More than just a buzzword in contractor conversations, productivity involves excellence, teamwork and results

Excellence. Teamwork. Productivity. Sadly, that’s sometimes a word of a different color.

Some see it as a buzzword—a term full of hot air but perhaps signifying little. Others see it as a code word—another way of saying speedup and doing more for the same or less pay.

Words can get us in trouble. But we shouldn’t let it happen.

Let’s look at productivity in its broadest sense, that of productive results. That’s a workable and accurate definition.

With this in place, we can combine our words and concepts into a practical statement: Individual excellence plus teamwork equals productive results.

We can work toward good individual performance, but that’s not enough. Our group must perform well collectively, as a team. Otherwise, our results may fall short of expectations.

In this sense, productivity is another word for results, according to Norb Slowikowski, a construction industry consultant with Slowikowski & Associates, Inc. in Darien, Illinois.

Results Aren’t Automatic

There are many factors at work in achieving productive results. They aren’t achieved automatically.

Slowikowski points out that job crews need quality materials, delivered to the right place on time. Plus good tools and equipment, well maintained and ready for use. Plus a skilled, well-motivated work force. And there must be effective management and direct supervision.

It is said that productivity has dropped off in recent years in the construction industry. Yet, in the past few decades, we have adopted faster and better machines. Tools have improved. We have better, more easily installed materials.

Still, as an industry, our productive results are no better. Why?

According to Slowikowski, the core problem is that our industry is people intensive. The skills and attitudes of people are vital to productivity improvements.

In productivity is flat or down, we have only ourselves to blame—whether we are mechanics, field foremen or executive managers.

Chances are that foremen and managers can take the longest, most effective steps to encourage individual excellence and to build productive teamwork on the job.

Doing the Right Things

Productivity is not just doing things right, Slowikowski says. It is also doing the right things.

Some foremen spend a lot of time doing things or asking their men to do things. For example, pipe and fittings may be delivered and piled in the corner of the job site. Then, the next day, the foreman asks the crew to move this material to the opposite side of the property. The crew members aren’t
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told why. They wonder why it wasn’t put in the right place originally. This may keep the crew busy, but is it productive?

Sometimes supervisors confuse means with ends. Keeping busy isn’t always the same as being effective.

Slowikowski says effectiveness is getting productive results. Or, to put it another way, improving the output you get compared to the input you make.

Foremen usually need help from two groups in their efforts to improve productivity. One is office management. The other is the work crew.

Office management can contribute in a big way by scheduling deliveries so the job can keep moving. It is important that deliveries be organized, with the materials for one segment of the job located together. It is also essential that the deliveries be put in the right place, to minimize such non-productive work as moving materials from one place to another, and that the right equipment is available to move materials when that is required.

Furnishing the right crew skills is another office management responsibility, according to Slowikowski. If a welder or rigger is needed, he should be on the spot. If an apprentice or helper can do a task, it is economic to be able to use them. Having too few or too many mechanics available are almost equally frustrating—and non-productive.

Productivity and the Crew

Productivity of the foreman and the crew is directly related to crew skills, crew attitudes and crew relations, Slowikowski explains.

Crew skills, in this sense, must be based on individual excellence. The quality of workmanship by all members is the foundation of productive crew performance.

But productive results demand more than excellent work. The individual crew members must believe in themselves, their performance, and in working quickly as well as effectively for their own good—and that of the entire crew. Poor attitudes lead to poor work. They can also lead to stresses and strains within the group, who have to work shoulder-to-shoulder and ego-to-ego every day.

Whether a crew becomes an effective, productive team depends on all of these factors—plus the ability of the foreman to stimulate everyone to want to act like a team.

Workers give extra for a leader they want to follow, and less (sometimes a lot less) for others. If a foreman does everything else right but falls down as a leader, the crew’s final results are likely to be less than satisfactory.

Effective foremen avoid asking (or demanding) their crews to merely run fast. Talk about “Work harder” or “Produce more” or “Let’s improve the bottom line” can lead to lots of frenzied activity.

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Slowikowski’s management and supervision seminars for AWCI have proven both popular and substantive. An official AWCI consultant, Norb is a former corporate executive trainer who now operates his own consulting organization.

But this doesn’t necessarily improve productivity unless the crew members understand what their piece of the bottom line is—in terms of expected results. Often, work crews who feel badgered about “all we need is more effort” without a sense of where they are going become frustrated, and productivity then declines.

Results Management

To Slowikowski, the heart of productivity improvement is results management. What do you want to achieve? If it can be measured, it should be. Measures may be in terms of quantity (number of feet of pipe set) or quality (an X percent reduction in rejected welds) or time or dollars used (to do a particular task).

Productive results can only be achieved by doing the right things, in the right ways, for the right reasons. It can’t be done by one man, although it usually starts that way. It requires a partnership between office management, field supervision, and the work crew.

It comes down to individual excellence plus teamwork. And the foreman is the key in making this equation add up.

(Editor’s Note: Norb Slowikowski, who heads his own management consulting firm, is an official consultant on management and supervision for the Association of the Wall and ceiling Industries-International. For AWCI, Slowikowski conducts the highly successful and popular series of management seminars and this article gives a good idea of the substance provided by one of his training sessions.)