

People! People! People!



By Kevin L. Lewis, PE

You've heard it, you've said it, and you know it's true. The only question is, when are you going to do something about it?

The "it" I'm referring to here is the age-old saying: "...this is a people profession."

Yes, we are technically diverse, technically dependent, and technically skilled, but without our workforce, we are nothing. More importantly, without a happy and productive workforce, we cannot be successful. At COAA's Fall Conference in Nashville, we learned about "soft skills" and "emotional intelligence," and we saw just how important these attributes are to our members and industry partners. We also began a dialog about workforce development and the next generation of workers joining our industry.

The shortage of skilled workers may very well be the most significant issue we face in our industry today. If your COAA experience is anything like mine, you know COAA to be a true industry leader. Our roles reach beyond hard skills like project delivery methods or design and construction technology and techniques: We are all engaged with soft skills and workforce-development issues on a daily basis—and our membership is perfectly positioned throughout the industry to make a difference.

The first item on our list are "soft skills." Are you a real "softy"? You'd better be!

Early in my career—okay, not my career, but my summer job(s) in high school—I had what I'm sure is a similar experience to most of my contemporaries. I had "soupy"

mortar and miss-cut rafters thrown at me by an impatient, militant foreman. Who knew that just a little bit more water would ruin the batch, or that if you started cutting on one side of the line and finished on the other, the rafter was scrap? The point is, on the first day of the job, I was expected to perform at a particular level, yet the expectation had not been set via training or any sort of demonstration. That was then, right? Unfortunately, all too often this is still the case.

I'm not just talking about the six-foot, six-inch meanies on the job site. I'm talking about supervision and leadership at all levels. Now don't miss-understand my reference to those "beasts" who yelled, screamed, cursed, and threw things at you! Some of those guys do have soft skills. They know how to get more out of their staff, and they know how to manage the emotional intelligence of their folks on the job and in the office. In fact, the guy that I still refer to as "My Mentor" was a screamer. He was also quite a nice guy—he just didn't want anyone to know it! He had high expectations, BUT he always clearly set those expectation and never expected me to perform a task at a particular level without having first trained me, taught me, or explained to me the task and the anticipated outcome.

More than 30 years later, I still use the technical (hard) skills he taught me, and once in a while, I'll even employ one or two of the soft skill techniques he "shared" with me. While my own management style is quite different, I learned and understood the importance of leadership that commands respect and loyalty.

As supervisors, managers, principles, and CEOs, we need to develop our people skills if we are going to realize the full potential of our organizations. G. Brent Darnell offered some tips as well as a copy of his book *The People-Profit Connection* at the Nashville conference, where he brought this subject to the front line not only for me, but lots of others as well. You'd do well to keep up-to-date with COAA on this subject, as we continue to explore our skills and potential for the future.

Our second item is "workforce development," and frankly, it's time we got our collective heads out of the sand about this one.

Workforce development is a problem—a real problem—and it's not going away. We need to address it on two fronts: 1) continuing the education and training of our existing workforce to sustain their skills and 2) instilling enthusiasm for their career and our organizations. Next, we need to attract the best and brightest to our industry. I don't just mean those who possess a higher education sheepskin, admirable as that is. I'm talking about the skilled trades as well—and indeed, the latter is likely the most critical.

If you attended the Nashville conference, you heard Mike Kenig, of Holder Construction, and Spencer Moore, of M.D.

Anderson, talk about this very crisis. Here's one of the things they shared at the event:

"While the construction workforce is aging and less productive due to lack of training, the demand on our industry increases and becomes more technical every year. We must do more to recruit, train, and retain craft workers to meet the demands of our industry."

They also discussed the fact that if you polled a group of parents of middle or high schoolers, you would find very few, if any, who wanted—or would even allow—their children to consider pursuing the construction trades as a profession. We have to show them, along with the rest of this great nation, that the construction industry is solid and can provide both men and women with respected and rewarding careers.

So you can probably guess what I'm going to say next... wait for it... you are invited to join us in this important effort! Here is your call to action: Mike Kenig, Spencer Moore, Howie Ferguson of the University of Florida, and yours truly have committed to take on this challenge for COAA. Please join us so we can all continue to promote and encourage folks to join and/or stay in our industry.

After all, your organization's success depends upon it.



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