Training and Participation: The Keys to a Successful Association

An Interview with William Bell

Editor’s Note: William Bell is AWCI’s Second Vice President. His company, Grayhawk Corporation, is based in Lexington, Kentucky.

Construction Dimensions: What do you think are the most important problems your company and the industry are facing?

Bell: We face the same problems upper and middle management people. I need a program for my superintendents and foremen too.

We have a good company, but we could be so much better if we could strengthen our management skills.

CD: Why do you think this has happened?

Bell: Generally, our management people come up through the ranks. How do they manage people? How do they motivate people? And how do they keep the organization moving forward?

CD: That would seem to provide an opportunity for the association, to provide more management training.

Bell: Our company is open shop, but this would apply to any company whether open shop or not as far as we’ve faced for 20 years.

The two that stand out when I think “long term” are marketing and management training.

When business is good we don’t think we need a marketing program, and when it slows down it’s too late to do any good. This problem has an obvious solution and we are working on it.

Management training is a little tougher to solve. I know I have good people. I also know that the lack of training in management skills is keeping them from realizing anything close to their true potential. We get so involved in the day to day operations that we fail miserably in solving this problem.

Sure, I send them to various association seminars and meetings, and this helps. But we need something more structured and continuous. Also, the seminars are usually only for the upper and middle management people. I need a program for my superintendents and foremen too.

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CD: Why do you think this has happened?

Bell: Generally, our management people come up through the ranks. We have a good company, but we could be so much better if we could strengthen our management skills.

We've considered some of the training programs that are available, but like most of the companies in the industry we tend to procrastinate. We think things will improve with time, that people will learn with experience, but it really doesn’t happen that way. They reach a certain level and they don’t seem to progress beyond that level. It’s not their fault—they could go much further with the proper training.

There’s no mechanism in place to train these people and provide them with skills for managing people, motivating them, and organizing them for tasks. There’s no formal training available at the different skill levels to bring those people along—for example, to help a mechanic move up to a foreman’s level or a foreman to move up to a superintendent’s level. They know drywall, they know acoustical ceilings, they know EIFS systems, and they can do those things very well. But how do they manage people? How do they motivate people? And how do they keep the organization moving forward?

CD: That would seem to provide an opportunity for the association, to provide more management training.

Bell: Our company is open shop, but this would apply to any company whether open shop or not as far as management skill levels are concerned. We tend to do the everyday things well, but we fall short in overall efficiency.

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There is room for seminars that emphasize management development to help our people improve, I’m convinced of that. We could provide such seminars around the country at low cost and get people to lead them who are involved with the industry—not
just the generic management seminars led by consultant types. If we could find contractors who are doing a good job with this and get them to share their methods, I think this would fill a real need. Some people do this better than others, and I bet they’d be willing to share this information.

CD: Is much of your work exterior insulation?

Bell: Yes, that’s about 50% of our business. Primarily, we work with panelization.

CD: That requires a great deal of training, doesn’t it?

Bell: At the technical level it does require formal training. Once the shop drawings are developed and you get into the construction level, however, the need for training is reduced. Actually applying an EIFS system doesn’t require a lot of technical training. That’s more of a hands-on skill.

Let me add one other thing. There is a tremendous learning curve and expense in getting into the panelization business. Our company’s been working on panelization for 10 years, and many companies in the association have been doing it longer than that. We’ve spent a great deal of money to learn what we’ve learned, and we’re still learning. Panelization requires a serious commitment in facilities, equipment and technical expertise.

CD: Where do you see opportunities for the industry? What areas are growing or could potentially grow in the coming few years?

Bell: The exterior cladding area of our business seems to be where the growth potential lies. At our company, we have broadened our product line to include an aluminum, reinforced foam panel that offers us a new opportunity in panelization retrofit and refurbishment work. These panels can also be used for new construction similar to our traditional full frame system. We’ve recently landed a very nice job with that system. I feel the system will open up a tremendous market for our company.

CD: Does your company do much retrofitting in exterior work?

Bell: We do both interior and exterior retrofitting. Exterior retrofitting has tremendous growth potential.

We sell the benefits of panelization for exterior work. In other words, you can prefabricate panels in a controlled environment with excellent quality control, with little concern for the weather. We now can apply this to a retrofit, which previously wasn’t the case. We see some great opportunities with this approach.

The growth of the interior business is market-driven. If the market is good, you’re OK. However, if you have a general downturn, there isn’t a great deal you can do except ride it out. With retrofit, you can create new business.

CD: We hear that refurbishing is a good opportunity now, since there are so many buildings in need of modernization.
Bell: For the last 20 or 25 years, construction in general has moved further and further away from the concept of constructing buildings to last forever. Many of those buildings now are to the point where they need modernization. We recently worked on a medical building that’s about 25 years old, a six-story building. We applied a complete new exterior to it with EIFS. This was a site application rather than panels, and it was a tremendous success. Now it looks like a new building. The energy efficiency has increased a great deal, and as a matter of fact they predict a four-year payback just from energy savings. After the fourth year, it would translate into savings right to the bottom line. We’re going to promote that and use it as a sales tool, and I think other companies in the industry will be doing the same thing. The institutional market (schools, hospitals, etc) probably are our best market in today’s economy.

CD: You mentioned the area of management training as an opportunity for the association. Do you think there are other areas where AWCI could play a bigger role to be of benefit to members?

Bell: We are presently developing a program to train EIFS applicators, and I am excited about this. Our recent efforts with the code battles related to EIFS have taken a great deal of time and energy, but the training program for EIFS applicators is nearly ready. Many people involved in EIFS believe the next place the competition will attack is in the quality of the EIFS applications. We feel we’d serve two purposes by developing a strong training program for people just coming into the EIFS industry: (1) we’d fulfill our need for manpower, and (2) we’d also upgrade the quality of EIFS applications. This program is primarily coming out of Technical Subcommittee #7, and it should be in place as an ongoing program during 1991.

We need to do more, of course. Once we get such a program in place, we need to promote it. We need to develop strong training programs across the board In difficult economic times, we need to focus more on training, not less. Our industry is cyclical, things will change, they always have. We need to be prepared for when the situation swings upward again.

Everyone agrees the EIFS industry will get bigger. But to get bigger it will need more people. Even though things are off a little bit now, the EIFS part of our business is good. We need more qualified people.

Training in general needs to be an ongoing thing. It needs to be examined not in the short term, but rather in the long term. Just about every publication you pick up that has a forecast predicts construction will need more people as we move into the next century. I think that’s true.

CD: You’re in line to become President of AWCI in just over a year. What do you think your goals will be when you take office?

Bell: It’s difficult to be anything more than very general at this point because so many things can happen between now and then. My first goal would be to maintain the stability of the association. It will be the first year without Joe Baker— we’ll have a new executive vice president starting then, and if we can keep everything on an even keel we will have accomplished a great deal at that point. There will certainly be some topical concerns that will come to the forefront, and we will deal with those as they arise.

Our current President, Steve Watkins, is doing a great job in my opinion, and I’m confident that (First Vice President) Mike Boyd will do the same. I hope that by the time I take office most of the major problems that we face now will have been successfully dealt with. That will possibly allow me to be able to do some of the things some of my predecessors would have liked to do but were unable to tackle.

CD: That year will also be the 75th anniversary of the association.

Bell: The 75th anniversary of AWCI offers us an excellent opportunity to turn up the steam on our public relations efforts, to get the word out about AWCI.
Anniversaries not only mark a point in time to celebrate and reflect on our accomplishments, but they also offer an opportunity to begin again. I would hope that the future allows us to work closer with other associations that represent the various segments of our industry. We share many common concerns and opportunities that can be handled so much better with a unified effort. I think this association has an excellent record for providing services to its members. However, we need to rethink the way we do some things, such as financing the association and what services we can afford to provide. We’re studying these areas now. Times change and we have to keep looking at new ideas, new ways to approach problems.

There will be some changes in the future in the way the association works. It’s tough to mesh volunteers with a full-time staff; it’s hard to differentiate who does what. There will always be a gray area. The volunteers, who should be policy makers, will always want to influence operations. That will probably never change. But we can try to eliminate as much confusion in that area as possible, and that would be one of the things I’d like to see happen.

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Joe Baker retires.

**Bell:** Actually, the changes will not be that noticeable, because the changes have already begun.

Steve Watkins and Joe Baker, along with the Executive Committee, have worked very hard this year to put AWCI in a more solid financial position. This required some basic changes in the way we do things and will be an ongoing evolution toward making AWCI the best it can be.

**CD:** How do you feel about membership involvement in the association?

**Bell:** When I joined AWCI in 1980, the first two meetings I attended were regional meetings. I found, not only new friends, but people willing to share, openly, their solutions to common problems and new ideas and techniques that I could use immediately to make my business better.

I have profited in many ways from these meetings over the years, and I discovered early on that the more I became involved the more I gained, both professionally and personally.

If I can offer any advice for new or old members, it is to participate to the highest degree you’re comfortable with.
You will always gain more than it costs.

I’ve been very active mostly in the technical areas over the years, and I’ve found that to be a good place to involve new people. The Academy’s done a great job, but even the Academy is in desperate need of new blood, new volunteers who are willing to participate. I think we need to renew our efforts in getting a stronger grassroots support. I was very pleased to read that the mid-central region voted to continue their summer regional meeting. I’m hoping the other regions will do that as well, because I think that’s how we are able to bring in more members as active participants in the association.

**CD:** How did your company, Grayhawk, get started?

**Bell:** The company was incorporated originally in 1967, but it came under my leadership in 1971. Actually, we formed Grayhawk from two companies: Drywall Incorporated, which has been in business for about 20 years, and Panel Tech, Incorporated, which is a company I started when I got into the panelization business about 10 years ago. It became too cumbersome to have two corporations, so we merged them in April, 1990, for better efficiency.

People always ask me, “How did you get the name Grayhawk?” We (my staff and I) couldn’t come up with anything that was descriptive of all the things we do, so we decided to get away from descriptive names. I’m a big fan of birds of prey, so we finally compromised on Grayhawk as a name. Actually, there is no true “grayhawk;” however, there are several hawks that are gray when they go through a period of molting, but none are named “grayhawks.” So we took a little poetic license there.

Mark Nabity, the president of Grayhawk, has not only played a major role in the development of our panelization business, but has also been very active in AWCI. He sits on the Board of Directors of the Foundation and has been active with several committees and the Academy Council.