

It's Time to Tell the TRUTH

by MARK BRESLIN

THROUGHOUT MY ENTIRE career I have worked for the advancement of union construction. To do so has required a great degree of personal optimism in the face of cynicism, inertia, conflict and declining numbers. Now, even as an eternal optimist, I am worried about the future of the union business model and labor and management's ability to safely navigate toward a better future. But I have the solution, at once simple and painful:

Tell the truth. Be brave. Implement change.

The truth is that the future for union construction is going to be very rough. Across the United States and Canada, my labor and management clients are facing the same critical challenges: declining market share, escalating benefit costs, increasing non-union competition and a sputtering economy. These factors have led to difficult bargaining, loss of trust, jurisdictional strife and general fear and anxiety about an uncertain future. At times like this, fear causes some leaders to "ball up" instead of reaching forward boldly. We must avoid this reaction at all costs.

The challenges of the economic environment we are in are unprecedented, but meeting them head-on is crucial. Contractors must remain competitive and unions must fulfill their role as employee advocates, but both must be done in a way that balances economics and market share. This requires change, and in order to change, you have to get everyone on board.

The most important thing that needs to be done is for both labor and management

to tell the truth to every union worker in the United States and Canada. Ready? Here it is:

- The good old days are gone.
- There is no entitlement available – not now, not ever again.
- You are responsible for your own future.
- There is a limit to what construction owners will pay.
- When you exceed that limit and don't provide value, they go to the competition.
- Your pension, health and welfare benefits and career are directly tied to market share.
- If market share declines, then every aspect of the industry has to be scrutinized and, in some instances, dramatically overhauled, or else we all go under.
- This is not the contractor's fault or your business manager's fault.
- Complaining won't fix anything.
- Change is not only necessary; it is the only answer.

Labor and management need to educate our workers like never before. Union members need to fully understand the real truth about the challenges ahead and act in support of whatever change is needed. No more telling them what they want to hear. No more blaming the other guy. No more treating them like mushrooms (keep them in the dark and feed them bull--t).

To empower union workers to meet these new competitive challenges, they need to be "all in." To accept necessary changes as suggested by their leadership, they need to understand why. In order for

them to step up professionally and boost productivity so that contractors can try to fill the labor cost gap, they need to understand those costs, as well as the nature of the competition. Our ultimate goal is for union members to become engaged and energized as owners of the situation rather than mere spectators.

The polarization of labor and management sank the union airline, steel and auto industries, to name just a few. The union construction industry has moved toward change faster than those industries...but is time running out? The broader view must be solution-based, not conflict-based. Combining truth-telling with sound change strategies is the way of the future.

It's hard to keep one's chin up when it keeps getting punched, but those of us who remain optimistic and committed to education and change will keep our collective future from sliding toward the edge of darkness. This is today's leadership challenge and test. And that's the damn truth. ■



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