

# TOPPING OUT

The last word from Readers of *Modern Steel Construction*

## Staying Competitive

By Marc Dutil

Writing this commentary confines me to a few editorial rules: don't be product-specific; don't talk about a particular individual (especially if you don't have anything nice to say); and finally, promote steel but don't throw mud at other construction materials.

Within those bounds I will attempt to propose a recipe for success—to see how we, as individuals, as independent companies and as an industry, can prosper in this harsh work environment and not be dominated by it.

A recent Thomas Sowell article in *Forbes* magazine strongly influenced my basic premise and I use his ideas without remorse because, ultimately, that's exactly what he suggests: if you want to be a long-term winner then have the capability to be influenced, to learn, to borrow and to imitate.

Winners will absorb the skills of others. Others will not.

According to Sowell when a whole continent of Native Americans met a few Europeans who were thousand of miles from home, one group did not stand a chance. The Europeans had been exploring the seas of the world for years. They had learned about Chinese ship building skills, Indian navigating knowledge, Arab numbers; they knew about gun powder, fire-making and within a generation they had also gathered much needed knowledge from the Native Americans themselves about how to survive in a new world.

This is not an issue of moral superiority; it's simply one of survival.

The world has yet to discover an "advanced" society in a remote jungle. You've never read the headline "Isolated Island People Beat the Americans to the Moon" and you never will. Americans have historically been great assimilators and many of their early rocket scientists were in fact Germans who had come to America with their rich old-world heritage.

Assimilators win. Others don't.

As I write this, I am returning home from a trip that took me through France, Romania, India and China.

I got to visit a plant introducing the North American joists to Europe and I saw detailing offices with 30 steel detailers when a year ago there were none. In Calcutta, I saw a steel fabricating company founded in 1788 where (besides welders wearing sandals) you couldn't help being impressed by the skills and resourcefulness of the people.

Finally, in China I witnessed as productive and as large a facility as you'll ever see in America. Their tools were modern, their technology was up-to-date and their goals were ambitious. I left very well aware that it's cheaper to ship steel 5,000 miles by boat than to deliver it 500 miles by truck.

This commentary is not about Native Americans, rocket scientists and world tours. It's about the fate awaiting those who believe that their success is within their immediate environment. It's not.

Whether your objective is to raise your individual skills, to increase your company's competitiveness, or to support the prosperity of the steel industry, then you are in a race to extend your reach to the outside world as strategically and as promptly as you possibly can.

It could be in five, 10 or 15 years, but one day there will be a steel high-rise in Los Angeles designed in New York and Calcutta, detailed in Ohio and Russia, fabricated in Texas and China, and erected by Americans with Japanese consultants from steel that has been recycled so many times that we can't even begin to know where in the world it's from anymore.

Not possible? If the steel industry is not ready by that time to cooperate as such then that high rise will simply not be made of steel.

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