused and prolonged effort to help them be more effective as they lead project teams.

This model recognizes that developing people is more than a one-day event and that time and experience are still the best teachers. Paying exorbitant training fees does not ensure results. This model also commits a company's resources and directs them where they will deliver the highest return – the supervisors and project managers who are directly accountable for providing work work profitably.

My active duty experience in the Marines and as a Non-Resident Fellow with Marine Corps University reminded me that the real leverage to win at anything rests with the small unit leader. The great military formations of history have all been built on a foundation of competent small unit leaders. The Marine Corps model doesn't send one or two future leaders to school each year. It sends almost everyone of a particular pay grade. Those who don't go to school have the training brought to them. Leadership is synonymous with Marines, and their excellence in this art comes from many sources. But one of the key sources is the recognition that developing new leaders is simply part of the job. They understand the importance of small unit leadership, so they dedicate attention and resources to this vital position. Generals may set strategy, just as CEOs may decide what job to bid. Small unit leaders will execute that strategy at the tactical level, just as supervisors and project managers will build the project, no matter the bid margin.

There are plenty of excuses for not using the third model; I hear them often.

There is one reason to embrace it: success. I know firms that are committed to developing leaders at all levels, using a variety of sources and methods. These firms recognize the impact of the small unit leader (the supervisor/project manager) and invest in them often. These firms succeed. They have qualified people on the bench, jumping up to say, "Put me in, Coach! I'm ready!"

Despite the crippling demographics that contractors face today, superior leadership can tip the balance in your favor. Solid leadership will attract quality labor to your firm. And with quality labor, you can knock it out of the park!

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Adamchik will be presenting at UCT Atlanta on Jan. 29:

Finding And Keeping Them: Best Practices In Recruiting And Retention

Description: Learn from the best in the business. This informative session will feature the best of class practices firms are using today to attract, recruit, and retain best of class people. Benchmark your business against the best and see how you stack up. If you want to win the war for talent then you need to attend this entertaining presentation and get the ammunition you need.

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