10 Minutes to Better Business

CASE STUDY

JAMES YATES | NASHVILLE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Rob Barrick is CEO of Smith Seckman Reid, an engineering firm in Nashville.

Firm says being first is key to adding new service

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It often pays to get in on something early.

Today engineering firms are all about building commissioning — a rapidly growing process that ensures electrical, mechanical and heating/air conditioning systems are working the way they should.

But 12 years ago, when Nashville-based Smith Seckman Reid first started offering the service, the company had to explain to everybody what it was.

"Being early paid off," said Rob Barrick, president and CEO. "We were able to establish ourselves in the market, when there were not many people doing it."

Commissioning buildings makes up about 15 percent of Smith Seckman Reid's business.

"It has been a very good business that has grown rapidly for us," Barrick said.

Building owners increasingly want to save money by improving energy efficiency. According to studies, commissioning a building saves 8 to 20 percent on utility bills over the life of an average building.

Commissioning also is mandatory to achieve LEED certification from the U.S. Green Building Council.

Increased demand for the service has helped the firm grow. With more than 500 employees the company now has offices in 15 cities across the country. It recently opened offices in Chicago, Washington, D.C., and San Antonio.

Offering a variety of services helped the firm weather the impact of the recession, which was particularly tough on the commercial real estate industry.

Barrick is "cautiously optimistic" about the company's short-term future.

The company posted revenue of $67 million last year, he said. This year he expects revenue to increase by 10 percent to $74 million.

With the economy recovering, "people are talking more optimistically about making investments," he said. "The health care construction market will begin to grow, if not this year than certainly next year."

Barrick also expects to see increased demand for improving the country's aging infrastructure. The big unknown is how it gets paid for.

"We as a nation are spending more money than we have," Barrick said. "Sooner or later that merry-go-round has got to stop."

— Nevin Batiwalla

TOOLBOX

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NICE GUYS DON'T FINISH LAST

INTEGRITY FIRST

NANCY REECE

A recent article in Harvard Business Review magazine suggested that "nice" leaders don't make it to the CEO's office.

The reality is that 15 years of research, starting with Daniel Goleman and ending with Cornell University and the Center for Creative Leadership, conclude the opposite. Executives who lack interpersonal skills produce results over a short time frame. Leaders who have character, integrity, hold others accountable, make tough decisions and are self-aware are strongly correlated to better strategic and financial performance long term.

• Promote and hire leaders who score high on self-awareness.

• Look for measureable results that can be duplicated.

• Delve into how the potential candidate leads and look for strong interpersonal skills.

• Watch for signs of arrogance, impatience and lack of tact.

It's time to shed the old paradigm of "results at all costs" leaders, and instead hire and promote leaders who demand performance while building trust. Nice leaders make the best CEOs.

Nancy Reece is a senior consultant with The Human Capital Group.

LESSONS LEARNED

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THE TRUST FACTOR

In the results of the 2012 Edelman Trust Barometer, which examines trust in government, business and the media, the message was clear: You must earn the trust of your employees, customers and communities in which you operate because, on average, we distrust your intentions.

To distinguish your business in the trust arena, Edelman suggests four practices:

• **Shape public discussion.** A business can't be seen as acting solely in self-interest. It must be a source of information.

• **Increase transparency.** By speaking to employees first, encouraging two-way conversations and reporting regularly to the workforce on important operational and societal initiatives, employees are empowered to share company messaging.

• **Employ principles-based leadership**, not rules-based strategy. Trust is enhanced when a business is perceived as focusing on the balance between what is beneficial to shareholders and in the best interest of society.

• **Invest in societal attributes.** Greater emphasis on engagement and societal factors that demonstrate respect for employees, customers and the public-at-large will be critical to building credibility.

Trust is a precious commodity that cannot be taken for granted. While it may be difficult to assign a monetary value to a company's trustworthiness, it clearly plays a pivotal role in the success or failure of a business.

— Ruth Kinzey, corporate reputation strategist, www.kinzeycompany.com

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Top 10

MISTAKES WHEN LEAVING A JOB

1. Slighting your boss. Make sure your supervisor is the first one you notify about leaving. Do this in person and in private. Do not be overly happy about leaving, but communicate how much you enjoyed working there.

2. Burning bridges. Do not leave on a sour note or be bitter about things such as being passed over for promotion or inadequately compensated.

3. Not giving sufficient notice. Two weeks' notice is customary for staff positions. Managers may need to give more notice.

4. Not offering to train your replacement. If your replacement has been selected, offer to train him or her. If no successor has been chosen, volunteer to help choose a replacement.

5. Failure to thank employer. Thank your employer for the great career opportunity.

6. Not participating in an exit interview. Treat the exit interview as seriously as a hiring one. Focus on the benefits of your new position, not the shortcomings of the job you are leaving.

7. Not making a clean break. Leave professionally and do not take proprietary information with you.

8. Leaving unfinished work. Complete all work that can reasonably be expected within your time remaining. Do not slack off.

9. Unwilling to answer questions. Volunteer to answer questions related to the job for a short period after departing.

10. Not staying in touch with your co-workers after you leave. Keep in contact to maintain your career network.

– OI Partners-Russell Montgomery & Associates, Brentwood