

By Joe Kiedinger

REALITIES AND SOLUTIONS **LEADING MODERN WORK**

There has rarely been a more opportune time in the contracting world for great leaders to step up and take the reins. With topics like employee engagement, talent retention, and proper work-life balance coming at the forefront of discussion in recent years, it's clear that employees and job seekers are starting to expect more of their employers, and that's a good thing. Leaders have an opportunity to rise to the challenge, meet

those demands, and make a measurable difference for their people and for their organization.

Gone are the days of people sticking with their jobs even when they are dissatisfied. Employees have made it loud and clear that the old status quo is no longer acceptable with recent trends like the Great Resignation and quiet quitting. Shock crises like COVID-19 and persistent problems like inflation have intro-

duced a lot of stressors and extra frustration into people's lives, on top of their day-to-day responsibilities and struggles. Flexibility, fulfillment, and opportunities to advance at work quickly went from niceties to necessities for many people.

These realities are especially true in the construction industry, where labor shortages and turnovers are reported as a nearly universal



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problem. According to one construction industry survey, 91% of contractors have reported trouble in trying to fill positions. Putting that into perspective is something to behold – for every contractor that isn't struggling to fill a position, there are over nine contractors that are.

Across all industries, employers have been called upon to adapt, construction contractors included. The labor market is like any other mar-

ket – those that adapt to its conditions thrive, and those that don't struggle. The unfortunate reality is – some organizations are much better equipped to adapt than others. Those that have more resources at their disposal and bigger networks have largely been able to weather the storm and figure things out.

But there is one element that makes all organizations equal, especially in this regard – people. Organizations are ultimately made up of people, from the smallest local contractors to the most profitable international corporations in the world. Although the playing field might be skewed in many ways, people are the inescapable equalizing factor.

Solving problems starts with a person – a leader, coming forward and making a decision to stick to a certain path, no matter how difficult it may be. Changes and adaptations are never easy – it takes a committed and well-informed leader to go through with it. Those who are not up to the task will fall behind, and their organizations will fall behind as a result. Here's the thing – it's entirely possible for a small construction contractor to provide a superior standard of living for their employees and enjoy healthier numbers across the board compared to a large

company in a cozy industry, and it all starts with one good leader.

Although specific applications may vary, the core principles of what modern employees and job seekers are looking for remain mostly the same across all industries. As a leader in construction, there are plenty of things that you can do to start making a difference for your workforce. Here are three essential ways to get started:

❶ Build a culture of dignity and respect

Here's one thing that will be true of all people, all the time. People want to be treated with dignity. They want to be honored and respected, not just because of what they do, but because of who they are. People want to be in environments that fulfill them and build them up and avoid being in environments that make them feel bad about themselves.

As a leader, here are some things that you can do to start building a culture of dignity and respect in your workforce:

- Set clear boundaries for yourself and for your team on what is and isn't an acceptable interaction.
- Build trust with your team by showing a healthy level of vulnerability.
- Set an expectation that team members treat each other the way that they want to be treated.
- Ensure that conflict is resolved calmly and productively so that it doesn't devolve.
- Teach the importance of emotional intelligence and its practical applications in the jobsite.
- Recognize and reward employees – don't let good deeds go unnoticed or unappreciated.

Your goal should be to have employees look forward to coming to the jobsite, rather than dreading it. At the end of the day, work is work, and things have to be done whether we like to do it or not. But, when people have a full day of fulfilling interactions to look forward to, they'll have a positive attitude even when the work is tough. That kind of environment is hard to beat.

❷ Provide mentorship, development, and growth opportunities

Job seekers and employees naturally gravitate towards environments where they know that they can grow their skillset and contribute more. Contract workers, like any others, have bills to pay, families to feed, and love to take on opportunities to contribute more to a greater good and make their mark on the world.

Contractors can provide apprenticeships for incoming employees, training and education for current employees, and future opportunities for outstanding employees to enjoy lower turnover

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rates across the board. Allowing employees to hone and expand their skillset opens up a lot of doors for both the employee and their employer.

Through an apprenticeship program, incoming employees have a clear-cut path to understanding everything about their craft before they start applying it full-time. The employer, in turn, reaps all the benefits of having their positions filled with skilled employees that are more capable of sticking to standards, more likely to overperform, and less likely to underperform.

Training and education for current employees can provide opportunities for them to expand their skillsets, grow their careers, and learn valuable hard skills AND soft skills. When employees learn, they are empowered to solve their own problems and be better prepared for the next step in their career. For example, skills training at various levels can make all the difference for an ambitious up-and-comer looking to grow their career and make their mark. Leadership training can help an incoming, inexperienced, or struggling leader connect with their team, turn over better performance, and maintain their position. Communication training can help people figure out how to resolve conflicts in a healthy and productive way, reducing their frustrations at work.

More qualified workers that are invited to take the initiative and grow will find ways to contrib-

ute to the company's success in ways that you might not expect. You, as a leader, can be more comfortable providing internal opportunities for career growth when you know that your people are either qualified for the position or can be trained up to it. And when employees know that opportunities for growth are ripe in a company, they will stick around to pursue them.

❻ Be flexible – provide a healthy work-life balance

As a leader, would you want all of your time to be consumed by worrying about work? Do you want to be stuck at the jobsite working required overtime? Do you want to be responding to work calls and emails when you're trying to spend time with your family? Do you want to be so exhausted after work that you can't do anything after work? How about being randomly called into work off your schedule and without warning?

The likelihood is that your answer to all of those questions is a no. If it isn't a no – it should be! A healthy work-life balance is incredibly important to living a low-stress and fulfilling life. When you're stressed and occupied with your work all the time, it takes a toll on your mind and body. It leads to burnout, leaving you more susceptible to physical issues ranging from fatigue to respiratory issues, and mental issues ranging from irritability to depression.


Construction workers face a multitude of unfortunate realities that are unlike those seen in any other industry, with suicide rates over twice that of other professions and gradually growing each year. A lot of it has to do with excessive stress and pressure over the course of long hours. In this industry, providing a healthy work-

life balance isn't just keeping an employee at your company or improving a number, it's about saving lives.

As a leader, here are some steps that you can take to set the standard for work-life balance in your company:

- Lead by example. Make your work-life balance a priority and demonstrate that it's okay for others to do so as well.
- Set realistic expectations. Don't overburden employees.
- Provide ample paid time off for vacations and family time.
- Be flexible and understanding if an employee can't come into work for a legitimate reason like an emergency, appointment, or sickness.
- Educate employees on the importance of mental health, provide mental health benefits and resources for those in need.
- Practice transparency and provide predictability.
- Maintain adherence to accountability standards and expectations so that work is done when it's supposed to be, not after.

Prioritizing a healthy work-life balance will show your employees that you care for them not just as assets, but as people. They will appreciate the flexibility, space, and boundaries that you set and know that you have their best interests in mind. Meanwhile, your company will enjoy healthier performance as productivity increases as a result of your efforts.

It's time for leaders to rise to the occasion and make a difference for their people. The modern workforce has modern expectations, and by rising to meet them, leaders can position their company for long term success. With flexibility, growth opportunities, and an outstanding culture, your organization will be hard to beat in the labor market. 



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significant part of the challenge outlined above by providing a platform to create and maintain a culture of dignity in an organization.

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