

# Business development in an open bid environment: In all the rough and tumble, it's still about people

Business Development Best Practices Series

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When you're offering specialized expertise in a closed-shop environment where low bid is king, labor sources are equal, and material pricing is tight, how can you differentiate yourself? What makes you stand out from your competition?

I'm often asked how I drive business development initiatives while operating in an open bid marketplace, since it seems like a discordant concept. The questions make sense because, on its surface, this environment seems to mean that you aren't really selling anything, and that as long as you're on the bid list you have just as much of an opportunity as anyone else.

I believe that we, as contractors (regardless of specialty), are much more in control of our destiny than that, even in an open bid environment. In an increasingly impersonal process, fittingly the answer to what makes a difference is, "people."

Really caring about your work and your business relationships at a personal level and showing genuine respect for projects and for those you do business with is the best way to stand apart from the competition. And it's a process that must be organic within your organization.

## Wanting to do well and make a difference

In my current role in business development for a glazing contractor, I support and help guide a culture where we look at ourselves as not just a great contractor designing and installing glass assemblies. We also know how much we can help developers, GCs, owners, and architects by making their lives easier and their buildings better. And when it comes to making buildings better, that everyday goal of ours is tied to a very big, serious need in the world to address climate change, something we can help address. There's something empowering in that kind of realization that allows us to have a sense of a purpose – of wanting to contribute to something that's bigger than ourselves.

## Seeing the opportunity to provide white-glove service in every moment

When we consider the work we've done over all the decades we've been in

business, like many contractors we feel a deep sense of pride at seeing the craftsmanship right there, still evident in those three very real dimensions of concrete, bricks, wood, and steel. And it's a great feeling.

But what also jumps out to us is how many buildings we've worked on and helped renovate while people were living in them or working in them. We bring a level of high-quality service to every job, which is why we're known for our white-glove service in occupied and highly demanding spaces. But we've also made it a point to make sure that level of excellence is built in to all our interactions and efforts, not just the ones related to projects labeled "white glove."

## The coveted win/win/win

In my younger days as a mid-level manager in the mechanical contracting field, I once attended a seminar on negotiation and communication. The instructor told the group that over the course of the next eight hours we would become experts at uncovering and solidifying the win/win/win proposition.

Let's just say it took longer than eight hours to learn how such mutually beneficial goals can be achieved, and I am finally at a place where I see not only the importance of the philosophy but also the positive results when I apply it to all of my interactions.

So consider the goals, in our world of commercial construction. For the developer and owner: adhere to spec and deliver the building that they have been promised. For the GC: find cost effective solutions that help budgets, meet timelines, and limit change orders. For the sub: execute on time and on budget while instilling confidence in all parties that we should be a first consideration on future projects.

Though all the aforementioned parties would likely argue that they are in the business of making money, we often come to the table with differing or at times

somewhat conflicting objectives. So the key to delivering a safe, on-time, on-budget job largely depends on rapport. Keeping that ultimate goal in focus requires mutual and synchronized attention to detail if anyone wishes to meet the end goal of profitability. This can only be achieved with open and honest communication and respect. Ultimately, it is imperative that we put aside our personal and limiting viewpoints and break down the silos that inevitably surface on projects.

I think Daniel Goleman, the author of Emotional Intelligence, summed it up best when he said,

*"Rapport demands joint attention – mutual focus. Our need to make an effort to have such human moments has never been greater, given the ocean of distractions we all navigate daily."*

At a recent networking event discussing common liability and legal issues faced by subcontractors, a guest speaker from a prominent firm said, "the GC/CM is not your friend, especially on a problem project." This statement gave me pause, as I am a firm believer that with synergistic goals and open communication many of these issues can be identified and dealt with in a friendly, or certainly at least civil, manner. Sometimes jobs can take a turn and things can happen in the real world, but holding true to a mission and to your synergistic goals can help alleviate many of these common traps.

## So the answer is, people

That's why I'll say it again. The answer is "people." From that initial handshake until your team signs the closeout docs, your level of professionalism and service is what will earn you the reputation of being the subcontractor with unparalleled execution. It's a very good position from which to continue to grow your business.

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