

## Build a Winning Team

BY JEFF SCHULZ

Building a team environment, letting people know their roles, and putting them in a position to win all go a long way toward being successful.

**MAXIMIZING PRODUCTIVITY. MINIMIZING COSTS. RETAINING KEY EMPLOYEES.** Reducing waste. Controlling scope creep. These are some of the major problems affecting nearly every company within the construction industry. Tremendous amounts of time and money are wasted on these issues. Yet, one possible, all-encompassing solution exists within your company: teamwork.

Teams win championships. Having superstars is a tremendous advantage, but the everyday guys who perform their roles and buy into the team-first strategy are the real keys to victory. The Chicago Bulls and Michael Jordan provide a good example. Do you think Jordan won those six titles by himself? Jordan was definitely the best player, but he did not do it by himself. In fact, until he became a team player, he did not win an NBA Championship. Remember the Detroit Pistons and their “Jordan Rules” tactic? Under this strategy, the Pistons fouled Jordan every chance they got. They did this because they knew the Bulls were not a team. If Jordan couldn’t beat them, they weren’t going to lose. But, Jordan finally brought home the trophies when he had a team around him. By themselves, Jordan’s teammates were not superstars, but they did have individual strengths that could be parlayed into team success. When Jordan was double-teamed, Steve Kerr and John Paxson were there to hit the open threes. When a shot was missed, Horace Grant and Dennis Rodman were there to grab the rebounds. And Scottie Pippen was there to back up Jordan and even *be* Jordan when the “big guy” needed a break. That team had its star, and the others were willing to be role-players in order to win and be named champions.

### Construction Teams

“It’s the team, the team, the team.” One of the most successful and respected coaches in the history of college football professed this mantra. The late coach of the Michigan Wolverines football team, Bo Schembechler, knew that if he could get his star players to play as a team, he would win—and he did win. He was the winningest college football coach of the 1970s; he won or tied for 13 Big Ten Championships and never once had a losing record in his 27 seasons as a head football coach. As the athletic director, he emphasized this to all his teams: ice hockey, softball, swimming, you name it. The players bought into his team philosophy and

were rewarded by being winning teams and earning the glory for successful tasks, including the 1989 men’s basketball NCAA title.

Construction is arguably the industry that most closely resembles the sporting world. Teams are requirements. It is impossible for nearly any project to be completed successfully by one person acting alone. A typical project has several sub-teams working within a big team. The foremen, supervisors, and laborers work internally for the self-performing GC. Then the HVAC, plumbing, steel erector, roofers, and other subcontractors work on the same team as the GC. Don’t forget about the office crew or the architect, scheduler, estimator, sales force, admin, P.E., and on and on. Tying this all together is the coach of the project, the project manager.

A football team is a strong analogy for a construction project. In football, you have the head coach, the assistant coaches, and the players who specialize in different positions. The head coach sets the vision for the team. He then tweaks this vision based on input from his assistant coaches. At this point, the coach leaves his assistants so they can go to their individual players whether it is the offensive line or the defensive backfield, and implement a plan based on the overall goal. Goals are set for the long-term and the short-term. Every player knows what his role is every day. Then, after the individual units have their assignments, they put it all together and practice,

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practice, practice. The saying goes: Amateurs practice until they get it right, but professionals practice until they can’t get it wrong.

This mirrors a construction project, or at least how a winning company runs a project. The project manager acts as the coach of his or her team. He has the plan and sets the vision. He then assembles his supervisors and foremen and gets their input and buy-in. If anyone in this group sees something that

could be improved or a danger that was previously overlooked, they work together to solve the problem. Then, those leader-supervisors take the ideas back to their groups, and the process repeats itself with each individual calling upon his experience and background to add to the process.

Getting employee input helps employees feel that they provided value and were important to the project. It also encourages employees to put in the extra effort sometimes needed to keep the project on schedule and within budget. These newly educated employees can make informed decisions, reducing waste caused by uncertainty. Uncertainty forces a delay so a situation may be discussed with a supervisor, or worse, it leads to doing something incorrectly and creating expensive re-work.

Subcontractors are the free agents who have the expertise we cannot find within our organization. These agents also need to feel like a part of the team. As free agents, they have their own way of doing things so they need to know how the team operates and what the goals are. Otherwise, they will act individually and prevent the project team from reaching its potential.

Another part of the construction team is the back office. These are the people who facilitate projects and make them run smoothly and efficiently. For example, the administrative staff answers phones and handles paperwork. Taking these tasks off project managers' plates frees up their time to ensure the actual construction work stays on plan. Administrative staff perform many tasks effectively and at a significantly lower cost. Other team members perform necessary roles for a successful project, even though they are not physically out on the playing field. The estimators, human resources coordinator, business developers, and workers in the supply shed, for example, are the scouts, the grounds crew, and the equipment managers of our construction team. If these people do not share the same vision as the rest of the team, they can seriously impair or cripple a job.

Perhaps the most important team member, yet often the most overlooked member, is the client. On too many projects, the client is perceived as the enemy, the opponent on the field. Nothing could be further from the truth. The most successful firms make sure they share a common vision with the client. They work hand-in-hand as a team. This leads to many benefits. If a client trusts you, they are more willing to listen to your suggestions and act on your expert opinion. If a project hits a bump, teammates don't hide the problem; they turn to the client and seek client input or maybe even assistance in order to overcome this obstacle. It also accelerates other processes and minimizes change orders. Team behavior can reduce payment periods. Teamwork leads to long-term relationships. Consider a contractor whose sense of teamwork with a client is so well established that the contractor does not bid a job unless there is a potential long-term relationship with the client.

## Preparation

Teamwork is all about the development of your team and your people. It is not about building buildings.

So why don't all construction crews put an emphasis on developing their people?

In the 2005–2006 U.S. Construction Industry Training

Report, FMI's survey respondents listed their top five training challenges as:

1. Finding time to train people
2. Obtaining measurable results
3. Training people at multiple or remote sites
4. Delivering comprehensive training
5. Using training to drive organizational change.

While these are all valid issues, there are several ways to overcome them, with some effort. For example, finding time to train means that the individual being trained is not at that moment helping to produce a building. People perceive an employee in training as a cost. Yet, this is very short-sighted. Individuals in training are learning valuable ways to increase productivity, and gains of 10% in margin can be created by something as small as a 1% gain in productivity. Oftentimes, even greater gains can be realized. Beyond productivity improvement, workers are also learning how to improve safety and prevent costly accidents, reducing waste. Furthermore, the training investment made in the employee by the organization builds loyalty. The Craft Labor Supply Outlook states that while there probably will not be a shortage in actual bodies for the construction workforce, the problem will be the quality and the lack of necessary skills and talent. Recruiting will be important, but retention will be essential. Companies will be forced to do whatever they can to keep good team members. Keeping your team for the long run will mean realizing a large return on investment.

The majority of training for baseball takes place during spring training. The team manager sets the season strategy and selects the team that will best help the team achieve its goals. This does not necessarily mean selecting the best players. Even in perceived individual sports such as cycling, the winners are usually those with the best team. Lance Armstrong won seven straight Tours de France, but he readily admits that it was his team who made this possible. It could be argued that his team, the U.S. Postal Service Team (and later the Discovery Channel Team), was not the best team. That honor belonged to Team Telekom. However, Telekom had no leader since its three best riders were out for themselves and would not sacrifice potential individual glory for the team. Why would Lance's teammates subordinate themselves to support roles? Two major reasons exist: to be associated with winning as opposed to simply being an above-average individual and perhaps to be the future leader of the successful, winning team. Individuals become team members, train appropriately, and focus on team success. They develop skills that strengthen the team more than themselves, and their reward is the team's success.

In player development, the company aligns its efforts to build the team's long-term success, not just an individual's win or a short-term project success. Find time or make time. The outcome of increased employee loyalty, reduced costs, and increased efficiency will nearly always more than offset the short-term costs of developing the skills of team members and the teamwork of those members.

## Know the Score

In order for the stakeholders in your project to be a winning team, they have to know what qualifies as winning. In baseball, it is easy to know. You look up at the scoreboard and everything is there: runs, innings, pitch count, and the runners on base. You

even know the history of the batter. All of this information is up-to-the-moment. Baseball players know exactly where they stand. They know the score, and they know if they are winning or losing.

But, how do you tell what the score is on a job site? And does your team know the score? The project score can be based on many things, but it is usually some combination of client satisfaction, meeting the specs, safety, and, of course, completion on time and within budget. These scores should be reinforced every day on the job. Daily huddles are excellent times to provide the team with updated information, remind everyone of the plays for the day, and inform them of the score and how they can help the team win.

It is easy enough to state, "We are going to be under budget and on time." That is a fair selection, as it is easily quantifiable and normalized. The most successful companies tend to have team development and human measurement involved as well from both the client and the project team.

## **Forward**

There are many needs that must be met to assure a team success. Maximizing productivity. Employee retention. Keeping costs to a minimum. Reducing waste. A highly effective way to achieve all of these is through the building of a strong team. Allow team members to feel that they have the power to contribute to and affect the success of the job. Provide them the opportunity to voice their opinions. Employees, once encouraged, are usually excited to come together and express their views, talking candidly about ways to improve.

Industry analysts have stated that labor is going to be the biggest issue—including how the industry is able to manage that demand in more creative ways—for the construction industry for the next three to five years. Building a team environment, letting people know their roles, and putting them in a position to win goes a long way toward being successful. You already have some of the players, now make them a team. Develop more team members. When you do, you will improve your profits and beat your competitors.

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