

The Vision to See What Isn't There

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HOW ADJUSTING YOUR VANTAGE POINT CAN BRING NEW VALUE TO YOUR STRATEGIES

Abraham Wald, a mathematician at Columbia University during World War II, might have been onto something. While Wald may not be a household name, the British pilots in World War II were probably thankful for his insight. As described in Kevin Drum's article "The Counterintuitive World," the Royal Air Force observed that planes returning from missions were riddled with bullet holes. Consequently, there was a movement to bolster the aircraft's armor where the bullet holes were observed. It was Wald who made an ingenious deduction – why reinforce the aircraft in places where the holes were made? In fact, the aircraft in question ultimately returned from their sorties so it must be the undamaged locations that were the weakest areas. Ultimately, it was his revision to the designs that enhanced the aircraft and made the planes safer to fly.

As the world begins to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, there are noticeable changes in supply and demand. There is more to it than just the litany of shortages and price fluctuations impacting the construction world – workforce demand and market and end-user shifts are also taking center stage.

Contractors are migrating to the hot areas like a moth to a flame. However, it's important to first ask whether these are the right strategic moves. Recalling a famous quote by ice hockey great Wayne Gretzky, "Skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been," provides critical insight into how strategic leaders must recondition their long-term thinking.



Remember that Wald decided not to add armor to a plane that was doing its job because he saw the problem in an entirely different light.

Amazon & the Jungle of Contractors

Amazon may not have needed marketing help prior to the pandemic but it certainly received an enormous boost during it. It continues to reshape the landscape of retail and commerce daily. Whether it is building large distribution centers, headquarters or simply those "last mile" shipping centers, contractors are flocking to the e-commerce behemoth. The flood of contractors becoming "distribution specialists" has the resemblance of a group of children playing soccer.

Rather than seeing the ball brought skillfully down field,

there is simply a group of children chasing a ball to and fro. Of course, there are plenty of capable contractors building for Amazon and making profits. However, this same phenomenon is happening in the bio, medical, and pharmaceutical sectors.

Previously, during the green movement, there were contractors scrambling to become Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified professionals. The expression that comes to mind is: “Unless you are the lead dog, the view is always the same.”

Rather than seek to become the next green contractor, would not it be more practical to be the first blue contractor (if that was a thing)?

This is not to say e-commerce will go away any time soon. For that matter, it is a safe bet to also estimate that we will need medical services for the duration. However, real strategic success comes from examining those trends that are simply a ripple on the surface, but have the capability of becoming a roaring tsunami later. More importantly, being on the leading edge of that ripple affords a firm the benefit of being first to market. All of this takes time to craft the right strategy and correct action plan.

Skill Sets & What’s Missing

There is a common refrain that goes, “Our people need more training.” As a result, leaders plop countless managers and superintendents in traditional classrooms to get smart. There are certainly benefits of training in all forms and all subjects but often there is a “check the box” mentality that comes with putting bodies in seats. However, is this really solving the problem? Are our people saying they need more training or is the problem they need more development? Are we “adding sheet metal to frames” that already have the raw materials, but simply need refinement and practical experience?

Here are a few important questions you must ask when examining your internal talent development programs:


- » How consistent is our training and development across all roles and departments?
- » How do we measure the success of our training and development?

- » What mechanisms do we use to reinforce the training and development once it is complete?
- » How interwoven is the training to the position’s responsibilities?
- » Does our training program involve more than simply preaching from the podium?
- » Do we leverage our in-house capabilities and internal subject matter experts enough?
- » How do we balance business skill, technical skill, and interpersonal skill development in our curriculum?

Marketing in the New World

Social media migrated from passing fad to a must-have marketing need. While not everyone is hip to TikTok (And is it hip to say hip?), the construction universe has recognized the importance of leveraging the myriad social media tools available. Being relevant is just as important to a heavy civil contractor as it is to a YouTube influencer. However, in world that lives through its smart device, is there an opportunity to connect with the customer differently?

Consider the mail you receive at home. After sifting through the old-school paper bills and obligatory junk, it starts to look a great deal like the filtering that also occurs in one’s email inbox or social media stream. Think of how euphoric it is to receive a real letter in the mail. Electronic communication in all its forms is easy, instantaneous, and does not require a stamp. However, it is also easily filtered, avoided, and deleted. Once again, social media is not about how many postings make it to LinkedIn, Facebook, or Instagram, but rather the number of eyeballs that ultimately see it and react to it. Before everyone thinks about deleting their accounts, it is important to ask marketing leaders about varying the message delivery, concentrating on a message or theme, and finding ways to be that real letter in the mailbox, rather than the millionth credit card application.

Both Wald and Gretzky articulated a theme of thinking and acting differently. As a business owner seeking success, it’s easy to get caught up in the flavor of the week and chase the market trends. However, being an industry leader requires vision to see what the rest of the world cannot. 



About the Author

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