

Constructing a plan

How Bob Strickland prepared Project and Construction Services Inc. for growth by keeping an eye on the future **By Mark Scott**

If a company wants to expand, it needs to first make sure it has the staff to handle the accompanying increased workload, says Bob Strickland.

"We never, ever pursue work and then look to expand our staff to take advantage of that increased business opportunity," says Strickland, president of Project and Construction Services Inc., which recently doubled the size of its Cleveland headquarters from 6,200 square feet to more than 12,000 square feet. The company currently has about 40 employees.

A smart company always has an adequate number of trained and experienced employees in place to service any opportunities that may arise, Strickland says.

"We make sure we are always trying to recruit and train staff to stay ahead of the curve," he says.

And Strickland says proper planning is essential to maintaining both profitability and the quality and consistency of your work as the company grows.

"Make sure, absolutely, that you have good metrics in place so that you can contemporaneously measure and gauge whether you're maintaining profitability, so you're not just looking at quarterly or semiannual statements and end up being disappointed with a diminishment of your profitability," Strickland says.

And while there is a certain level of risk in trying to take your company to the next level, the alternative — remaining stagnant — is an even riskier proposition, Strickland says.

"If you're not satisfied that there are sufficient opportunities there, I feel it's much more risky to continue to exclusively concentrate on one area as opposed to venturing out and trying to explore and exploit areas that are obviously in a much more expansive mode," Strickland says. "I think it's more risky to stay put because you're not taking advantage of trying to expand the diversification of the markets you're trying to serve."

He says it is a leader's responsibility to take risks and strive for growth for the benefit of his or her employees and for the families of those employees.

"We always have to look for those opportunities that are consistent with fulfilling that mission to make sure the people" have continued job opportunities at the company, Strickland says.



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Along with that responsibility should come a willingness to discuss growth with employees and to be open about the benefits and the potential drawbacks each opportunity presents.

"In most industries, people certainly embrace a challenge," Strickland says. "What they don't embrace is uncertainty. Communicate your vision and represent that. That vision just will expand the opportunities for growth and fulfillment with your existing staff and provide them with opportunities to move up in the organization."

Communication at PCS occurs through regular staff meetings and an open-door policy that Strickland constantly reinforces to employees.

And when growth leads to the hiring of new employees, Strickland says it's important to make them feel like part of the team. He helps facilitate that process by having new employees fill out a questionnaire to help existing employees learn more about their new colleagues' interests outside of work.

"Not only what they have done in the past or where they came from, but their interests or hobbies, number of kids, those specific areas that are of interest to the employee," Strickland says. "That is broadcast through the intranet to our employees. Each of our existing employees are encouraged to get around and meet the new employee."

HOW TO REACH: Project and Construction Services Inc., (216) 619-1700 or www.pcscmservices.com

Don't drink the Kool-Aid

One of the biggest hindrances to corporate growth is a lack of understanding between a company and its customers as to what the business is selling and what the customers are buying, says Andy Birol.

"What a company says it sells and what their customers say they buy is almost always somewhat different," Birol says. "Reconciling that creates the biggest and best possible opportunity."

Birol is president of Birol Growth Consulting Inc. in Solon, which acts as a consultant to business owners on the issues of growth. He is also author of "The 5 Catalysts of 7-Figure Growth."

Birol says many companies get insulated as to what is really happening with their business.

"They start to drink their own Kool-Aid," Birol says. "Specifically, what you find is the buying processes of customers switch. They move, and often the company itself misses the shift because it's very likely to perpetuate its status quo."

The key to avoiding this problem is being willing to redefine what your company does best based on your target market and its changing buying processes.

Birol also recommends finding a third-party growth consultant or market researcher to ensure that a company and its customers are on the same page.

"It comes from being able to engage a customer in a dialogue, build trust, and ask follow-up and probing questions to get behind the obvious," Birol says. "Too many companies go out and ask their customers themselves how they are doing. All you get back is the usual platitudes."

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