

Building Blocks: A DCN EAB discussion on leadership

by RICHARD GILBERT_Dec 29, 2014

At this year's Daily Commercial News (DCN) Editorial Advisory Board (EAB) meeting, board members discussed some core issues facing Canadian construction. The members looked at what is key in construction leadership, how to meet the challenge of globalization, growing business threats and dispelling myths about a career in construction. Today, we present the first part of the Building Blocks series — a discussion about leadership in construction.



Ontario construction leaders agree good leadership is critical to the success of all organizations and companies, but there are differing views about the skill set required to move the industry forward in the future.

"I don't think there is anything particularly unique about construction (leadership) as opposed to any other industry or any other group of people," said Geza Banfai, a McMillan LLP lawyer.

"Leadership, in its essence, is the ability to inspire action on the part of others. That principle prevails throughout all society."

Banfai's comments were among many shared by the DCN's EAB members at their annual meeting earlier this year. Board members discussed the nature of leadership and the key threats it faces in the Canadian construction industry. They also identified a range of issues that must be addressed to successfully guide their organizations, whether they operate at the provincial or national level.

One thing all these construction leaders agreed upon is that effective leaders must be able to inspire, motivate or influence a group of people to achieve challenging goals. As a result,

construction leaders must develop skill sets which include strategic planning, adapting to change, communications, managing others, integrity, honesty, relationship building, technical expertise and collaboration.

For this reason, Banfai argues, construction leaders are similar to leaders in other business sectors or industries, because they have similar skill sets and face similar obstacles. He believes that leadership skills are transferable between different industries which means construction firms or organizations should be able to recruit new leaders from other industries and vice versa.

However, there is a traditional belief that construction leaders should have a skill set gained through hands-on technical and managerial experience on industry projects.

"I don't think you can take outsiders and plug them in as easily in a contractor kind of world, and expect them to be successful," said Andy Manahan, Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario executive director.

"They may have really good management attributes, but if you don't really understand what your crews are doing on the ground, you are going to have a difficult time achieving whatever strategic targets are set. I think people in construction who have risen up through the ranks probably have a better idea what it takes to do the job."

In this view, soft leadership skills that make up the skill set for leaders in other industries are less important in the construction industry, according to some board members.

The construction process is considered to be unique or quite different from that involved in manufacturing and other heavy industries. This industry landscape leaves construction leaders needing to adopt leadership styles that are more appropriate for this unique process which includes the needs and timetables of people like owners, architects, engineers, general contractors, sub-contractors, regulators, inspectors, financiers and tenants.

"One of the greatest qualities of construction is there is an abundance of a 'can do' type of attitude often in leadership positions, where I think sometimes they commit to things they have never done before and they just figure it out," said Ian Cunningham, Council of Ontario Construction Associations president.

Cunningham said a great deal of leadership in construction is more entrepreneurial than corporate because of the structure of much of the industry.

"While there are some huge general contracting companies, like AECON, EllisDon, PCL and Bird and they are more corporate in their approach to doing business," he explained.

"Many companies at the trade level are entrepreneurial or family members who have grown into leadership positions in the company."