

AIMING FOR Success IN SURVEYING MANAGEMENT

—by Richard A. Smith, P. E.



Richard A. Smith, P. E., is president and owner of R.A. Smith & Associates, Inc. He purchased the struggling civil engineering firm where he had been an employee in 1978, just five years out of college. Rick's vision and philosophy grew R.A. Smith from a mere 12 employees in 1978 to the third largest civil engineering and surveying firm in Wisconsin with 250 employees and offices in Brookfield, Oshkosh, Appleton, Green Bay, and Madison, Wisconsin, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Smith holds a master's of science degree in civil engineering and a bachelor's of science degree in civil engineering from Marquette University. He is a registered professional engineer in the state of Wisconsin.

Since my first job as a professional, starting back in the late seventies, the field of surveying, as expected, has undergone a great deal of change. Looking forward to the future, we can expect change to happen at an accelerated pace and in more dramatic ways, as a result, primarily, of advances in technology and its impact on “how field and office surveying is done.” But the characteristics of a successful surveying manager will not change.

Of course, success does not just happen, and it's a fact that no two people achieve success in the same way. One person's definition of success is not the same as another's. Hence, the first step in career success is to define what success means to you. The difference between one individual achieving success in surveying and another is basically how hard each individual has planned and worked for his or her success.

Work and planning both are essential. Even though we all need a bit of luck—good fortune to be in the right place at the right time—, long-term success results from a purposeful, concentrated effort to succeed and a commitment to sound management principles, regardless of how much change may impact our work.

In addition, personal management style matters. Some managers, for example, are better listeners than others, learning in the process what makes others successful. I am very hopeful, therefore, that as a reader of this column you will listen carefully and find ways to include elements of my experience into your management style. I want to share with you my Personal Success Tactics (PSTs) toward greater success in surveying management.

Directing the course of R. A. Smith and Associates, Inc. over the past quarter of a century, I have discovered that there is one general rule that works for everybody—**the more you do to help others, the more you do to help yourself.** Live up to this rule and you will benefit greatly. Your long-term success can be directly related to the degree you go out of your way to support the success of others in your firm.

With this general rule in mind, let's get more specific and concentrate in this column on a success tactic that will increase your management effectiveness and accomplishments—

PST #1: Pursue better results through consensus thinking

You will be more successful if you can shorten the time it normally takes to reach a point in your career where you are more concerned about best results than about “turf issues” and “getting credit.” Whether related to improving operations, finances, customer service, employee relations or other business factors, in most cases, consensus thinking will win the day. That means not only encouraging and obtaining input from others but, over time, being sure that everyone is fully aware that you manage through a process of consensus thinking. Develop a core of individuals on whose thinking and suggestions you can rely.

When those you work with know this is part of your management style, then input will be given freely. Through your actions and your communications, you can be certain your associates know that you value their input—regardless of whose input you may use in any given situation. Developing a cadre of individuals on whose input you can rely will serve as a “reward” for those who become part of that group of advisers. This is not only good for the company but also keeps people involved at the highest level of management.

In its simplest form, consensus building means embracing that it is better to be successful than to be right. To get to that point,

you need to consistently encourage others to think about an opportunity or a problem and suggest creative approaches, and then you need to adopt the ideas of others as if they were your own. This kind of an approach follows the doctrine of manag-



ing with a sense of partnership rather than ownership.

Once you have thought through this management technique and made a commitment to it, the next step is to identify a consensus-building opportunity. When identified—let's say the opportunity relates to a customer service issue—state in a written form what you see as the opportunity or problem and make your thoughts available to members of your team for discussion and input. In this way, you not only communicate to each team member which opportunity or problem you want to address, but each member on the team gets the same message at the same time.

You can help guide the members of your team by providing adequate background regarding the situation you wish to address, focusing on information that will focus their response. The information thus provided will help support employee input and recommendations.

You also can encourage input by suggesting that team members

include in their discussion past experience that supports their conclusions. Again, this will help keep the process focused. In addition, it will add credibility to the input and build greater understanding.

Throughout the process, keep in mind the importance of accepting feedback and suggestions without expressing judgment. As the discussion develops, and as you receive feedback, maintain and communicate with an open mind. Otherwise, you will squash much

of the input and sabotage future opportunities for an exchange of ideas.

Finally, give the process sufficient time. Don't start asking for feedback and a consensus solution to a problem or opportunity if you do not have time to allow the process to work. This too will stifle future consensus opportunities.

The consensus thinking process, more often than not, will result in a win-win situation for everyone. The group gets to be involved in the company's progress forward, people become educated in the process and, professionally, they learn how to interact effectively so that the best possible decision is reached and supported.

All of us in the field of surveying are facing challenges that have the potential to dramatically impact our company's success. Developing the necessary personal success tactics—such as pursuing consensus thinking—could make a major difference in turning challenges into growth opportunities. ■