



## How Generations Can Work Together to Bridge the Divide

By Lindsay Minard

In no other industry is the generational gap better illustrated than in commercial construction, as the distance between those who created their own success and those who were groomed for it continues to exponentially widen. Ironically, seasoned industry leaders who put work above all else, not only to be successful, but also to provide better lives and opportunities for their children, are now struggling with the repercussions that a “provided for” lifestyle creates as those “children” continue to enter the workplace demanding a work-life balance and holding their employers to higher standards.

“The model of a commercial construction employee that used to dominate the industry was maybe high school educated and kept his head down and mouth shut for 15 years, grew into a foreman or superintendent position and worked 40 years at that position with the same company. Today kids come out of school expecting to have three or four devices strapped to their belt, a fast car and a fast computer. They have a degree, they expect to be trained and they are using all the hard work of the past as a stepping stone to their own success,” contemplates Richard Lee, vice president of operations for KBS, Inc.

On the other side of the gap are the industry’s young professionals. They believe in the efficiency of technology and count on it to get more done at a faster pace. They struggle to understand the seasoned professionals’ resistance to change, innovation and giving them a seat at the table because they easily adapt and are comfortable sharing their voice.

“We cannot generalize today’s youth; there are some that are so geared for leadership that given the opportunity they will succeed; they are just like us older folks and they are coming out of universities. A lack of leadership qualities in today’s youth is not the common denominator,” states Yvan Beliveau, director of the Myers-Lawson School of Construction at Virginia Tech.

The face of the commercial construction employee is evolving; it is not a bad thing, it is just different. Hard work will always be a prerequisite to success in this industry, but nurturing and attention to development, while not originally a part of the game plan, are now necessary investments as the job becomes more complex and diverse.

“Organizations have to align the development of their future leaders with strategy that leads the demands of the marketplace. They need to figure out where they are at, where they are going and design development, selection and coaching processes that fill those requirements. This will give the people involved the skills and awareness to close the gap,” states Dr. John Grinnell, president and CEO of Grinnell Leadership. “The idea is to create a culture that breeds the greatest amount of success. In order to accomplish this management needs to not only focus on the technical and marketplace aspects of the business, but also on establishing the right beliefs, culture, behaviors, practices and actions that allow all generations to excel and continue growing the business. It is time to focus on the intangible side of leadership, because this industry already does a good job at the management side,” explains Grinnell.

Bottom line? In order to bridge the proverbial gap, both seasoned professionals and future leaders are going to have to work towards understanding and accepting the differences between them and staying open minded to learning from one another. The industry is going to continue to change and move forward, with time-tested basics always having their place.

## What the Up and Comer's Need to Learn

### You are Not an Island. This is a Team.

“Young people need to realize they are no different from the guys in the field. They have to gain the respect of the men in the field because we are only as good as they are. If we do not have field personnel that can implement the projects we are closing there is no point in us doing our job. They need to respect one another and work together,” explains Carter Baldwin, president of Capital Interior Contractors, Inc.

Young professionals must realize that personal success in this business is only achieved by being an integral part of a well-assembled team; and that a laborer who did not finish high school and a manager with a master’s degree need one another to get the job done best.

“I think it is tough for the younger generations to understand, at least initially, the concept of teamwork. They often think they are being evaluated on their performance when ultimately it is the company’s performance that matters most. You may be where the buck stops but you have to rely on the people around you, the team, to get to the end; otherwise you will not get there. Ego, pride, different personality traits hold people back,” explains Jim Stamer, president of Prospect Waterproofing, Inc.

A new project means a new team with varying backgrounds, education and experience levels. The ability to accept, understand and work with the differences in the individuals who make up the team is the distinction between those who are recognized as potential leaders and those who will never move up the ladder.

“The capability to work with a diverse team can make or break a career in this industry. At the same time, it does not matter what level you are at within the team; anyone can make a difference. Just



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as one bad apple can spoil the whole bunch, a person right out of school can have a powerful influence and bring a team together,” contemplates Beliveau.

### Experience Trumps Education

“All the education in the world does not replace the lessons learned through experience. In some respects, it’s very similar to raising children. As a new mom, I read all the books and tried to come into the world of parenting with education and knowledge of what the experts say you “should” do, but experiencing parenting is how I really learned to be a parent,” explains Joanna Dobson, human resources director for Balfour Beatty Construction.

Perhaps the biggest concept that young professionals coming from a higher education environment need to grasp is that by no means does learning end when they receive their degree. College educated or field educated, young professionals that want to lead will have to get comfortable asking questions and become avid learners of the industry.

“There is a serious disconnect on the instinctual side of contracting. The younger generations think they have it inherently. They do not understand the gut side of contracting which is the only way you are going to learn it. They need to make mistakes and watch and observe other leaders making decisions. It is not something you can learn out of a book or overnight,” states Bill Strack, president of Henderson, Inc.

### Relationships are Not Formed over Email, Text or Facebook

“The older generation of leaders does not hesitate to pick up the phone and have an open, frank conversation; they have personal relationships with the people they do business with. The younger generations are quick to hide behind the technology, fire off an email and never pick up the phone. That is going to be big issue in our future. Before anyone can lead they have to be able to connect with people on a personal level,” asserts Jon Reid, project manager for KBS, Inc.

Relationships need nurturing; staying in touch, in person and by phone, is an important part of how successful companies stay on top in good times and bad. The older generation of leaders does not *hate*

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technology; these leaders simply recognize that just as personal relationships do not develop and grow through email, neither do business relationships. Sounds pretty common sense right?

"While it is easy to communicate via email versus the phone, something often gets lost in translation. Strong relationships are vital in this industry; if you establish and nurture those relationships like a friendship, you cement a stronger bond that will pull you through the tough times," contemplates Jocko Pare, president of Tri-State Drywall, Inc.

Because young professionals do not remember a world without the internet, there is a concern among seasoned professionals that they simply do not know *how* to build a proper business relationship through human interaction. "The interpersonal relationships built in the industry are vastly important to what we do. I have great concern that the impersonal nature of the technology distracts from the ability to sell. It is much easier to say no to someone if no relationship has been developed," states Stamer.

**"Not My Job, Man" = "No Job for You, Man"**

"That's not my job," is not only a phrase that makes the concept of unionization terrifying, it is simply a phrase that does not apply in this industry. The quickest way to a leadership position in commercial construction is hard work, coupled with a positive attitude about whatever job is before you.

"'Not my job, man' is a quick ticket out of a company. Job titles and descriptions, while important, are not as important as understanding the goal and doing everything

that can be done to reach that objective. A 'whatever it takes attitude' is a wise approach," states Steve Skinner, executive vice president of BE&K Building Group.

Being a part of a team means doing whatever needs to be done; just because you have reached a first-tier leadership position does not mean you are above *any* task that arises. Industry leaders look at business operations from a "job's done" perspective; the growing tendency of the younger generations to focus on salary and hours instead of on getting the job done is a hurdle they will have to overcome in order to work long term in commercial construction. No matter how user-friendly technology makes the job, construction is and will always be an industry in which successes are not found in a traditional 40-hour work week.

"It is about getting the job done and not measuring time. It is about looking at the end game and not saying, 'Well I got my day's hours in,'" asserts Beliveau. "The job may be made more of a 9 to 5 situation with the various new technologies; but while you can communicate and make things happen an individual still has to be motivated by the end game. Saying something cannot be done is not an answer; you have to say how can we make this work."

### **What the Seasoned Professionals Need to Grasp**

#### **Stop, Collaborate and Listen**

When it comes to experience and technical skills, leaders in today's industry are untouchable. Because of this and the authoritarian structures they likely grew up with they are more familiar and

comfortable with a chain of command approach to leadership; why have a group make decisions when one person already knows the answers?

The answer? This *is* a team, right?

"Executives in the industry today are more ingrained with the hierarchy of a company, with a couple of senior folks overseeing every aspect of the business," contemplates Reid.

While this mindset has worked in the past, it simply does not motivate the well-educated, innovative, confident young workforce entering the industry today. They are constantly researching and staying in tune with new ways to get the job done better, quicker and more efficiently and are looking for a platform or simply the opportunity to be heard.

"The younger generations do in fact not have the experience and technical skills that their predecessors do so they incorporate multiple pieces of experience and skills to get the job done. This leads to a more collaborative environment with lots of people involved in coming up with a plan as opposed to one or two guys sitting at a table and passing out direction to everyone," continues Reid.



Besides motivating the future leaders, collaboration is key to positive growth in this industry. “One of the biggest challenges to anyone who has been in the industry a long time is that they know how to do it and they think it is the only way to be done. Young industry professionals bring phenomenal dexterity to the industry. They may see something that gives you a better solution if given the chance,” states Beliveau.

### **Change is NOT a Four-letter Word**

It is safe to say that in any industry experience trumps education, hands down. It is also safe to say that if an individual has 40 years worth of experience, getting them to consider a new way of doing something they have been doing the same way for those 40 years is a challenge.

“Current and future leaders need to work together to preserve the core principals that made their companies successful, and at the same time consider what changes may be needed in order to be successful in the future. I believe there is a tendency at times to be set in your ways and to say “Well this has worked in the past, and this is what will work in the future,” explains Kevin Nearpass, senior project manager for L.F. Jennings, Inc. “I would say one of the biggest differences I see between past and future generations is the willingness to not only incorporate change, but also to embrace it. If companies have future leaders who recognize they need to work with current leaders to understand how and why their company’s became successful, and companies are able to blend that with current leaders who are open to instituting change, they will continue to strengthen themselves in the long run”

Companies that resist change do not grow and eventually will die out as the world around them continues to change at warp speed. “It is all about passion to learn and accept new ideas, whatever your background or generational category. If you do not

accept new ideas and challenge yourself you will not grow,” affirms Skinner.

### **Technology and Good Work Ethic Go Hand-in-hand**

Many of the “old school” generations define a strong work ethic by the amount of hours spent in the office, on the project site and just in general time spent ingrained in the job. Future leaders on the other hand define a strong work ethic as working smarter and using technology to make the job more flexible and efficient; they use technologies available to accomplish what used to take a 12 to 15 hour day, within a more reasonable ten to 12 hour one.

New technologies enable the industry to move quicker and more efficiently; not getting on board with them is career suicide, if not for those leaders retiring from the industry, definitely for those moving up. “Changing technology creates an entirely new learning curve with regards to managing relationships and the project. Increased collaboration and information sharing will be needed; keeping the lines of communication open is paramount,” says Dobson. “Future leaders will need to become or stay comfortable with changing technology and consider new ways of doing business.”

### **Finding a Happy Place in the Middle**

In order for young professionals in this industry to reach leadership positions they must accept that there are fundamentals in this business that will never change. For

seasoned professionals to effectively lead they must accept that young professionals are engaged and motivated differently today; and if given the proper direction and motivation they will move the industry forward.

“You have to entice them, energize and excite them; providing them with great challenges and opportunities. The younger generations are not satisfied in a cubicle with a particular task. They want to know about owner relationships and financials on projects. The young talent is there; it is just different and that means they have to be molded, managed and challenged differently than the generations prior to them,” explains Lee.

Open-mindedness, respect and self awareness are the points that bring the generations to a happy medium. Being aware of what you stand to learn as well as what you need to teach is all part of mastering that intangible side of leadership and development. “Self awareness is the key to bridging the leadership gap. Once you understand how humans operate and use their personalities, you can better manage them and manage yourself. The process of learning to be aware of yourself and then of other people is a key to success in any industry,” states Grinnell.

The generations have come full circle and the sense of entitlement, educational opportunities, energy and ideas that characterize the younger generations all stem from the lifestyle that was created for them. The best way to take the

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training wheels off is to provide hands-on opportunities so that they can gain the experiences necessary to lead one day.

“You have to give them the opportunity to make mistakes and let them shine. There is a great opportunity if you allow new professionals to do things, make mistakes

and learn. Those mistakes will teach them to make better decisions,” states Beliveau.

In the mean time, young professionals need to recognize that today’s leaders are at the helm because their methods work. While being open to new ideas is important, there is no reason to change simply for the sake of

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change. “The way it has always been done” *can* be a path to success. “Our industry sometimes tries to reinvent the wheel and they do not need to because it has already been done. Teaching and knowing when to re-teach and recognizing that it is a continuous cycle is key,” states Skinner.

Finding the happy place in the middle of this great divide means putting as much effort into the people side of the business as is put into the operations side. People and building are fundamentals that this industry can latch onto.

### Conclusion

“Leaders need to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the individuals, allowing one to focus on what they are good at, resulting in an energetic, passionate, and self motivated worker,” contemplates Greg Terry, vice president of KADCON Corp.

Hard work, a positive attitude, strong relationships and remembering that you are in the service business are the keys to success in this industry. The industry is on a course of growth and change and accepting that course while not losing sight of the nuts and bolts is what both today’s and tomorrow’s leaders need to come to terms with. The generations working together have a lot to learn from one another and bridging the gap and securing the industry’s successful future begins with accepting the diversity that is the commercial construction workforce today.