

Hello everybody. Dennis Engelbrecht, Digging Deeper Family Business Institute where we help contractors succeed.

So, at the close of my career, I've tried to come up with the 10 most important aspects of construction success. And we've talked about of the four-legged stool of construction, and we talked about bad job avoidance. Let's move to the positive side this week and let's talk about leadership excellence. There's absolutely no doubt as I look back at the most successful companies in that they've had some of the best leaders and some of the best leadership. Very often, not an individual leader, but a group of leaders, a team of leaders right down through the company. And leadership excellence is so important to construction company success. And when you started in construction, you probably started with a lot of skills, but maybe not have been a great leader. And that's one of the first lessons of developing leadership excellence, is that excellence in leadership demands that you change, and you evolve. The demands of leadership change. As your company grows, all of a sudden you have layers, you're a little bit removed from the project, now you're leading leaders or you're managing managers instead of managing work. That takes a different set of skills.

Your company probably progresses some and even the world changes. You think about employees now versus 30 or 40 years ago. It takes a whole different set of, let's say, challenges, but also skills to motivate folks today versus the way they were motivated 20, 30 years ago. So, the demands of leadership change and leaders must evolve. Leaders must constantly be learning and trying to hone their trade. It doesn't just come naturally, and what got you here won't get you there.

So, what are the core skills of leadership at excellence? I think in looking back at that, the ones that came to mind most were number one, effective listening. Great leaders, when somebody's talking to them, they give them their full attention, so they actually hear what is being said. Great listening requires you to put aside your filters, and that affects all of us. Of course, we each have a history of things that happened before, and somebody starts talking and all of a sudden that history is yapping in our ears. "Yeah, I've heard this before, I've seen this before and this is what happens." You put up your guard and instead of actually listening, we're starting to form opinions or prepare for pushing back or whatever we're doing. But effective listening requires you to put aside your filters and actually, again, hear what's being said.

And then the last part of effective listening is seeking to understand before you seek to be understood. By seeking to understand now you're fully invested in what the person's trying to tell you and what they're trying to get to. Again, if you let your filters or your reaction to that come back first and say, "Oh, no, no, you don't understand, this is how it is. This is how it is." You may never get the full picture or give the person who's speaking a fair chance to present their full picture. So that's effective listening.

The second skill I want to talk about is empathy. And empathy is perhaps more a trait than a skill. But I can look at myself and I don't think if I looked at myself in my 20s as a very empathetic person, but now people see me that way so I must have transitioned it in some way along there. But I think you can develop empathy and refine that skill. And part of that is to make sure that you understand feelings and not just facts. All right? To be empathetic, somebody's telling you something and they're most often not telling you everything. So, asking questions, trying to dig deeper into their feelings that are behind that. Sometimes you can't solve a problem without knowing what their core feelings are. That could be an owner that's got a problem they're coming to, and to understand the fears behind that owner, why they're upset. Maybe it's because they had a project before when this happened and it's important for you to understand that. So again, it's important to understand the feelings, not just the facts.

Then it's also important of course, to actually care about others and to care about the effect of your actions and your decisions. To have empathy for your organization that's very important because as a leader, you're making decisions and those decisions are affecting people. So, try to apply your empathy and try to envision what the effects of the various actions and decisions are going to have on the other people in your organization or outside your organization.

The third core skill, I mentioned listening, but communication, the talking side of listening, let's just say. And for leaders, confidence is very important in your communication. If you're wishy washy, don't exude confidence when you're creating a direction or making a statement, the people you're talking to will be unsure and uncertain and that won't be good. So, it's very important in your communication as a leader that you do reflect some confidence. Also, important that you're clear. Clarity, what you want people to do and the why of what they're going to do to help them fully understand that clarity.

And then the third thing I want to mention about communication is inviting feedback. So, okay, now we've spoken, do you understand what I want you to do? Do you have any questions about that? And when I say inviting feedback, this is really critical because sometimes, I mentioned confidence, if you speak over confidently, people may be scared to question or give you any feedback. So, you got to make sure that you have some vulnerability, that you're open to feedback and that you invite feedback so that you'll get the bad news that's going on in the organization. Or if you have a bad plan and they know it won't work, but they just head off like, "Well, that's what he wants us to do, so let's go ahead and screw it up." That's not good either, right? You want to hear the feedback to make sure that if you're off base, you can get on base.

The next core skill, I'd say, for effective leadership or leadership excellence is to be able to apply logic and perspective in making a decision. All right? You're going to make a lot of them and you're going to make some wrong ones, but you're going to make more right ones than wrong ones if you can apply good logic. Sometimes it's a pluses and minuses chart or something like that, but also perspective and that goes back to the empathy thing, putting perspective into your decision of how this is going to affect others or what the results might be. So, applying logic and perspective to help you be a better decision maker.

Next, being able to control your attitude and your emotions is critical to leadership excellence. And if you think about that, your attitude affects everybody around you. So how you control your own attitude is going to be important as to the culture of your company. And that's whether you need to be positive. In some cases, you might need to be more serious, or you might need to take something more lightly, have some humor even. Part of leadership in a sense is being an actor on a stage, there's a certain attitude that's appropriate for each situation. And that doesn't mean necessarily not being yourself, but you have to have the flexibility. If your organization needs a kick in the pants, sometimes you have to be more serious and more urgent. If your organization needs a little lift, sometimes they need to see you being more positive and talking more about a positive future or things like that. And sometimes things are too serious, and you just need the humor or whatever, or they need to see you fail or do something stupid or something like that to let everybody know that, yeah, it doesn't have to all be that serious. So, controlling your attitude and emotions rather than letting them dictate the effect on the culture.

And then finally, aside from evolving and having those core skills, I think the great leaders have an appropriate moral code and compass. And that's very important because you probably have a core set of values in your company, and you probably have a mission and a vision. But for leaders to be successful, those things have to be authentic. And as leaders, you need to embody that mission and you need to embody those core values. You need to demonstrate them and inspire them among your people. And I think great leaders do that. They inspire excellence and they inspire people to stay within the core values. And the other aspect that's so important about that is when they have that example, that shining light that's demonstrating the right way, that helps everybody else make decisions correctly as well, to do the things that are in line with the core values, act in line with the core values, make decisions that the way you would make them because you've already demonstrated that and shown that in your own character.

So, for leadership excellence, be learning, be evolving, develop those core skills that are so important, and make sure you have an appropriate moral code and compass, and that you live that every day in your work and demonstrate that to your team members. So, looking forward to number four next week. Thanks for tuning in. Dennis Engelbrecht, Digging Deeper.