



# More Lessons From a Trade Association National Convention

Insights

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Not every commentator links character, love of family, and a commitment to one's family, nation and industry to business success, but I'm convinced that the connection exists as much now as in the supposedly less complicated "Old Days." Certainly our values and view of the world has changed much in my 55 years, but have certain core values and principles changed? I think not.

I am involved with a number of Trade Associations, but probably spend the most time with my friends in the Associated General Contractors. This is not intended to downplay my appreciation for the Associated Builders and Contractors, the American Foundry Association or my long ties to AWRF, the Associated Wire Rope Fabricators. One of the rewards of being a traditional labor lawyer and OSHA practitioner is that one spends most of their time in the field and learns one's clients' business. I enjoy businesses which build or manufacture products partly because I grew up in my parent's businesses and learned to drive a truck and to hand splice wire rope.

So when I speak at or participate in trade association meetings, I learn from the members and use that knowledge to counsel other clients, as well as to write what are hopefully entertaining posts.

## Values

Good character is not defined by religious faith, political affiliation, race, gender identification, age or any other characteristic. However, my 30+ years of cleaning up corporate issues has convinced me that good character and judgment contributes to business success ... at least in the long run.

I was reminded again of this fact tonight as I attended the AGC National dinner at which new officers were introduced. It's a big deal. This industry is one of the prime determinants of whether the US economy succeeds, so don't underestimate the importance or influence of the leaders of this organization (or of the ABC). Two former National Presidents escorted the new officer to the podium, literally with arms locked. One father and former President accompanied his son, who quipped that "now dad has escorted both my sisters and me down the aisle." A hallmark of the construction industry is that even companies with over a billion in revenues are often "family businesses." The speeches were pretty funny, but I'll make a few serious observations ...

- None of the new or outgoing officers had been married less than 35 years and they talked emotionally about their wives and children and grandchildren. These comments were clearly not pro forma. The speakers knew that without their spouses, some of whom were active business partners, they would not have succeeded. Likewise, while these officers had made a great deal of

money, one got the impression that, unlike some business and finance leaders, their kids and grandchildren were their proudest achievements. Say what you will, fidelity and a true partnership with one's spouse gives you an advantage weathering storms and in recognizing the personal and ethical effects of your decisions.

- The officers seemed to recognize that they were stewards, and must apply the same basic decency to their workers. As a labor lawyer, I hope that they do so, and if they do, they'll rarely need our services.
- I've noticed that many construction leaders recognize they're duty (and self-interest) to assist their industry develop; even their competitors. This is good business. Those craft workers or supervisors you trained, but left your company, may one day work again for you.

Decent people may lead businesses and nonetheless make bad decisions or be unaware of the challenges faced by their workers.

- My challenge to such leaders is to be as "purposeful" in treating employees well and ensuring a culture that values safety as you approach other business goals.
- I rarely encounter business leaders who don't care about these issues, but trust me, unless you, the leader, are actively involved, safety, employee engagement, communication and a host of other needs will eventually fail. No matter how competent your HR and Safety professionals, the CEO or President determines the company's goals and culture.
- I'm not being a preacher. The rewards for this focus are less legal fees and distractions.

## **Mentorship**

I was struck by how new AGC officers praised the mentorship they received from older officers, even those that were potentially competitors. It's hard enough to obtain mentorship in a business; I was impressed to see conscious mentorship in a trade association.

## **Involving More Women and Minorities in the Industry**

It's just good business to involve and empower women and minorities in the construction industry. The industry is wrestling with a serious shortage of craft workers, laborers, and even managers and professionals. Construction jobs may not seem "cool" in today's tech-driven culture. Construction NEEDS more women and minorities in all areas of the industry.

Some of the absence may be due to residual attitudes that "this is a man's business" or that construction is an "old white guy's club." The industry must purposely continue to address those barriers, but the greater problem is that today's youth eschew even high paying construction craft and professional jobs. Not just the construction industry, but our educational and political establishments need what they refer to as a "paradigm shift."

## **Technology is changing construction**

The movement towards using BIM and developing Lean construction processes, (which also applies

to safety, makes a huge difference. Some of the most useful sessions at this week's convention dealt with a host of Apps and programs affecting almost every aspect of the construction process. These technology advances are not limited only to big companies.

### ***Related People***

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