

Member Communication Experience

Building a Future Leader: How to Cultivate Leadership That Aligns with Your Company's DNA

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In the construction industry — where projects are complex, timelines are tight, and collaboration is essential — the need for strong leadership is undeniable. But, for the industry to thrive, where do tomorrow's leaders come from?

When it comes to filling leadership roles, most companies rely on one of three strategies:

1. **Hire from the outside.** This is the fastest approach, but it's costly and risky. External hires don't always mesh with company culture and hiring-in multiple leaders with their own leadership style means your company's culture and values can be diluted quickly.
2. **Promote internal talent based on who shows "leadership potential."** While this approach recognizes your people, it forsakes a unified "face of leadership." Most internal promotions are based on someone being the best at what they do, not the best at leading others or being a smart businessperson.
3. **Purposefully develop leaders from within, based on the values, goals, and culture that define your company.** This is the most economical and sustainable option — and the one with the highest success rate.

Here are some straightforward ways to purposely build future leaders, by design; they are presented in the order of execution:

Define What a Leader Looks Like at Your Company

When we talk about "leadership skills," what do we really



mean? It's not enough to say someone's a good communicator or problem-solver. You need to define the behavior you expect.

Every company should define both technical and temperamental competencies for leadership roles. For example, beyond managing schedules and budgets, you might want leaders who are humble, flexible under pressure, and who see their role as building relationships internally and externally.

Think of how all Southwest employees embody "luv." If your leaders are going to represent your brand and culture, be purposeful about defining what that is. Once defined, these traits can be woven into training, mentoring, and even performance evaluations.

Educate Employees About the Industry — Not Just Their Job

Here's something I hear from construction executives again and again:

"I don't see anyone on my team I can promote to leadership because they don't understand enough about the industry."

And they're right. If someone has only ever worked in estimating, or on one type of project, they know a job – not the business, not the industry. To solve this, companies need to provide industry education.

Ensure your folks belong to their relevant professional associations (such as CMAA), send them to conferences, give them the time to attend association-offered webinars, etc.

Internally, add site-tours, municipal meetings, and cross-functional assignments to broaden their knowledge and understanding.

Expose Future Leaders to Broader Business Conversations

One of the most effective (and inexpensive) ways to grow future leaders is to allow them to sit in on meetings that have nothing to do with their current role. Leadership isn't just about managing people – it's about understanding the bigger picture.

Let your up-and-comers listen in on project bid reviews, safety committee meetings, or conversations about finances. Then, debrief with them. Ask what they noticed, what surprised them, and what questions they have. These interactions create business literacy – something too often missing in technically strong employees.

Make the Leadership Path Visible and Measurable

Too often, employees have "a job" because that's all you've offered them. When they do get promoted, it's based on tenure or technical skill, not because they've been trained and prepared for leadership.


To be more purposeful, identify clear career milestones that outline what knowledge, skills, and behaviors should be demonstrated at each level of leadership – whether that's apprentice to crew leader, or project manager to superintendent to COO.

Mapping the path to leadership serves two purposes:

- » It shows employees what's possible for their growth, which increases engagement and retention.
- » It gives you, as an owner or executive, confidence that your leadership pipeline is filled with people who are truly "built to spec."

Leadership by Intent, Not Accident

You wouldn't frame a building without a blueprint, right? So why try to "wing it" when it comes to developing the next generation of leaders?

Invest the time to educate, mentor, and shape your internal talent. Because when you build leaders intentionally, you don't just grow individuals – you ensure the longevity, values, and continued success of your entire company. 



About the Author

Dr. Nanette Miner is an expert in building ready and capable leadership teams for succession and exit.

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