Profits Are in the People

AWCI Supervisory Consultant Norb Slowikowski Parlayed a Fast Foods Executive Career into a Successful Construction Consulting Role

Neither the lack of construction experience nor a familiarity with the wall and ceiling industry hindered him as an effective consultant.

Furthermore, the contractors with whom he’s worked are of the same opinion: Chicago’s Norb Slowikowski is one of the best when it comes to showing how to get performance out of people.

Slowikowski first came to AWCI attention shortly after he’d developed an outstanding job site supervisory training program for the Chicago area’s Construction Employers Association. He’s since conducted nearly a dozen such seminar programs for AWCI and also offered his services on a private consulting basis to some of the more enlightened AWCI contractors.

To a man, they agree. Slowikowski knows his business . . . construction experience or not.

To Norb, the absence of a construction background was neither a hindrance nor a benefit. “The rules of working with people are the same, regardless of the industry,” the 48-year-old Chicago native explains. ‘Because construction is so labor intensive, the rules may apply with a little more impact . . . that’s the only difference.”

His people skills have been honed from nearly two decades of personnel work in all levels of management. Following graduation from Loyola University where he obtained degrees in psychology and industrial relations, Norb worked a few years in the Chicago police department’s personnel division where he collected data for appraisals, pensions, wage and salary and special projects.
“The one nice thing about being a consultant, you know, is that employees will talk to me and usually tell me the truth: they generally will tell the boss what they think the boss wants to hear.”

After a short stay with the American Dental Association working on their dental school candidate program, Norb signed on in the early 60s as a headquarters personnel manager with an up and coming new fast food company called McDonald’s. For the next decade he participated in—and scaled the corporate ladder—as the hamburger chain continued it’s meteoric rise.

By 1975, though, on the doorstep of a vice presidency which meant even more extensive travel and time demands he confronted himself with the usual personal crises of career demands versus the quality of his life. He and his wife, the former Mary Kay Brennan, an ex-Chicago school teacher, parents now of four children, mulled the challenge for more than a year.

Finally, they made the break. Mary Kay launched the family business, Personal Achievement Resources, while Norb held on at McDonald’s another six months. Then he made the break and the husband-wife team, operating as Slowikowski and Associates, have never looked back.

Mary Kay got the new company off and running with a pair of copyrighted female oriented seminars, “Future Women” and “Managing Multiple Roles,” which were successfully sold through a unique multi-marketing strategy. Norb’s reputation was moving well. Then in 1982 the construction industry caught on to his skills as the Chicago Construction Employers Association hired him to design and conduct its supervisory training program. The 6-module package followed and now counts more than 500 graduates.

Active in Catholic church affairs, Norb and Mary Kay now find time to conduct a fast-moving consulting business while retaining the one thing that started it all—a commitment to a quality life.

DIMENSIONS: Realizing that the principles of people management are relatively universal, Norb, what is the distinctive element you find in the construction industry. . . the one element that perhaps does make it unique?

SLOWIKOWSKI: I’d have to say the sharp dividing line between technical competence and people deficiency.

The work I’ve done with contractors shows that the people in the construction industry are technically very capable on the one hand, but quite people deficient on the other. That is, field people can pick up a tool and do just about anything they want, but when it comes to working with people, motivating them, getting them to put out top performance there’s something noticeably lacking.

DIMENSIONS: And construction management, does this shortage show up there?

SLOWIKOWSKI: Of course. In the construction industry, promotion is often based on an individual’s technical
skills and his readiness to work hard. When a contractor recognizes good skills in a man he’s inclined to tap him on the shoulder and say, “you’re now a foreman so go get it.”

DIMENSIONS: And he might be good with the tools, but maybe not with people? Is that it?
SLOWIKOWSKI: That’s right. He needs just as much help and training in his new role—perhaps more—than he did as a mechanic.

DIMENSIONS: What can you, as a supervisory training consultant, do about a problem like that?
SLOWIKOWSKI: Let me cite an example of a wall and ceiling contractor in the Northeast who called me in. Now this contractor has good people relations, he’s a skilled manager, but he wanted peak proficiency in his company.

I talked to the CEO, his key people, and then went out and talked with his employees. The one nice thing about being a consultant, you know, is that employees will talk to me and usually tell me the truth: they generally will tell the boss what they think the boss wants to hear—.

DIMENSIONS: —in other words, they’ll lie to the boss?
SLOWIKOWSKI: That’s another way of putting it, yes. This allows me to identify the problems and then I can come back and help formulate a response that will solve these people bottlenecks.

DIMENSIONS: Identifying the problem is only part of the solution, though, isn’t it?
SLOWIKOWSKI: Yes, the key to personnel or people relations isn’t what you learn or know: the key is what is applied on the job. Many construction people know how they should approach a particular problem, but they don’t apply that knowledge.

My training seminars and individual efforts are directed at transferring people skills into action. I can identify problems and show techniques intended to help solve them, but the management team has to apply them—constantly.

DIMENSIONS: What’s the main objective that a contractor should strive for in trying to achieve top efficiency in his company?
SLOWIKOWSKI: I’d have to say, “establish a motivational climate.” Remember, this is 1987 not 1957 and you can’t possibly motivate an individual with the same techniques that worked three decades ago.

Most contractors are aware of this principle but I recite it anyway. I call it the “lengthening shadow approach.” As a contractor goes, so goes his organization.

If a contractor is up tight, angry, hostile, abusive, his company will soon take on that personality. Everyone is a lengthening shadow of his immediate boss.

For that reason, a contractor should look carefully at his foremen and superintendents. If a contractor is a positive, fair, firm kind of individual, he’ll spot that foreman who’s out of tune with his organizational profile and do something about it.

DIMENSIONS: That means the contractor will have to do something about staying in touch with all levels of his organization. Can a contractor do that effectively and still run his business? Continued on page 19
SLOWIKOWSKI: He’d better be able to do both. Actually, it isn’t all that hard to do. I call it the MBWA approach, meaning, “manage by walking around.”

A contractor should schedule time to visit the job sites and find out what’s going on. Most contractors practice this principle anyway: it’s just good business sense.

But don’t restrict your fact finding to job progress. Talk—and, especially, listen—to your people. Don’t be so certain that your foremen and supers will tell you 100%. I’m not talking about spying: I’m talking about your company and staying in touch.

Let your people know you’re interested in them and the work. Ask them if you can help them in any way. Give some credit where credit is due. And mean what you say. Nothing is more motivating than for the boss to say he’s appreciative. It’s amazing what that does for people—and it doesn’t cost very much.

DIMENSIONS: Common sense, right?

SLOWIKOWSKI: Yes, but there’s more to it than that. I’m talking about the way you deal with people . . . in honest terms. So often, I hear employees complain, “All I get is criticism, not help.” When you hear a person say that you can bet he doesn’t like to see the boss on the job. That’s a bad sign because it reflects an antagonism between the field and the office . . . and division that just shouldn’t be allowed to continue.

People today want three things: first, they want to feel that they’re in on things . . . that they’re part of the team; second, they want sincere appreciation for a job that’s well done, and third, they want the feeling that
“Let your people on the job site know what the plan is . . . what you’re trying to achieve and how . . . let them in on the know. Create the sense of “family” so everyone is pulling toward the same objective.”

you’re supportive of them . . . that when an obstacle crops up you’ll take action to assist or remove it. Can you see a sense of self-importance in all this?

The old excuse that good employees don’t need positive feedback because they know when they’re doing a good job just isn’t valid in today’s environment.

DIMENSIONS: That attitude could be extended to apply to the CEO or the contractor, couldn’t it? I mean, sometimes he’s the problem, isn’t that right?

SLOWIKOWSKI: Problems vary with each company. Sometimes the CEO is the problem. The important thing is that he’s the one who recognizes some kind of problem, or

some area that could and should be improved.

If there’s a problem, it can be identified and fixed. As a consultant, I can tell a client the truth. What can he do: fire me? The issue is to fix the problem, not blame or fire someone.

DIMENSIONS: Let’s talk about problems. In any construction company the foul-ups can be severe . . . wrong delivery of the wrong materials on the wrong date to the wrong location at the wrong time, etc., etc. The list could go on.

What’s a good rule to apply here, to control problems and their destructive impact? Is there such a set of rules?

SLOWIKOWSKI: Certainly. People don’t deliberately foul things up so

watch out for assigning blame or criticism. In other words, keep your focus on the problem and what caused it.

When everyone is focusing on the problem and fixing it becomes the objective people don’t have to get defensive. The rules are thus pretty easy to recognize:

1) Focus on the problem, not the person.
2) Maintain emotional control, which eliminates yelling and
3) set a time line and assign someone to take specific action.

DIMENSIONS: Norb, ask any enlightened contractor to what does he owe his company’s success and he’ll admit, “it’s my people.” My question is: how does a contractor go about obtaining good management people in
the first place and then maintaining their skill levels?

SLOWIKOWSKI: Today, you simply must train your management-in people skills BEFORE they become foremen.

There is no known cure-all and I’m not talking that. The future of any construction company is in its management and the way it handles people: they make or break’ profits so the foremen and superintendents must have the tools and skills to operate profitably.

That means an investment by the contractor . . . in his own time and effort to select potentially good people, get them trained, and support them every step of the way. To most successful contractors today, there’s nothing unique or esoteric in what I’ve just said: they’re doing it all the time right now.

As a CEO you must maintain what I call “family.” You and your managers must understand the “lengthening shadow” influence.

DIMENSIONS: And there’s room for the “tough minded manager” in all this?

SLOWIKOWSKI: Oh, but of course. Being tough is fine. There’s nothing wrong with that—as long as you’re tough on standards, not on people. If a problem develops, be tough on the issues involved not abusive to the people caught up in it.

Again, attack the problem, not the people.

DIMENSIONS: Let’s move away from individual consulting to the seminar concept. As I understand it, the seminar is intended to develop and enhance supervisory skills whether for experienced managers or those coming into the management ranks. Would you mind listing the subjects that are developed in the 6-module ‘Dynamics of Supervision’ seminar program:

SLOWIKOWSKI: Well, each module is of three hours duration. The subject areas include: 1) supervision on the site; 2) effective communication; 3) employee motivation; 4) establishing a motivational climate on the job site; 5) scheduling and manpower coordination, and 6) team building.

DIMENSIONS: Fine. Let’s take a look at each section. Could you summarize “site supervision”?

SLOWIKOWSKI: We’ve been discussing these elements, but essentially that first module refers to identifying the problem as a barrier or obstacle to efficiency and then fixing it.

Who knows what the problem is? It could be morale . . . logistics . . . planning . . . management . . . lack of scheduling . . . anyone of a hundred factors. The first aspect of any problem is identifying it . . . and doing so accurately.

DIMENSIONS: And effective communication?

SLOWIKOWSKI: The emphasis here is on listening. Most people can talk but listening is even more difficult. Do I hear—and understand—what
you’re telling me? We cover the principles of effective meetings—so many are simply time wasters. The idea is to get the information flowing throughout the organization so people know what’s expected of them. It’s often incredible how much money a contractor could save if he’d listen to his people—all of them—in the field.

Do you want me to go on to the other modules?

DIMENSIONS: Yes, if you would, please?

SLOWIKOWSKI: As for employee motivation, I realize that money is the major element but only when tied to performance. Otherwise, let them feel a sense of involvement . . . that they’re part of things . . . that their work and their talents are appreciated and wanted. That’s not too much to ask.

As for establishing a motivational environment, on the job site, you must find out what the needs are. Here’s where incentives prove so useful. A good worker should be the one who gets the perks. If a mechanic or foreman or superintendent is making your profits, that’s in it for him, too.

Let your people on the job site know what the plan is . . . what you’re trying to achieve and how . . . let them in on the know. Create the sense of “family” so everyone is pulling toward the same objective.

Scheduling and manpower coordination are relatively technical subjects, but foul up in either of these areas and watch productivity fall through the bottom. If you need 25 men on the job and you have only 15 you’ve got a problem that needs quick fixing.

And, finally, team building. That’s where it all comes together . . . the lengthened shadow . . . the contractor who manages by walking around . . . the support and commitment to a company . . . the desire to perform and to profit.

DIMENSIONS: One last comment: a management study recently showed that a training seminar was the finest expression that top management could make in its people . . . that it demonstrated the willingness of the company to support good leadership.

Since you give seminars on just such subjects, would you mind commenting on this aspect of developing supervisory skill.

SLOWIKOWSKI: I’ll do it by referring to an AWCI contractor who does just that.

He’s got a top performing company with outstanding people. Yet he brought all of his management . . . foremen, superintendents, would-be managers, etc . . . into the local Holiday Inn and hired me to present the entire seminar.

His people were thrilled with the idea. They not only got a chance to learn new and modern people skills and techniques but they realized they were being treated to the luxury of working for a company with a firm commitment to them as members of the “family” . . . as people with a need to share in the destiny of their company.

Like I said before, there’s no big secret. Just let your employees know you care, that you’ll support them, and that you value them as a member of your “family.”

Profits in construction are made in the field, not in the office, and they’re lost there, too. Any prudent contractor will invest some time and energy and making certain that his field operations are at peak efficiency—and that takes work.