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CELEBRATING THE DESIGNERS OF THE WORLD AROUND US

GREG GRAVES: LEADERSHIP THAT MATTERS

Retiring CEO of Burns & McDonnell reviews his 37-year career

Integrating virtual construction into design-build projects

Structural engineering at the intersection of two curves

Arcadis Sustainable Cities Water Index

Bus rapid transit transforms El Paso transportation





THE EASY WAY OR THE HARD WAY?

Identify a person's particular passion and strength and help them work on it. Focus on strengths, not weaknesses.

SOMEONE RECENTLY ASKED what prompted me as a young structural engineer in 1997 to lead an engineering business. “I didn’t plan this,” I said. “During the recession in the mid-1990s, most of the senior engineers at the company I was working with quit to join public agencies.” While that answer may be simplistic, being the CEO of a global structural engineering company was not part of my life plan. I wanted to be the best structural engineer in the world, though. It was my “humble” desire.

I also wanted to contribute globally, especially in developing countries. So, when the company’s then president, John Shaffer, wanted to retire, I took on the challenge to buy him out from the small Sacramento, Calif., engineering firm. This was during the recession and my salary was meager. It also did not come at a discounted price, but John was my mentor and friend. There is no way I would’ve let him down. We only had five people left by then, but the people who stayed were the best. Most of them are still with our company and driving it today. I owe them a lot.

I am almost always blessed to work with great people. It is super critical to identify a person’s particular passion and strength and help them work on it. Focus on strengths, not weaknesses. That’s why our company doesn’t have job descriptions or detailed responsibilities. To me, these things are nonsense. We all are so unique and particular; there is no way that anyone can fit into a standard job category.

I also hate titles. Titles are only good for external marketing. Internally, titles are cumbersome, outdated, and dangerous. We need to attract and grow great people to build great organizations. To do that, we need to get rid of this kind of nonsense. Team building is critical, and a leader’s job is simple: We exist to remove road blocks for the team and have team members focus on their strengths.

Running a business is full of risks, but I thrive on that. When our small Sacramento company opened an office in Los Angeles 15 years ago, people thought I was reckless. When I moved to Haiti to open an office right after the 2010 earthquake, I think the board was close to firing me. Today, we have a thriving business in Haiti staffed by Haitian engineers, providing international standard engineering services. Mission accomplished.

I took almost all of the opportunities that came to me. Life is a gamble. Until you roll the dice, you don’t know what you’ll get.

I am also very strategic as much as action-oriented. I learned many of the applied strategies from our board members over the years. They are all external. Usually, I ask retired famous business leaders in our industry to become board members at our firm. They have done a lot of good things, but have also failed. We can learn a lot from older people. Ask them, since you don’t know what you don’t know. Leaders exist in order to find a way to win. We need all the best knowledge that is out there to help us win.

Our company today has offices on five continents. My “secret sauce” has been following my calling — to make things better, safer for others, especially those who don’t have plenty. Follow your passion and do good for others. Then all good things will follow you.

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