

AMERICAN EXECUTIVE

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Keith Ferrazzi wants you to forget everything you know about networking and start building real relationships

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Ben Bishop, Jr. talks to Michelle Rivera about the benefits of working with second, third, and even fourth generation family member employees.

Western Construction Group

A large photograph showing several pairs of hands of different ages and skin tones. The hands are gathered around a stack of yellow work gloves. The background is a blurred construction site with wooden framing and gravel.

Family Cycle

There are a number of businesses out there today that are family-owned, but it's not often that you hear of a business having second, third, and fourth generation employees. Ben Bishop, Jr. at Western Construction Group can proudly boast about having both.

"We have created a work force that is made up of generational family members throughout the country. It does a lot for a business when you're surrounded by a sense of family," said Bishop, a 30-year veteran employee and CEO of Western Construction Group. "We're in the service business, and having family values helps us with employee recruitment and retention. We show them we're a good employer and that we strongly believe in honest values."

Western Construction Group, now a \$140 million company, was founded in 1915 by Bishop's grandfather, George, and Ben Many. Today, it operates 34 locations and serves all 50 states.

Noticing the little things

To keep the family of more than 1,300 employees together and happy, Bishop focuses his efforts on training. "We are our best trainers, so we brought in consultants to guide us and help develop training programs," he said.

"We're developing a university-style format and shuffling people in and out of our corporate office in St. Louis on a regular basis to train," Bishop continued. He is working to have training classes that would be held periodically throughout the year.

But it's not just training that Bishop monitors. He pays close attention to employee retention, which he says is an important piece of the company's puzzle.

"Employee retention is an item we track closely. We put a significant amount of effort into interviews and the review process," Bishop said. "Most of the time, when people leave a company, it's not because of money—it's because there's something in the system they aren't happy with."

It's the little things that make a difference, according to Bishop. "The fact that we have

our finger on retention is a big plus," he said. "We have competitive compensation and benefits, and we believe our employees stand out. When they complete a project or get a nice letter from a customer, we like to recognize them. Personal recognition takes them a long way."

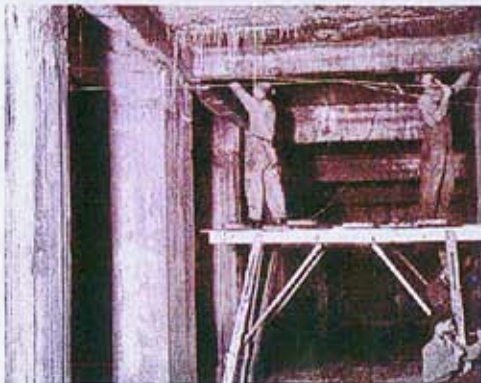
The company is doing something right. Statistics show that, on average, employees in the construction industry stay at their respective companies about nine years. At Western Construction Group, the average is 17.

The road ahead

A big challenge for the construction industry is the shortage of skilled workers due to retiring baby boomers. "We have to replace them with unskilled employees every year," Bishop said. "We have to make sure that we get the proper mix of skilled and unskilled workers."

Bishop is already looking for ways to combat the problem. Three-fourths of the company is union affiliated, and the other fourth is non-union. Bishop and his team spend much of their time in union offices contributing to and hosting apprenticeship programs.

In its non-union markets, Bishop said his team has to be their own trainers. "We have a couple of offices that mainly focus on hiring, holding meetings, and conducting inhouse training."



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Western Construction has a safety department comprised of six people who concentrate on day-to-day field activities. Three to four of those people travel the country (two to three days per week) and work with each office, focusing on branch training. At each stop, they work on specific safety initiatives that will help the company improve and give employees the knowledge to conduct their operations in the safest possible manner.

The company's marketing department, made up of four people, has the job of going out to local markets and spending time with architects, engineers, and developers. "They conduct seminars and workshops. If owners are informed about what is going on, it helps them make better decisions," said the CEO.

"We try to find out what they're interested in learning about, and then we share our experiences and some tricks of the trade. When everyone is educated, it presents a better job."

Western Construction is in the process of developing a software program that works on a PDA, which will help to keep track of large-project



information. "This wireless system will feed back any information to our main frame in St. Louis, and then we can produce daily reports on where we are, where our people are, and what quantities we're getting done. Time is money, and proper information is critical to the success of our business," Bishop said.



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