

## Why Employee Development is the Key to Everything

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The future of our industry is in a state of flux. From an increased demand for talent to more focus on cost competitiveness, disruptions are afoot. While analyzing your business model and tightening operating procedures are important, it is even more important to focus on one critical asset: your people.

The importance of prioritizing employee development cannot be overstated. It's the competitive advantage too often overlooked.

Construction firms build things. But they construct much more than buildings: They also develop people. And if you help people on their journey, it pays dividends to them and the company over time.

The true value of any company is its people. Everything meaningful you do within your organization happens through people. This is true in any industry—it's people who make the decisions that determine a company's success or failure.

A focus on building people sparks two significant outcomes — both of which are good for business:

1. **EMPLOYEES ARE HAPPIER AND ACHIEVE MORE OUT OF LIFE** - They are better positioned to fulfill their unique dreams, which might be financial, a specific role, or possibly a better work/life balance or mastering a specific skill. Whatever it is, working at an organization that invests in them has a ripple effect across their lives.



2. **EMPLOYEES MAKE A BIGGER IMPACT ON THE COMPANY, ACCELERATING ITS SUCCESS** - For many companies, success is defined as profit. But more broadly speaking, it's also about creativity, efficiency and effectiveness — all of which are a byproduct of building people and have a direct impact on the bottom line.

**Bonus:** As employee retention becomes a more pressing issue across all sectors, investing resources in the people who power your organization makes employees less likely to jump ship.

Employee satisfaction does not begin and end with compensation. Money is always an important factor, but if the pandemic has taught businesses anything, it's that fostering an environment that provides opportunity and creates a sense of

belonging, pride, and respect amongst employees is often far more important.

Ask yourself: Are you creating a desirable workplace? Is it the kind of workplace you would want to operate in? What are you getting right? What are you getting wrong? What is falling through the cracks? It's easy to talk a big game, but if the day-to-day reality doesn't align, employee output will suffer – or they'll just leave.

It's never one-size-fits-all, but here are some employee-first initiatives to enhance and amplify your employee development practices:

*Education and Training:* Solid education and training programs, either in-house or from outside resources, ensure employees have the best information and latest thinking for excelling at their jobs. Arming them with knowledge builds competence and confidence.

*Teaching Leadership and “Soft Skills”:* As employees climb the ranks, their need for technical skill sets diminish and the need to hire, lead, and develop the people they manage increases. Leadership workshops, as well as self-awareness and communication training, empowers employees to build stronger, more effective, trusting, and reliable relationships that help the organization thrive. For this group on the rise, it's now their turn to take the torch and begin building people.

*Long-Term Management Succession Plan:* There is no substitute for experience in companies plotting their success going forward, and employees groomed for long tenures play a large role in keeping an organization at the forefront of the industry. This initiative gives organizations a roadmap for grooming its future leaders early and often.

*Coaching and Mentoring:* Traditional mentoring programs don't have a great track record. A better approach is a combination of structured coaching and organic mentoring. Consider assigning a coach who provides feedback on areas for development, as well as strengths to exercise. This produces better results than traditional performance reviews. Organic mentoring, develops naturally between two people, one of whom is usually more senior or more experienced and provides career guidance over time. But those pairings are two-directional: the mentee can and should find ways of adding value for the mentor, even if it's through simple acts, like sharing articles of interest.

*Non-linear Career Path:* Diversity – of all varieties – is a key driver of organizational success. This includes seeking out experiences that provide a different perspective, as well as building new skills. Non-linear career paths allow employees to develop in-depth expertise beyond those which result from the most direct path on an organizational chart. The more exposure to other aspects of the business, the better. Experiential assignments that provide more focused, short-term learning opportunities are also critical. This may include leading an initiative or serving on a working group to tackle an issue beyond an individual's role. An employee who can operate from multiple perspectives can be more impactful, and that ability is critical for those seeking senior leadership positions.

*Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI):* This is a big buzz phrase these days and rightly so. But it's about a lot more than ticking boxes and meeting diversity quotas. The goal should be to create and maintain a workforce that best reflects the communities in which the company operates and to mine for the best current and under-developed talent in the marketplace – which makes employee development programs all the more crucial.

*Company Purpose:* All construction firms want to be known for building great buildings, but to what end? What is the company's goal, beyond building structures? How is it striving to make the lives of its employees, partners, clients, and community better? Staying mindful of a worthwhile purpose, what you stand for, is a great way to foster a sense of pride in the company and its work.

While it is the responsibility of the company and its senior leadership to lay this foundation, building people is not just the responsibility of the company. It is the responsibility of people at every level within the organization and requires participation by individuals who want to invest in themselves. Ask your employees to be equal partners in their own development by embracing these habits and mindsets:


**Read:** Read, read, and then read some more! (Or listen, if that's more your thing.) Actively thinking about things on a broad and deep scale is at the center of individual growth and development – not just in your personal life, but as a valuable employee. Acquiring knowledge and awareness breeds excellence, and it doesn't all happen from 9-to-5.

**Focus:** “Be present” is a phrase often ignored in the workplace.

Focus on making yourself better in what you’re doing right now, without worrying about how you will get promoted. Be fully present in your mindset and execution, and the next phase will organically come into focus in time.

**Have Patience:** Nothing great is built overnight – including you. Take the time to achieve the skills and competencies needed at your current level. If you don’t, those deficiencies will come back to bite you later in your career. Remember: this is a marathon, not a sprint. Give yourself the time and space you need to arrive at each project and role in the best way possible.

**Know What You Want:** Your career is about more than a title. Get clear on what you truly want your days to look like: Is it more technical? More of a management role? Success is driven by staying aligned with what works for you. Knowing what you want and staying true to it gives you the best shot of loving what you do every day.

Any company is only as good as the people that power it. That takes mindful, ongoing investment from both the company and the individual employees. How does your firm stack up? Do you build your people as well as your structures? 



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### About the Author

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Richard Walker, chief executive officer of XL Construction, is a nearly 30-year veteran of the construction and real estate industries with a passion for sustainable and innovative building design.

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### About the Article

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